

Apprenticeships
and the role of
Lifelong Learning
Networks

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Foreword

by Susan Hayday – Director of Workplace Learning Strategy - **fdf**

The present government's 14-19 reforms aim to ensure that learning for young people will lead to qualifications from one of four routes: Apprenticeships – with an entitlement to a place by 2013 for all 16 year olds suitably qualified, General Qualifications, e.g. GCSEs and A levels, Diplomas, and the Foundation Learning Tier. It is intended that the first three routes will all prepare young people for higher education and employment. The Diploma route is as yet untested but, as we all know, there is a mountain to climb to establish Apprenticeships as well understood and effective pathways to higher learning.

In our 2008-2011 Strategic plan, **fdf** committed to support work-based progression to HE including through Apprenticeships. This supports Strategic Aim 3, *to develop strategies to deliver greater diversity in HE through workforce development supported both by employers and employee organisations.*

As a consequence we commissioned the Universities Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) to research features of Apprenticeship programmes that support progression to higher education¹.

Our intent was to use the research to promote and encourage transference of those features to a wider range of Apprenticeships, including through a seminar at the National LLN conference in November 2008. Of the LLNs represented at the seminar, some had developed strategies to support Apprenticeship progression to HE, others were in the process and the rest were interested in exploring how their existing work could better support apprentices. What all recognised, however, was a lack of knowledge and awareness of strategies that were being employed by other LLNs.

The outcome was **fdf's** agreement to work with the National Forum to research and capture effective LLN practice so that LLNs and others could learn from it and build on what was demonstrably effective. **fdf** is therefore pleased to present this comprehensive research undertaken by Professor Robin Smith, which is not only of benefit to LLNs and to providers of Apprenticeships but has also some very clear messages for a wider range of stakeholders, including those with a policy remit. Whilst the research has clearly identified successes to embed and build upon; information advice and guidance processes, progression information and agreements, and strategies for developing the necessary higher level learning skills of apprentices, it also identifies the further work necessary both to ensure employers recognise and invest in the business benefits of higher level learning for their employees and that relevant and appropriate work-based higher education is in place.

The messages in this research are timely; they emerge as we are waiting for Royal Assent this autumn for the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill. This will place the Apprenticeships programme on a statutory footing and guarantee that all suitably qualified young people will be entitled to an Apprenticeship place, and by implication, a route to higher learning. The Bill will also ensure that young people in schools receive proper information, advice and guidance (IAG) about vocational training opportunities, one area in particular where the innovative work of LLNs and the IAG tools and processes referred to in this research can be applied.

fdf is committed to work-based access to higher education and will review the recommendations of this research with the National Forum and other partners to agree the most effective ways of disseminating the research and acting on its recommendations.

Susan Hayday

Director of Workplace Learning Strategy, **fdf**

September 2009

1 <http://www.fdf.ac.uk/downloads/123/20090812154836ApprenticeshipProgression.pdf>

Preface

This research was commissioned and funded by Foundation degree Forward (**fdf**). In February 2009 it approached the Directors of the Lifelong Learning Networks across England, through the National Lifelong Learning Network Forum, with a proposal to investigate the role of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) in the progression of apprentices into higher education (HE).

The target group for the research was mainly the Advanced Apprentices, those for whom the interface between level 3 and level 4 progression is so important. Many of the findings are applicable to other groups of vocational learners, such as those with NVQs, but I have not explicitly referred to these since they were outside the immediate remit. There are approximately 180 types of Apprenticeships available from more than 130,000 businesses in England², and most of these are Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships. Higher Apprenticeships are less well established although frameworks have been developed in a few sectors. The Higher Apprentice did not figure prominently in discussions with the LLNs but the development of the Higher Apprenticeship and its impact on the developing UK skills agenda will clearly be important for the future.

Lifelong Learning Networks have, as a key objective, increasing progression opportunities for individuals with vocational qualifications and experience. They are therefore an obvious vehicle to enhance progression opportunities and to improve the quality of information, advice and guidance to apprentices. The key question, however, was whether this was being implemented and with what degree of success. The Directors were pleased to engage in this research activity and proved most supportive and cooperative during the data collection stage of the research. The National Forum also provided some resource for the research and the West London LLN gave support, mainly through time and expertise, in the development and use of electronic surveys.

LLN Directors were keen that the research be undertaken quickly so that lessons could be taken on board. It was therefore agreed that the exercise would be started in April 2009 and completed by the end of July 2009. I cannot therefore claim that this is a comprehensive piece of research into Apprenticeships in the UK. However, given that there are only 30 LLNs nationally it is comprehensive in its coverage of the Lifelong Learning Network sector.

I have given a great detail of quantitative information which I hope does not get in the way of the text too much. I have used numbers rather than percentages given that, with a small group of respondents, percentages can convey misleading impressions. The numbers are there to help readers make their own judgements. However, the research was deliberately based, not only on a questionnaire, but on in-depth discussions with a small number of LLNs. Such discussions cannot be quantified yet the responses seemed at times to be as significant as the data recorded through the survey. I have therefore drawn conclusions and made statements that some readers may feel go beyond the data. However, legitimate inferences can be made from the in-depth interviews and given my current role as a Director of an LLN I feel I have some insight into the degree of emphasis I should give to them.

Robin Smith

2 <http://www.dius.gov.uk/~media/publications/E/EmployerApprenticeships>
(accessed 18/7/09)

Acknowledgements

Although I must take the responsibility for any shortcomings in this report I am pleased to give credit to various individuals who did much to facilitate the research.

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Also **Trish Judson** (MOVE East of England LLN) who provided invaluable expertise and advice in the writing up phase of the study.

Executive Summary

1. The key objectives for this study were to: gather information on what LLNs are currently doing in relation to enhancing progression from Apprenticeships to HE, identify case studies of existing effective practice, disseminate this information to a wider audience and make recommendations for further work.
2. Whilst having much in common, LLNs are organised very differently and crucially many of them are nearing the end of their initial three year HEFCE funding period. The issue of sustaining the good practices of LLNs (especially in relation to progression of apprentices) is now very much to the fore.
3. Whilst general references to vocational learners were much in evidence in LLNs' targeted constituencies, only a few made explicit mention to apprentices. More (about one third) referenced them in their detailed business plans to HEFCE. Apprentice progression is now, however, further up the LLNs' agendas.
4. The motivation of individual Apprenticeship learners was not seen as a major barrier to progression. Effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) were seen as crucial both in terms of impact on the learner but also on representatives of other organisations such as those representing the HE admissions systems. Relatively speaking, employers were not seen as a major barrier and not focussed upon significantly as part of IAG strategies or as a way of levering up demand for Apprenticeships.
5. Most LLNs see themselves as operating across employment sectors pertinent to Apprenticeship progression and many are being strategic in identifying which of the sectors to promote within those – with local influences being significant.
6. Key themes permeate the LLNs' approaches to Apprenticeship progression; IAG, curriculum development (especially bridging/access provision) Progression Agreements, research and finally collaboration especially with other LLNs, training providers and Aimhigher.
7. Case studies of six LLNs are presented to reflect activity in these themes but many other LLNs could have provided evidence of good practice in these areas. These case studies reflect specific and focussed Apprenticeship activity as well as 'adapted' activity based on a broader vocational constituency.
8. Diverse methodologies and target groups were selected by LLNs for IAG activity. Training providers emerged as an important group upon which to focus.
9. There was relatively little focus on other IAG agencies despite the fact they might become more significant in sustaining LLN strategies and outcomes.
10. The development of bridging/access provision suitable for apprentices emerged as a major element in LLNs' strategies. There are a variety of models, some generic and some specific, to a sector or group. They varied in credit size, length, delivery method and level (3 and/or 4). There was also evidence of shared development across LLNs.
11. Progression Agreements were at the heart of most LLNs' strategies but not universally. Whilst still small, there is a growing number of signed Progression Agreements indicating a greater significance given to progression from Apprenticeships than in the past. The nature of Progression Agreements varies between and within LLNs in relation to the benefits to be derived by the learner. The bulk of such agreements relate to Foundation degrees.
12. LLNs are engaging in research and related Apprenticeship project activity. There appears to be little cooperation between LLNs, however, in this particular activity - the main focus being 'mapping & gap analysis' and 'identification of progression barriers'.

13. There is evidence of cooperation between LLNs in other areas. Strong cooperative relationships with Aimhigher appear to have been fruitful in the IAG area. Such collaboration will become increasingly important as LLNs seek to embed good practice prior to the end of their HEFCE funding period.
14. Whilst there is some evidence of apprentice progression resulting from LLN activity it is basically too early to identify the impact especially since apprentices are more likely to enter HE after a period of time following successful achievement of their Apprenticeship. The extent to which any future growth in numbers of apprentices progressing to HE can be traced back to LLN activity will be problematic.
15. For those LLNs which choose to give a greater focus to apprentices in the development of their network policies, the report identifies elements of good practice. It commends the following:
 - i) Developing an explicit Apprenticeship strategy
 - ii) Aiming, inter alia, to build the longer term capacity of others
 - iii) Undertaking or drawing on sound market research to enable the strategic targeting of specific employers and/or employment sectors specific to the locality and then developing or adapting processes with these groups in mind.
 - iv) Working closely and directly with local training providers and their networks. This offers distinct advantages, including ready access to the specific Apprenticeship market and a staff resource which, where possible, should be utilised in the execution of the LLN's strategic approach. Sound contacts of this kind can also contribute to the longer term sustainability of those approaches.
 - v) In order to increase impact, cooperating with other organisations which have Apprenticeships on their agenda. (Aimhigher appeared to be an important partner for a number of the LLNs working on Apprenticeships but this will not be universally the case. Other potential partners may be available to share the resource burden but also to provide a basis for longer term sustainability).
 - vi) Working closely with, and influencing, the widest possible group of local IAG agencies to ensure that apprentices are a significant part of their focus and that they are well informed of the progression opportunities to HE in the region and the role of the LLN.
 - vii) Making use of existing processes such as local 'champions', bridging and access programmes or on-line IAG tools. This can allow the development of economic and speedy interventions to enhance Apprenticeship take up. However, there is the danger that apprentices can remain marginalised unless a specifically focussed Apprenticeship strategy accompanies such initiatives.
 - viii) Where bridging and access programmes are developed or adapted, it is important to ensure that this does not disadvantage the Apprenticeship award holder. The credit worthiness and level of such programmes should be transparent and their contents designed to respond to the specific needs of the apprentice client group.
 - ix) Pursuit of a vigorous Progression Agreement policy, but this should be based around the notion of guaranteed places in order to retain a presence for Apprenticeship award holders at a time when 'non traditional entrants' face fiercer competition from traditional 'A' level holders.

16. There are a number of recommendations arising from the report.
- i) LLN's should, if they wish to focus on apprentices as an important part of their constituency, develop an explicit Apprenticeship strategy which aims, inter alia, to build the longer term capacity of others.
 - ii) Given limited resources, LLNs should continue to act strategically in targeting specific employment sectors drawing on national and local research to determine where intervention is most likely to be effective.
 - iii) LLNs, at a local level, should seek to work closely and directly, wherever appropriate, with:
 - local training providers and their networks,
 - Aimhigher partnerships.
 - other LLNs
 - and where possible employers especially SMEs.
 - iv) The development of bridging and access programmes suitable for apprentices should be pursued, based on existing examples of good practice in such provision.
 - v) The current ambiguities surrounding the credit worthiness of such programmes should be clarified in a way that does not disadvantage the Apprenticeship award holder so that full recognition can be given for activity at an appropriate level.
 - vi) In order to sustain the activities and benefits of the approaches taken by LLNs beyond their lifetime, especially in the area of IAG, greater emphasis should be given to influencing the wider group of IAG agencies in the locality to ensure they are fully versed in the progression opportunities available and in the nature of HE in the region.
 - vii) In view of the current pressure on widening participation strategies brought about by the economic downturn LLNs should pursue a vigorous Progression Agreement policy based around the notion of guaranteed places in order to retain a presence for Apprenticeship award holders.
 - viii) Those involved in the admissions processes to HE, both with academic and administrative responsibilities, should be encouraged by LLNs to 'normalise' the Apprenticeship award in the entry criteria for their programmes and to publicise these effectively through prospectuses, entry profiles and other marketing devices.
 - ix) LLNs should continue to encourage innovation in teaching and learning in order to make HE more accessible to non-traditional learners once accepted onto programmes.
 - x) LLNs should consider the good practice identified in section 6 and elsewhere in this report.
 - xi) Given that a number of LLNs have already, or are about to, come to the end of their funding, Government, funding bodies and other stakeholders should consider, as a matter of urgency, how best to retain and build upon the effective processes established by the LLNs to support apprentice progression and indeed the national widening participation policy generally.
 - xii) LLNs should seek to operate more collaboratively as a national network of LLNs in the pursuit of Apprenticeship policies. The National Forum should proactively develop a coordinated strategy, working with the National Apprenticeship Service, but also with SSCs, **fdf**, funding bodies and other stakeholders to make best use of the leverage that LLNs can provide locally.

- xiii) The National LLN Forum has an important part to play in encouraging, focussing and co-ordinating research and project activity reflecting the good practice of its members in the context, inter alia, of Apprenticeship activity. Given timescales, distributing findings in a fast and effective manner is important. Case studies reflecting best practice will provide a effective starting point.
- xiv) The decision of UCAS to establish a points profile will go some way towards a 'normalisation' of the Apprenticeship award in the entry criteria for HE programmes. Other agencies also have a key role to play, such as:
- the National Apprenticeship Service through timely initiatives,
 - SSCs through framework development,
 - **fdf** especially through its new website section for Advisors³
 - employer representatives and professional bodies by promulgating the positive attributes of apprentices,
 - Government through application of consistent policies.
- xv) **fdf** should consider the role it might play in the future in supporting the maintenance and continued development of Apprenticeship Progression Agreements, based on the notion of guaranteed places, through its Endorsement Service.⁴
- xvi) Given the time scale for LLN activity HEFCE and **fdf** might wish to consider how they could monitor the longer term impact of LLNs in terms of progression into level 4 programmes, and Foundation degrees specifically, so that the real impact of LLNs can be evaluated more effectively in the future. The role of Progression Agreements might be one mechanism upon which to focus.
- xvii) The National Apprenticeship Service, HEFCE, **fdf** (especially through its regional structure) and other stakeholders might wish to consider how they could encourage the continued development and use of Progression Agreements for Apprenticeships (and more widely - for example in relation to the 14-19 Diploma) so that the national widening participation agenda can be supported during a time of recession and the recommendations of the Leitch report implemented more effectively.
- xviii) Given its responsibilities, the National Apprenticeship Service should engage in a dialogue with **fdf** and the LLN National Forum, using this report as a starting point, to consider how they can support it in meeting its objectives in assuming 'end to end responsibility for the delivery of Apprenticeships'.⁵

3 Expected to be launched in August 2009

4 Tatum, S: **fdf's** Endorsement Service in *Forward*, Innovating Workforce Development. Issue 18 June 2009 - **fdf**

5 <http://www.Apprenticeships.org.uk> (accessed 4/8/09)

1. Introduction

The key objectives for this research were stated as follows, to:

- gather information on what LLNs are currently doing in relation to increasing progression from Apprenticeships to HE
- identify case studies of existing effective practice
- disseminate this information to a wider audience
- make recommendations for further work.

Operationally these objectives were translated more simply as seeking answers to the following questions in relation to Apprenticeships:

- What have LLNs done?
- What do they perceive to be successful (or likely to be) and why?
- What has proved unsuccessful or difficult to deliver and why?
- What are LLNs' perceptions of the barriers to progression from Apprenticeships?

We cannot understand the role that LLNs have played in the lives of apprentices and, more importantly, what role they might play in future without first understanding something about LLNs themselves. The most important fact to understand is that they are all different.

The concept of lifelong learning is nothing new. However, Lifelong Learning Networks were first introduced into the national agenda in 2004, by the then Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Sir Howard Newby, in the Colin Bell Memorial Lecture, resulting in a circular letter jointly with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). At its heart was the recognition that:

'There are far fewer progression opportunities for learners on vocational programmes than for those on an academic route. About 90 per cent of those on conventional A-level programmes enter higher education, but only 40-50 per cent of those qualifying at Level 3 in vocational subjects do so. Those who do enter HE from vocational learning programmes often find that progression within higher education is also problematic. There are fewer choices open to them, and greater uncertainty attaches to the choices that do exist' (HEFCE12/2004).⁶

This therefore is what LLNs have in common - the aim to do something about this. Their differences lay firstly in the fact that HEFCE saw merit in a diversity of patterns:

'The first stage is to explore the scope for developing Lifelong Learning Networks in individual regions. We envisage these as groups of institutions, including higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) *that come together across a city, area or region to offer new progression opportunities for vocational learners'* *ibid.* (emphasis not in the original).

Two LLNs are in fact highly specialised and national.

Secondly, HEFCE funding was for three years in the first instance in most cases. Many LLNs officially finish in 2009. Continuation strategies to date have tended to be in the form of extensions granted for short periods of time by HEFCE, based on existing funding. Some early LLNs have continued with alternative funding streams and therefore different priorities. Essentially the individual LLNs, as originally conceived, had or will have a short life span. This is significant since some of the LLNs that are the subject of this research were coming to the end of their funding and saw little prospect of continuing at least in their current form. In fact, of the 26 respondents to the

6 http://hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlets/2004/cl12_04/ (accessed 25/6/09)

questionnaire 10 were completing their funding period by December 2009 and of these 2 were already operating on a different basis, 5 considered they might be able to continue albeit in a different form with different income streams, and consequently priorities, and 4 were unsure or felt they were unlikely to continue. This was a matter of great frustration for the representatives of the LLNs who were the subject of in-depth interviews. They felt that the period under HEFCE funding had allowed them to develop strategies and pilot new ideas that could have had considerable impact on the apprentice progression issue, but time had defeated them. It was for this reason that members of the Directors' Group of the National Forum were keen for an early report. There is little point in identifying good practice if there is nobody around to implement it!

That said, it was also the case that the process for approving the establishment of LLNs was somewhat drawn out. Thus whilst some are coming to their end or have already finished, others have started relatively recently (in May 2008 for example)⁷. This diversity of organisational shape, location, remaining funding period and 'continuation strategy', means that the lessons learnt from this report will impact upon apprentice progression policy somewhat unequally across the national landscape.

But LLNs do have a very important role to play. The **fdf**/UVAC report 'Apprenticeship Progression to HE'⁸ concluded that:

'Overall, however, Apprenticeship progression to higher learning appears to be small in scale, little known, patchy in application, and poorly supported by national policy. There is a lack of national leadership and drive in the field of Apprenticeship progression, which falls between FE and HE policy and development responsibilities'

LLNs were designed to bridge the FE HE divide operating as networks across both sectors. With their emphasis on information, advice and guidance, Progression Agreements and curriculum development who better to respond to this challenge?

The development of Apprenticeships through a government supported training scheme is a central plank of government policy for developing intermediate/technician skills. Formal government involvement with Apprenticeships began in 1994 when Modern Apprenticeships were introduced for 16-25 year olds. In 1997 there were 75,000 young people on Apprenticeship programmes, but retention and completion rates were low compared to other areas of education and training. In 2001/2 the completion rate was 24% but this rose to 64% in 2006/07, reflecting the concerted effort to improve the retention and achievement rates⁹. HEFCE research indicates that the number who completed an Apprenticeship increased from 37,460 in 2002-03 to 90,130 in 2005-06¹⁰ and that the rate of progression to higher education within four years for those who completed their Apprenticeship in 2002-03 was as little as 6%. By 2007 the numbers of apprentices had risen to 250,000¹¹. Leitch¹² has recommended 'boosting the number of apprentices in the UK to 500,000' by 2020.

It should be expected that, as part of the Government's requirement for all young people to stay in some form of education and training until the age of 18 by 2015, and the entitlement to an Apprenticeship place by 2013, there will be growth in demand for Apprenticeship places. The National Apprenticeship Service, launched on 27

7 Details of individual LLNs can be found on <http://hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/funded/networks> (accessed 25/6/09)

8 Apprenticeship progression to HE project Phase 2, Stage 3 report' UVAC/**fdf** February 2008.

9 <http://www.commonleader.gov.uk/output/page2169.asp> (accessed 22/6/09)

10 Pathways to HE – Apprenticeships, HEFCE May 2009

11 Commonsleader op cit

12 'Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – world class skills (Leitch Review of Skill, Final Report, Dec 2006)

April 2009, has been set up to be responsible for the delivery of Apprenticeships and associated targets. In its first prospectus the priorities focus on recruitment, delivery and achievement of Apprenticeships. There is however, very little about progression from Apprenticeships into higher education in the Prospectus, apart from the following reference:

'Research shows that most apprentices who successfully complete their training are interested in progressing to higher education at some point. We will therefore work with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), UCAS and Sector Skills Councils to maximise clear progression opportunities; and with individual higher education institutions and employers of apprentices'¹³

Given that some Sector Skills Councils have identified higher level skills as a shortage area and have developed Apprenticeship frameworks as a way forward it is not unexpected to see them as a point of reference. Skills for Health, for example, emphasises that Advanced Apprenticeships offer many benefits for higher education institutions, young people and employers:

'...Advanced Apprentices are quickly proving themselves to be committed learners who stick with their courses. This is helping HEIs to improve their retention and completion rates and maintain their funding streams... For young people who do not want to follow a traditional A level route, Advanced Apprenticeships are an attractive pathway which can lead to a variety of roles... Enthusing young people early on helps employers reduce recruitment costs, employees have greater job satisfaction and are more likely to stay in their chosen career.'¹⁴

It is disappointing that LLNs are not more prominent in the National Apprenticeship Service's thinking.

It is evident that although currently not many apprentices progress into higher education, a significant number continue to undertake some form of qualification, including vocational qualifications, GCSEs and A levels. Furthermore, there appears to be a willingness to consider progression to higher level skills programmes. Of 1180 Advanced Apprentices who had completed their Apprenticeship, 31% said they would like to study a level 4 course, 6% are currently arranging it and 17% said they may possibly want to progress to a level 4 course¹⁵. There is clearly a potential untapped market for higher level skills programmes, to which LLNs could respond. The planned increase in Apprenticeship numbers should increase the numbers considering higher education in subsequent years.

Advanced and Higher Apprentices, who engage in HE, are likely to do so through the part-time route. There is now considerable potential for the Apprenticeship as a platform for work related higher education. The development of the Foundation degree provides the basis for progression from both the Advanced and Higher Apprenticeship to a work related higher education qualification as does the growth in the development of 'bite-sized' accredited CPD activity in HEIs. Designed in conjunction with employers, the Foundation degree qualification provides a clear pathway from an Apprenticeship into a level 4 programme and beyond.

This research report, sponsored through **fdf** and involving the LLN National Forum, is therefore timely.

13 National Apprenticeship Service Prospectus, National Apprenticeship Service (May 2009)

14 The Higher Education Guide to the Advanced Apprenticeship Framework in Health and Social Care, New Opportunities. Skills For Health

15 The Benefits of Completing an Apprenticeship. Learning and Skills Council, April 2009.

2. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study, was to a large extent dictated by what was practical within the time scale. There is little doubt that the quality and quantity of the information gathered would have been improved had there been sufficient time to visit every LLN. Even the LLN which decided not to complete the questionnaire on the grounds that *'they had done nothing on apprentices but aimed to make this a significant area of activity in the academic year 2009/2010'* would have provided useful information. Nevertheless the combination of a questionnaire to all and in-depth interviews with some has enabled a picture to emerge which is more sophisticated than one based on a survey alone.

There are 30 LLNs and the gatherings of staff at various National Forum events has meant that there is a recognisably friendly and relatively close knit network of colleagues. This proved to be important for the research. The LLNs (even those operating on each others' borders often with overlapping membership) are, generally speaking, open about their activities and keen to share ideas with others. It became apparent during the research that there was little sense of competition. This meant that the response rate for the questionnaire was good (26 out of 30), the in-depth interviews illuminating, and the case studies willingly offered.

Phase 1

Phase 1 comprised mainly desk based research. It was important to read around the Apprenticeship topic to provide a context for the next phases, but the intention was that the outcomes of the research would be practical in nature, lead to sharing good practice and therefore we have avoided providing an overly academic report.

As part of this phase, the key strands and themes of each LLN were identified. Whilst some LLNs focus across a broad range of employment sectors, others, as part of the HEFCE funding 'contract', concentrated more narrowly. This information was cross referenced to LSC data, provided by **fdf**, indicating the sectors which were most active in Apprenticeship development and where progression might be expected to be most significant or at least significant as an issue. The intention here was to narrow down the range of LLNs to approach, to those that might be expected, because of their particular occupational sectors, to be engaged with the key questions for the research. However, this was not the way strategy was eventually determined.

A different policy was adopted as a result of the first contact with LLNs. Each LLN was requested to send broad information about their activity that was pertinent to the objectives of the research. No format was dictated and some emailed extensive information with attachments and others a paragraph or line or two. Out of the 30 LLNs contacted 26 responded. This information proved to be more valuable than expected and it provided the basis upon which to identify the key themes of the proposed questionnaire. Far from being restricted to a few LLNs in pertinent occupational areas, the LLN community was significantly engaged in the issue but to differing degrees and to different levels of explicitness. For some, Apprenticeships were approached through an adaptation of existing processes and approaches, whilst for others, Apprenticeships were given a specific focus and approached as a constituency in their own right¹⁶. Six LLNs were identified to visit in order to illustrate the approaches taken.

16 I am indebted to Graeme Hall for his insights here.

Phase 2

The Phase 1 information, once analysed, indicated four broad areas in which LLNs were engaged as far as Apprenticeship progression was concerned. Individually and collectively the LLNs were involved in various and differing activities that can best be described as:

- Information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- Curriculum development (especially bridging/access provision)
- Progression Agreements for apprentices
- Research or project activity (such as mapping exercises).

These became the basis for the construction of the questionnaire which was designed to elicit further information from some and to prompt others into considering their involvement in these aspects of their work.

It had been agreed through the Project Steering Group, that six in-depth interviews should also take place. By chance, and in parallel with the current study, consultancy work was also being undertaken with another LLN for different purposes and this provided an opportunity to talk in-depth to a seventh. In addition since the researcher was also the Director of an LLN himself he had access to the staff of an eighth network with whom to test ideas. The case studies however, are all derived from the 'official' sample of LLNs.

From the 26 respondents, any number of LLNs could have been visited and to some degree the decisions as to which were arbitrary. However, we aimed to select those that appeared to be doing 'something interesting' in at least one of the four categories above, where possible to get some degree of geographical spread and to illustrate the specific and/or adaptive approaches adopted by LLNs. This resulted in visits to the following HEFCE regions:

- North East
- Yorkshire and Humberside
- North West
- East Midlands
- West Midlands
- London

The six case studies chosen were representative of good practice identifiable in some other LLNs as well.

Phase 3

Using the expertise of the West London LLN, a survey was designed based upon the four broad areas above for circulation electronically to all LLNs. This was piloted with Linking London LLN and amendments made before circulation. This resulted in 26 replies including 4 partial replies. Of the 4 non responses we know that one was due to the fact that they considered it unnecessary to complete the questionnaire because they had had no engagement with the Apprenticeship issue. It might well be that the others fall into this category.

Although electronic analysis of the responses was available, it was decided to analyse the data by hand since this provided greater flexibility in the way the data could be interrogated and ensured that the answers to open questions were fully taken into consideration. In addition the questionnaire responses from each LLN were laid alongside the 'initial contact response' from phase 1 and also in some cases the transcript of a visit. This ensured that the views of the LLN were reflected as fully as possible.

3. The Developing Agenda

A factor in understanding the impact that LLNs are currently having on apprentices' progression into HE, is the extent to which the LLNs saw this as explicitly on their agendas when developing their business plans to attract HEFCE funding.

When asked what the target constituency was for the LLN, as specified in the plan and reiterated in their first monitoring report to HEFCE, there was very little evidence that apprentices per se were mentioned. The vast majority of LLNs had much more generalised statements such as:

'The key beneficiaries... will be:

- Learners who whatever their age, wish to pursue learning at Level 4 and beyond contributing towards qualifications in vocational subjects
- Learners who want to re-engage with HE learning as part of a personal career plan, whether that involves change or advancement
- Learners who wish to add to their 'credit bank' (with accumulated credit from Continuing Education modules, in-house programmes, or any other source of recognised level 4+ learning)
- Employer supported learners.'

Thus general references to vocational learners, including those in the workplace were common. In responding further, one LLN stated that this potentially included apprentices and this was reinforced through the in-depth interviews where it was clear that apprentices were swept up in the targeted constituencies rather than focussed on as a key element in those constituencies. However, 9 LLNs stated they made more specific references to progression from Apprenticeships to HE in the detail of their overall business plans. The relative lack of attention given to apprentices in the original plans to HEFCE is understandable since apprentices, as a learner category, were not high on the national agenda when many LLN plans were submitted. In addition, since LLNs are subject to monitoring criteria and meeting targets, other groups of learners represented a 'less difficult nut to crack'. One LLN stated:

'It has remained an important (though difficult) area for progression work.'

It is clear however, that the position has changed since the development of the original business plans. When asked whether Apprenticeships were an appropriate route into HE, all 21 LLNs which responded to this question said yes. This included 9 with the caveat that much depended on the readiness of the HE sector, in terms of the nature of the programmes on offer (such as the Foundation degree and HND/HNC) and the appropriateness of the delivery method (such as work based delivery). Many drew attention to the skills that apprentices have developed (including those derived from the disciplines of the world of work) which made them good candidates for the appropriate HE offering.

Thus, when asked what emphasis is now given within the LLN to Apprenticeship progression, of 24 respondents 19 stated that it had become more important to them. This demonstrates the acuity of the networks. LLNs have quickly identified their potential role in responding to new but mission relevant agendas (in the same way that they have with the 14-19 Diploma). Responses to the survey suggest LLNs have a willingness to respond to both national as well as local agendas. When asked why Apprenticeship progression has taken on more significance the following reasons were given.

SOURCE OF INFLUENCE	RESPONSES
NATIONAL	
Government Policy	16
General educational context (such as the Leitch report, HEFCE policy on employer engagement)	16
LOCAL	
Local market factors (changes in demand, employer, newly identified needs etc.	9
Network partner/stakeholder influences	8
OTHER	
<i>fdf</i> /UVAC publications	4
Other LLNs	1
Interests of staff	1
TV advertisements	1
Launch of National Apprenticeship Service	1

Of the remaining 5 LLNs which perceived no change in policy, 4 already had Apprenticeships on the agenda from the outset of their network activities. Interestingly, two of these stated they were unable to give added emphasis to this agenda as they were nearing the end of their funded periods and lacked the finance. The remaining two continued to view it as important. One LLN operated in a highly specialised employment sector and had not identified apprentices as an area of significance for that sector.

LLNs also developed in different contexts. For half (10 of 21 respondents) there were no established Apprenticeship progression routes in existence prior to the establishment of the LLN. In the case of another 6 they were unsure. Only 5 developed against a background of existing provision. For LLNs, Apprenticeship progression was for the most part uncharted territory.

LLNs saw themselves as only one, important, part of the strategy towards enhancing progression for apprentices. Others have a role to play as well. LLNs have collaborated with agencies of all kinds including Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), employers, NHS Health Trusts and, as described later, substantially with Aimhigher. So which agencies did LLNs believe could give more priority to this agenda outside their immediate partnership, and with whom more collaborative ventures could be established? Of 21 LLN answering this question the following agencies were of note.

UCAS	16
Sector Skills Councils	16
Professional Bodies	15
Employer Organisations	13
Aimhigher	10
Government Departments	9
LSC	9
Local Authorities	8
Private Training Providers	2

The strategies adopted by LLNs should of course relate to their perception of the barriers that need to be overcome to enhance apprentice progression. Perception is not, of course, necessarily a reflection of reality which is why the outcomes of research, such as that reflected in Case Study (3) requires wide dissemination. So what do LLNs perceive to be the main barriers to apprentice progression? Of the 26 LLNs which completed the questionnaire 20 responded to this question.

BARRIERS

Lack of knowledge of HE availability	17
Lack of information, advice and guidance	14
Perceptions amongst HE admissions tutors	16
No UCAS points assigned to Apprenticeship frameworks	10
Lack of HE learning skills	13
Lack of appropriate maths and/or literacy skills	9
Employer attitudes	9
Lack of motivation	7
Other ¹⁷	4

It is clear that the motivation of the learners was not seen as a major barrier, but that providing them with good and effective information, advice and guidance is problematic. It is not surprising therefore that a great deal of activity of LLNs is in that direction (see section 5) focussing on these pinch points.

Also clear is that the HE admissions system through institutional gatekeepers and UCAS, is seen as a considerable obstacle to be overcome. When asked how best to overcome barriers, normalising Apprenticeships through the provision of UCAS points, scored highly. The decision by UCAS to 'normalise' the Apprenticeship frameworks by the end of 2009 may well make a major contribution to smoothing the apprentices' progression pathways.

LLN activities through IAG strategies (see section 5a) bridging modules (section 5b) and Progression Agreements (section 5c) are also designed to smooth the actual or virtual encounter with admissions tutors which was seen as problematic. As one respondent said

'It is essential that, if progression via the Apprenticeship route is to be successful, the views of admissions and registry need to be addressed. There is also a need for tutors in HE to be aware of how vocational learners perceive HE and they need to take into consideration how their teaching might need to change/evolve in order to make HE more accessible to non-traditional learners.'

Whilst employers are clearly important they are not considered in relative terms a major obstacle and this is reflected in the LLNs activities in that direction. Although several respondents made comments such as:

'One big problem area is that of employers' attitudes. In our region many employers are actually very small and do not wish their apprentices to be "taken off the job" to continue their education, when they can be working. Probably this is due to financial constraints.'

¹⁷ Four respondents added that costs, social class, a lack of appropriate course provision or well organised funding for higher Apprenticeships and inappropriate gate keeper activity (e.g. work-based learning assessors, training providers) also impacted.

It is the actual or perceived lack of readiness of apprentices to enter HE that LLNs see as an important factor in reinforcing the reluctance of HE tutors to admit these learners. (One respondent glossed their response by suggesting this was especially in relation to *'traditional HE rather than the more vocationally and work focussed/ based HE that is becoming more widespread'*). This issue of being ready to enter HE was reinforced by some actual or perceived inadequacies in maths and literacy. (Such concerns are also raised in relation to traditional 'A' level school leavers). The encouragement by LLNs of the development of access and bridging programmes has been an important response, as detailed in section 5.

As stated above at least one LLN operating in a highly specialised employment sector felt that the Apprenticeship agenda was not one that was of significance to that sector. LLNs can only respond to the market that presents itself or where there are genuine opportunities to lever up market interest. The **fdf/UVAC** report 'Apprenticeship progression to HE'¹⁸ is pertinent here. The report identifies that there is a stronger case for apprentice and work based progression in some sectors rather than others, supported by relevant Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and professional bodies. These are: Accountancy, Engineering, Health Care and IT/Telecommunications. Earlier **fdf/UVAC** work also found some evidence that childcare, agriculture, hairdressing and active leisure could be added to the list. Information supplied through **fdf** from the LSC for phase 1 of this project would support this with the possible addition of Construction, Customer Service/Retail and the broadly defined area of Business. HEFCE also points out that industry sector is an important factor in apprentice progression rates with a much greater proportion of those studying accountancy, for example, progressing (67 per cent of Advanced Apprentices) compared with those studying other subjects. This increased progression rate is, HEFCE states, 'in part due to structured Level 3 to Level 4 progression routes for accounting'.¹⁹ Given that some LLNs have a limited sector remit it is likely that some will be more effective or more able than others to respond to the Apprenticeship agenda.

Of the 25 respondents to this part of the survey, the distribution of sectors was as follow:

Health and Social Care	21
Creative and Cultural Industries	17
Engineering and Technology	16
Construction	15
Finance, Business Management and Enterprise	12
Education and Early Years	11
Information and Communications Technology	9
Environment, Land-based and Animal Science	8
Sport	8
Leisure and Tourism	7
Biosciences	6
Retail	5
Hospitality	4
Public Services	4
Heritage/Archaeology	3

LLNs are therefore broadly operating in pertinent sectors. The overlap between sectors identified as being more appropriate for Apprenticeship progression activity and those focussed upon by LLNs is significant.

18 Apprenticeship Progression to HE project Phase 2, Stage 3 report' UVAC/**fdf** February 2008.

19 Pathways to HE – Apprenticeships – HEFCE May 2009.

LLNs have clearly taken a strategic approach to the Apprenticeship agenda. 22 LLNs responded to the question about the sectors on which they have selected to focus. Of these, half had decided not to apply their Apprenticeship strategy to all the sectors within their remit even where in some cases virtually all the LLN's sectors reflected fertile ground for development. Of the other half, they were either very specialised in their sector approach (in which case if they were to pursue an Apprenticeship policy at all they had little option but to cover all their employment sectors (sometimes a single sector) or they had a larger range of sectors which through foresight or chance overlapped extremely well with the sectors identified above as being 'Apprenticeship friendly'. Those LLNs that had been selective identified the following influences on their decision making:

Local employer demand	6
Local apprentice demand	5
Sector Skill Council influence	5
FE partner influence	5
HE partner influence	4
Limited staff experience	1
Limited finance	1

4. Case Studies

It had been the intention to illustrate each of the key themes by reference to one case study. However, the richness of the case studies soon became obvious and multiple themes were identified as permeating each of them. It was decided therefore to place the case studies in one place at the heart of the report rather than relegating them to an appendix and to draw upon them as the report unfolds. As stated earlier, some other LLNs could have produced similar examples of the practices which the selected case studies illustrate .

These six case studies pick up and demonstrate the key themes found in the research to be significant to LLN involvement in the Apprenticeship agenda and illustrate responses that have been pursued. In summary there are four first phase themes mentioned above:

- Information, advice and guidance
- Curriculum development
- Progression Agreements for apprentices
- Research or project activity

and a fifth which emerged in the course of the second phase

- Cooperation.

There is an extensive network of cooperative relationships involving SSCs, employers, professional associations and so forth but during the course of the study, relationships with training providers and Aimhigher stood out as significant at an operational level in terms of the Apprenticeship activities of LLNs. Cooperation between LLNs was not as apparent as might have been expected but nevertheless there is also evidence of good practice here, as the case studies illustrate.

It is helpful to make a distinction between specific and adaptive approaches to Apprenticeship policies. The first four case studies illustrate LLN responses focussed specifically on the Apprenticeship agenda and the apprentice constituency, as well as some of the themes identified above. SELLLN for example decided to capitalise on the approved Apprenticeship framework of a particular Sector Skills Council, and then targeted its Apprenticeship strategy through 'mapping' Level 4 opportunities for Advanced Apprentices in that specific field of endeavour. YHELLN's strategy, again in cooperation with other agencies, homed in on the significant role played by training providers in encouraging apprentices to progress into HE. The use, but most importantly the development, of the "Preparation for Higher Education" study skills module aimed at Apprenticeship training staff, provides a significant illustration of how the work of the LLNs can be sustained into the future especially in the Apprenticeship arena. North East Higher Skills illustrates the importance of a sound understanding of the Apprenticeship market prior to implementing an effective response, by undertaking focussed research to verify the often unsubstantiated perceptions that many have about lower progression rates of apprentices. Such research if published will be invaluable to the LLNs, and others, seeking to provide tailor made responses. Leap Ahead LLN, like YHELLN, also identified Training Providers and their networks as a key to unlocking Apprenticeship progression and in this sense has sought to treat apprentices as an important and significant constituency of its own. However, their response is also in some senses adaptive by sensibly drawing upon what has worked in other contexts and extending the use of Champions into new settings.

Case study 1

Targeting the response

Ruth Keynes – South East London LLN

LLNs have for the most part been ready and willing to work together and the National LLN Forum has been important in encouraging this on a national basis. More locally, London provides a rich opportunity for the various London based LLNs to work together on a coordinated and cooperative basis. Cooperation between LLNs can take a number of forms, from simply sharing ideas through to working jointly on projects. Thus the South East London LLN (SELLLN) is part of a pan-London Information, Advice and Guidance Group collectively running conferences for the IAG sector. In addition SELLLN has worked closely with Linking London LLN and West London LLN to put on staff development sessions on topics such as the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

The latter, of course is relevant to the Apprenticeship, as a route into higher education. Cooperation has been an important aspect of SELLLN's strategy here. The network decided to focus its attention on the Creative and Cultural area since the Sector Skills Council, Creative and Cultural Skills, had a well developed and approved Apprenticeship framework. In addition not many of the other London-based LLNs focussed specifically on this sector, so it was possible to start work without treading on too many toes from other overlapping LLNs. However, in order to make progress it was recognised that SELLLN would need to work closely with the National Arts Learning Network the nationally based LLN for the Arts (NALN). Close personal links had been established with NALN in the past so it was possible to create a good working relationship. NALN brought into the relationship its lead University, the University of the Arts, and so together with Goldsmith's College, the lead University for the SELLLN, coverage of the London area providers was largely secured.

Through this relationship it was possible to undertake a 'mapping' exercise of Level 4 opportunities for Advanced Creative Apprentices available at institutions across London (the outcome of which it is hoped will be launched on the Creative and Cultural Skills website). NALN also brought with it a route into private training providers with whom discussions had been held about the needs of apprentices and the barriers that confront them in progressing to HE.

SELLLN has also sought support from outside London as part of this Apprenticeship initiative. The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (LLN) had developed a generic bridging module into HE currently validated by the University of Bolton. They were generous in allowing SELLLN to exploit this idea and use the module as a basis for a 30 credit level 4 module but specifically focussed on the creative and cultural industries sectors. This has now been validated through Goldsmith's College. The sharing of ideas and indeed development work between LLNs brings about huge savings in time and money.

So where are we now? The LLN Apprenticeship initiative has reached the point of take off but some formidable barriers are presenting themselves. Firstly the short lifespan of the LLN means that it now has little time to exploit this initiative. To raise awareness and encourage apprentices, and their employers to make use of the mapping, the module and the potential opportunities now available will take time and time is at a premium. In addition, it is apparent that much of the success of the initiative to date has rested on the attitudes of individuals, and individuals keep changing. Thus staff changes at the SSC, within Goldsmiths and indeed the LLN itself make the success of this strategy seem fragile.

If time permits the SELLLN would like to roll out the 'mapping and module' model that it has adopted to a second area: Health. This will require even more cooperation across the LLNs in London since this is a sector in which a number of LLNs take a keen interest. The current pan London LLN Health Group will be significant here.

Case study 2

Celebrating innovation in progression

Charlie Sanders - YHELLN, Jackie McAndrew - Aimhigher and Tammy Aldred - Consortium for Learning

The Yorkshire and Humber East Lifelong Learning Network (YHELLN) has played a key role in a successful collaborative partnership project with Aimhigher Humber, another of HEFCE's flagship initiatives designed to increase participation in HE. Whilst Aimhigher Humber originally commissioned the "innovative and challenging" project to "raise aspirations and awareness of Advanced Apprentices" in their specific cohort group, YHELLN were also planning to initiate other work in this area. YHELLN were invited to collaborate to "enhance and extend" the work of the project in order to engage with the wider population of Advanced Apprentices and Level 3 work based learners in the Humber area. With both organisations being hosted by the University of Hull, this proved a great opportunity to collaboratively achieve a range of complementary objectives supporting the progression of Advanced Apprentices and engaging with Apprenticeship learning providers. (McAndrew J, (2008), *Targeted Progression Support for Level 3 to Level 4 Work-Based Learners Project Initiation Document*, Eden Consultancy Services for Aimhigher Humber).

The innovative practice celebrated in this case study is the delivery of a "Preparation for Higher education (HE)" study skills module to Apprenticeship provider staff, following the traditional "train the trainer" model. Higher level study skills are often a barrier for Advanced Apprentices in making the transition to HE. The additional support provided by a relevant "bridging" module can make all the difference between success and failure. Initial feedback from provider staff participants has been very positive and it is hoped that it will have a long term impact on progression to higher level learning.

The origin of the innovation came from the other key project partner, the Consortium for Learning (CfL), the organisation that represents the interests of Apprenticeship providers in the Humber area. In 2005, CfL had developed the "Preparation for HE" module in conjunction with the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Hull with Partnerships for Progression funding. The module was successfully piloted with a cohort of Administration apprentices but little has been done with it since for a number of reasons namely delivery costs, appropriate location, timing and fees. When the new project was commissioned by Aimhigher in 2008, CfL recommended that we should pilot the delivery of the "Preparation for HE" to a representative group of Apprenticeship provider staff thus enabling them to embed the ability to deliver it to their own learners at a time and place to suit both thereby ensuring sustainability past the lifetime of both YHELLN and Aimhigher.

The course content was reviewed and updated with the original course developers at the University and an additional session was included covering how to deliver the module to learners and the resources and materials to be used. More importantly, it covered the application process required to become a Registered Teacher of the University of Hull Centre for Lifelong Learning, essential for those providers wanting to deliver the module as a University accredited module. YHELLN were able to fund the delivery of this module to Apprenticeship provider staff which made recruitment to the first pilot module easier and they played a key role in negotiating student places and fees with the Centre for Lifelong Learning.

Many tutors and assessors involved in supporting Advanced Apprentices also come through the work based learning route themselves and often do not experience "traditional HE". Whilst many have successfully undertaken a range of higher level qualifications including higher level NVQ's, professional qualifications and in-service lifelong learning, teaching or training qualifications, they may not always be in a position to or feel confident with advising students on the most appropriate next step into HE, and what it might involve. Studying the module for themselves would undoubtedly address some of these IAG shortcomings.

Providers now have a range of options to support progression. They can deliver the accredited module; they can also deliver the module without accreditation, at a time to suit their organisation, and without delivery, tuition and accreditation costs. They can also deliver relevant bite-size chunks of the module to individuals or groups when the whole module is not required. They can also cascade the model throughout their organisation delivering to staff who manage apprentices and other Level 3 work based learners, sustaining and embedding progression support into the future.

Case study 3

Progression research

Roger Iowans – North East Higher Skills

The North East of England, along with other areas of the country, are experiencing a much lower progression of level 3 vocational learners, particularly apprentices, to higher education/learning compared with those who undertake the academic A level route. It was felt the views of vocational learners should be obtained to verify the perceptions of stakeholders. Many reasons for the low progression rates were being suggested by colleagues working in work based learning providers, colleges of further education, universities and those working as practitioners in information, advice and guidance (IAG) and these required further examination. The suggested reasons included:

- Limited aspirations among level 3 vocational learners who often enjoy their work and therefore have no desire to change their role as employee to become either a full or part time HE student.
- A significant number of learners will have studied vocational qualifications at levels 2 and 3 and do not wish to immediately progress to level 4. In a sense it is the gap year syndrome that many learners completing A levels experience.
- Many learners chose an Apprenticeship and/or vocational qualification at level 3 because they have underachieved in their schooling and want to try a practical qualification and/or work related route to meet their perceived or identified learning style. They often see higher education as returning to the academic route where they were underachievers.
- A lack of confidence by some learners in their ability to achieve and be successful in higher education.
- The perception that HE courses are more general than level 3 vocational programmes and therefore lack relevance to the learner's employment. Therefore, they are seen as not being related to a learner's specific training needs.
- The perception of some learners is that their earning capacity would not benefit as much as using the time to gain further work experience and practical skills.
- The cost of the course and fear of getting themselves into debt is also a consideration, particularly if their only option is a full-time course.
- The additional workload caused by part-time study at a time in their lives when social activities have a high profile amongst their peer group.
- A lack of support from employers, particularly small and medium size organisations, in encouraging learners to progress further.
- Some learners are unaware of the availability of information, advice and careers guidance. Therefore, there is a lack of knowledge of progression routes.
- The perception that there is a lack of clear progression routes in some subject and/or geographical areas between level 3 and levels 4 and 5.
- Some employers do not recognise the skills and knowledge that higher education gives to an employee and how this will often enhance the operation of the business. Therefore, they do not encourage progression.

The researchers have been in contact with over 200 learners, both apprentices and those undertaking full-time level 3 vocational qualifications in colleges of further education. Throughout the study the researchers have examined the readiness of learners who have been successful at level 3 to progress to higher skill. Barriers have been identified as have the reasons given by vocational learners for wishing to progress or not.

The initial findings indicate that there are a number of key people who provide learners with information and make interventions to support learners in the decision making process including the state of readiness and self reliance of learners to access, assess and act on advice. In addition the role of FE and HE institutions and WBL providers in providing accessible and transparent progression routes and the associated information on vocational pathways from level 3 and onwards is paramount.

Another important role for FE and HE institutions in meeting the needs of level 3 vocational learners and their employers is by providing appropriate responsive and flexible programmes. Furthermore, where employers are involved in encouraging and supporting learners' progression to higher learning programmes learners are more likely to progress and feel that the obtaining of the qualification will be valued.

We expect the final report to be available in September 2009.

Mike Braun and Bop Dhillon - Leap Ahead LLN

During the summer of 2008 Leap Ahead committed to funding 12 Progression Agreement Champions across its 12 FE and HE partners. Funding was for one year, with the intention of acting as a catalyst within their own institutions in enhancing and championing progression opportunities for learners, primarily, although not exclusively, through the development of programme level Progression Agreements. More fundamentally, the aim of the role was to firmly embed activities that support progression opportunities for learners within respective institutions, requiring champions to work with colleagues, systems and structures which cut across the whole organisation.

The concept of the LLN funding progression champions within each partner institution, whilst not contained within the original Leap Ahead business plan, was felt to be the most effective way to build momentum behind the progression strand of the project and create a sense of ownership across the institutions.

The Leap Ahead remit to enhance progression possibilities for work based learners into higher education gained strong support from the two Training Provider Networks (TPNs), the Derbyshire Network and the Nottinghamshire Training Network, who currently have approximately 500 and 600 apprentices due to complete by July 2009 respectively. An Aimhigher East Midlands report (2006) stated that approximately 1.2% of Apprentices progressed into higher education.

The inclusion of work based learning providers into the inspection regime of the Common Inspection Framework means that work based learning providers are judged at inspection upon the systems in place to guide and support and track learners regarding progression post Apprenticeship completion. The extent to which work based learning providers themselves have a sufficient understanding of the range of progression routes available to work based learners, particularly of routes into higher education, to enable them to effectively support and guide learners has been found, through a variety of research reports, to be mixed and inconsistent.

The proposal therefore, was to fund an additional 2 Progression Champions located within the Training Provider Networks. The two TPNs were given autonomy in appointing their own progression champions, to ensure the opportunities for the role to be effectively integrated into their own respective strategies going forward. Leap Ahead offered an indicative job specification for the role to facilitate recruitment and to ensure a level of consistency in terms of expectations of the progression champion role as part of the wider network yet working to a common agenda.

This approach reflected an attempt to contribute towards a more coherent approach to enhancing progression opportunities into HE for work based learners through a range of activities:

- As part of a wider network of progression champions from across Leap Ahead partner FECs and HEIs, 'connecting' work based learning providers to HE to ensure that real progression infrastructures exist to support access to appropriate vocational HE. In so doing, providing greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities for vocational learners. All champions have the opportunity for face to face networking at monthly meetings which has proven valuable in facilitating dialogue and understanding, and identifying opportunities for targeted activity which seeks to enhance progression opportunities for apprentices.
- The delivery of awareness raising sessions to HE providers and work based learning providers as appropriate to foster enhanced understanding of work based learning/qualifications and of higher education respectively. To this end the TPN champions have led a focus group, bringing work based learning and HE providers together to explore the barriers to Apprenticeship progression to inform ongoing collaborative activities.

- Dispelling prevailing myths of HE held by employers, supported by Leap Ahead higher level skills advisers, enabling them to engage in dialogue with employers about flexible HE, the business benefits of investing in higher level workforce development, etc. brokering HE provision as appropriate.
- Actively contributing to the continued refinement of the Progression Agreement model to ensure a robust, fit for purpose and sustainable progression model is in place, following cessation of Leap Ahead.

The intention is that the champions can, as part of a wider network of champions, be instrumental in addressing some of the perceived barriers to HE progression for work based learners. It is also anticipated that emerging good practice might become embedded within the work based learning and HE domains and as such be sustainable beyond the lifetime of the LLN.

The value of embedding information and advice about progression within the work based learning experience will be realised to the extent that training providers make this a mainstream component of the ongoing dialogue between assessor and apprentice, evidenced by a stronger rate of progression of apprentices into local HE opportunities.

The development of Progression Agreements which offer clarity and certainty of progression opportunities should enable assessors to approach dialogue about opportunities for progression with greater confidence. It should provide a mechanism via which they can engage in an ongoing dialogue with the HE sector to foster a greater understanding of HE opportunities as well as enabling HE academics to develop a better appreciation of the validity of the Apprenticeship route.

The impact of the TPN progression champions will take time to realise. Whilst the champions are already making real inroads, developing and nurturing relationships and trust takes time, but is likely to pay real dividends in the future. A deeper level of understanding amongst all parties is required to enable consensus and commitment to be formed around a shared agenda. Whilst this process has begun through the champions network, initiatives such as this require longer term and appropriate resourcing in order to effect real change in respect of barriers to HE that appear to have become an accepted fate for apprentices rather than actively and consistently challenged.

LLNs are about bringing about a step change in vocational progression which includes, of course, apprentices. Many LLNs have therefore sought to draw in the Apprenticeship community rather than introducing uniquely new initiatives. The final two case studies illustrate approaches which are more fully adaptive in nature providing different degrees of focus on the apprentice per se. The Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network again illustrates the importance of cooperation. The LLN has extended the Aimhigher HE CARD initiative (this allows learners to participate in a number of activities including experiencing HE at summer school). It is also developing the Aimhigher ALPS initiative to show users which awards have Progression Agreements attached to them allowing entry to HE and under what conditions. The LLN has established a summer school for part-time, work based, vocational learners aimed at learners following NVQ and Advanced Apprenticeships. This adaptive strategy is also illustrated by GMSA which has taken the view that where progression opportunities are made clear and transparent to all concerned, then learners will progress successfully. The 'Pathways on-line service' designed to enhance the progression experience of all (vocational) learners has therefore drawn in the Apprenticeship award and related qualifications such as their 'Step In to HE' module.

Wendy Munroe - Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network

From the beginning of the Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network in May 2007 there has been a willingness to work closely with Aimhigher to enhance work around higher education progression, particularly for vocational learners.

In Staffordshire, Aimhigher runs an HE CARD project (Higher Education Choose a Real Deal) which supports young people in making informed decisions about progression into higher education. Signing up to HE CARD enables learners to take part in a range of activities including experiencing HE at summer school and other taster events. Working through the HE CARD co-ordinator, the LLN has funded work on an HE CARD Technology strand in three FE colleges across Staffordshire. All learners undertaking HE Technology CARD and successfully completing it (along with their vocational level 3 award) will be guaranteed places on HE awards offered across the Network through a progression agreement.

Progression Agreements are a central activity for all lifelong learning networks and promoting these agreements once they have been developed is crucial. Aimhigher Learning Pathways (ALPS) is a searchable database of progression opportunities developed by Aimhigher that enables potential learners to search for progression routes on to higher education awards across the West Midlands region. This LLN is now working with Aimhigher to create a portal that will link to the ALPS database and will show users which awards have Progression Agreements attached to them. It will also link to the detail of the Progression Agreements highlighting the partners in the agreement and the detail of what is guaranteed for the learner.

The LLN has also been involved in facilitating activity to ensure part-time vocational learners in a further education college environment can be exposed to the same HE awareness-raising experiences as other full-time students. A HEFCE-funded project run by Staffordshire University is working through the LLN to establish a summer school for part-time, work based, vocational learners in one of the Network's FE colleges aimed at learners following NVQ and Advanced Apprenticeship routes. This summer school aims to encourage progression onto part-time Foundation degrees offered in a further education environment.

The LLN was also invited to join a steering group overseeing a small research project funded by Aimhigher. The research looked specifically at the progression of advanced apprentices into HE experiences across Staffordshire - a key area of interest for all LLNs. The findings of the project showed these learners were more likely to progress if they had been work-based students in a college, rather than in a private training provider environment as their exposure to Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is greater. The results of this, and other similar work, has resulted in the LLN forging links with a range of work-based training providers to look at ways of raising awareness of progression routes for a group of learners that are significantly under represented in higher education.

GMSA pathways – From crazy paving to clear progression pathways for Apprentices

Gill Scott - Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance

The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, a membership organisation of 7 universities, 22 colleges, 56 work based learning (wbl) providers and other key stakeholders including Aimhigher Greater Manchester, gained funding in 2006 to take forward the Lifelong Learning Network(LLN) project for Greater Manchester.

Early work on signed Progression Agreements, a key outcome for Lifelong Learning Networks, laid the foundation for the development of GMSA Pathways - an interactive on line progression, information and enquiry service.

In the first year of the GMSA LLN, signed paper agreements, between further education colleges(FECs), wbl providers and higher education providers supported progression from one particular level 3 course (at one college) to a specific limited number of higher education courses within the same sector and or subject area. These agreements offered two levels of progression to learners, either guaranteed interview or a conditional offer.

The first Pathways pilot, an on-line service, was developed to communicate these agreements clearly to learners and advisors and to also enable agreements to be activated and tracked. This service was presented through Aimhigher's uni4me site and was developed and designed with guidance from the GMSA IAG Advisory Group. By focusing on the learner's perspective of progression, a learner could start from "where I am now"; input their current course, college and predicted grade; decide where they would like to study; and then get a range of offers to HE courses in Greater Manchester.

From initial feedback it was clear that having clarity of progression was highly valued by learners and staff. However, this value was undermined by the limited number of courses available to learners within a restricted range of subjects - the one they were already studying.

The process of using signed paper agreements, though supportive of changing HE perceptions of vocational qualifications, was also time consuming and unsustainable and, in terms of future expansion, the further development of the on line tool became increasingly significant. The development of wider offers, across different subjects and/or sector to all 10,000 learners on BTEC level 3 programmes, with hundreds of HE courses being considered, redefined the concept of Progression Agreements into a dynamic on line progression service that was to become GMSA Pathways.

Building on the experience gained in the first year, the new GMSA Pathways on line service was launched in May 2008. With the expansion of HE course offerings to 500 plus and a focus on full time and part time BTEC learners, Pathways gave a clarity of progression for vocational learners that had never before existed. The new Pathways service now provides three levels of offer to the learner: Applications Welcome, Guaranteed Interview and Conditional Offer (Applications Welcome is a clarification of entry qualifications linked to the UCAS tariff system that gives clear pathways to specific courses). HE providers can now export course data directly from their own databases, including part time courses, and further increase their offer as they feel appropriate through the on line Pathways Content Management System. For the first time this allows learners and advisors, unprecedented access to clear information on appropriate part time higher education courses from across Greater Manchester. This clarity of progression information, especially on part time courses, is most significant for apprentices and their employers who are interested in work based, flexible courses that fit with their existing work patterns.

GMSA Champions within HE, FE colleges and wbl providers have helped pave the development of Pathways by actively working with admissions staff, tutors, Information Advice & Guidance (IAG) staff to embed Pathways into their institutions. These activities have targeted both current HE processes and progression activities with learners on level 3 programmes. Feedback from IAG staff, tutors, parents and learners has been overwhelmingly positive with increasing requests from other areas for something similar.

"We've been waiting for a tool to provide some clarity and this appears to be it"

- Connexions Sunderland

"Why are you only ensuring that greater coherence and clarity takes place for students who only want to remain in Greater Manchester when this needs to be rolled out nationally?"

- Connexions Liverpool

Similarly, the GMSA funded Aimhigher 'Step In to HE' project has further enabled a range of progression pathways to be negotiated for apprentices. These include not only Foundation degrees but also BSc and BA(Hons) degree programmes. More importantly the Step In to HE 10 credit module has provided an opportunity for learners to develop the confidence and skills they need to progress and succeed on whatever HE course they choose.

The recent HEFCE report on progression from Apprenticeships mirrors the feedback we have gained directly from work based learning providers - where progression is clear and explicit then apprentices can and will progress successfully and gain the higher level skills they need for employment.

A much greater proportion of those studying accountancy progressed (67% per cent of advanced Apprentices) than studying any other subject (3% average for all sectors, 7% for Business Admin). This increased progression rate is in part due to structured Level 3 to Level 4 progression routes for accounting²⁰.

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Mark Gittoes - May 2009 - Hefce

5. Outcomes

The case studies collectively demonstrate the forms of response to the Apprenticeship agenda that the LLN community has taken, especially in relation to:

- Information, advice and guidance (IAG) methodologies
- Curriculum development (especially bridging/access provision)
- Progression Agreements for apprentices
- Research or project activity (such as mapping exercises)
- Co-operation strategies

These were followed up systematically through the survey.

Of the 26 respondents, 23 were engaged with Apprenticeship strategies to one degree or another, either from the outset of their LLN or as an activity more recently recognised as significant. Bearing in mind the four non respondents, this represents at least two thirds of the LLNs.

a. Information, Advice and Guidance

Of this 23, two explicitly stated that they had not engaged in any Apprentice specific IAG activity because it was too early for them (being late comers to the game) a further 5 did not respond to the IAG question and it is difficult to know whether they come into a similar category or not.

Apprenticeship IAG activity can be targeted at a number of different groups. For some (such as employers and apprentices themselves) it is all about motivation and information regarding opportunities. For others such as higher education institutions (HEIs) it is about changing perceptions about the abilities of apprentices to cope with higher level learning. For others (such as other IAG agencies, e.g. Connexions, Next Step) it is about information on opportunities available to apprentices. Different LLNs took different approaches, most selecting multiple targets.

The methodology used to impact on these groups varied across the LLNs with some stressing personal contact, others publicity materials and some a mixture of both.

TARGET GROUP	Employers	Apprentices	HEIs	FECs	Schools	Training Providers	IAG Agencies
METHODOLOGY							
1:1 encounters		5	2	3		2	
Training workshops		2	1	2		2	2
Group presentations	2	5	4	6		5	3
Conferences	3	1	4	4		1	1
Apprentice specific leaflets	3	8	4	3	1	2	
Apprentice progression posters		1		1			
Apprentice web pages/references	2	5	3	1		1	
Careers events		2			1		
Visits to HE		3		4		2	

The GMSA Case Study (6) provides an example of one web-based tool, amongst a number developed or supported by LLNs (such as ALPs – Case Study 5) to provide ‘clarity of progression’ focussing on the apprentice’s starting point and making clear the nature of the offer available, ranging from; ‘application welcome’, ‘guaranteed interview’ and ‘conditional offer’. *‘For the first time this allows learners and advisors, unprecedented access to clear information on appropriate part-time higher education courses from across Greater Manchester.’*

The Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network (SSSTW LLN) Case Study (5) gives an example of face to face engagement as the vehicle for a HEFCE-funded project run by Staffordshire University *‘to establish a summer school for part-time, work based, vocational learners in one of the Network’s FE colleges aimed at learners following NVQ and Advanced Apprenticeship routes.’* It also identified local Aimhigher research which indicated that *‘learners were more likely to progress if they had been work-based students in a college, rather than private training provider environment as their exposure to information, advice and guidance (IAG) is greater.’* As a consequence this LLN has established relationships with a number of work-based training providers to find ways of raising awareness of progression opportunities.’

Training providers emerged as an important factor in the Apprenticeship debate. It is worth noting that these organisations can have a substantial impact on apprentices but the in-depth interviews highlighted that they are sometimes perceived to be not well informed or not particularly motivated to encourage apprentices towards higher level skills development. Training providers are businesses of course, and focus therefore on successful completion of the Apprenticeship framework. When the inspection regime considers progression as a measure of success such providers might well be further encouraged to focus on this in greater depth drawing no doubt on the support that LLNs can provide. Those LLNs which have targeted the training providers have tended to do so through direct encounters via presentations of one kind or another, again identifying these providers as an important IAG resource. From the sample of case studies derived from the in-depth interviews two interesting but different ways of influencing and capitalising upon the position of the training providers have been adopted above and beyond the more limited IAG approaches described above. The case studies show a basis for some degree of sustainability in the future. The first aimed to embed the LLN’s influence into the heart of the local training provider network.

The Leap Ahead Case Study (4) provides one example of how direct involvement, via Champions, with training provider networks aimed to make *‘information and advice about progression within the work based learning experience...a mainstream component of the ongoing dialogue between assessor and apprentice.’* Similarly the YHELLN Case Study (2) focuses on a way to *‘embed the ability to deliver...[a Preparation for HE module to the training providers’] own learners at a time and place to suit both, thereby ensuring sustainability past the lifetime of both YHELLN and Aimhigher.’*

Training providers and the Further Education College tutors (in work-based learning units which are therefore in contact with apprentices) are a potentially important source of IAG for apprentices in the longer term. There is also a significant investment in influencing HE tutors too, especially those responsible for admissions to programmes. Confronting admission tutors’ negative perceptions and also the need to provide better training for enquiry and admissions administrators was seen as important by the respondents when asked how best to overcome barriers.

Whilst the target groups and IAG methodologies will come as no surprise, it is perhaps noteworthy that LLNs reported little in the way of activity designed to influence other IAG agencies. This is surprising given that when asked how best to overcome barriers to progression, giving better information to careers/connexions staff rated highly. Given that a key issue facing all LLNs is the question of sustainability it might well be that the future messages to apprentices will be carried forward (or not) by these agencies rather than the LLNs themselves and that perhaps they ought to be given greater significance in LLN IAG strategies. Where LLNs did target other agencies, the means by which this was transacted was usually direct, through workshops and group presentations rather than through indirect measures such as publicity leaflets or websites.

Lesser attention has been paid to the role of employers and this again is reflected in the LLNs' response to the question about how best to overcome barriers. Eighteen LLNs answered the question about where they perceived the key barriers to apprentice progression to be and half identified employer attitudes as being a significant element. Yet employers were not seen as a major focus for IAG influence. When asked whether the LLN has been involved in any activity to encourage employers to establish Apprenticeships (irrespective of issues of progression to HE) 75% said no. Of the 5 LLNs who said they had engaged in such activity (there were 3 non responses) the activity tended to be through representative organisations such as business support agencies, SSCs or the Strategic Health Authority. This is not surprising. LLNs have a broad remit and limited funding. Few LLNs have benefitted directly from employer engagement funding from HEFCE and therefore they have only a limited capacity to lever up demand for Apprenticeships by expanding the pool of apprentices directly. At best they can support other agencies by continuing to point out the business benefits of the Advanced and Higher Apprenticeship and the career possibilities through HE for individuals with those qualifications.

b. Curriculum

The second key response of LLNs to meeting the needs of the Apprenticeship market can broadly be described as curriculum design.

A minority of LLNs have been engaging with their partners in what might be referred to as 'curriculum re-engineering' to enable entry to programmes by apprentices through facilitating revisions to existing HE courses. Of the 20 respondents to this issue, 3 had done this (although detail is lacking) and a further two were currently engaged in such activity, two were unsure but a further 12 said they were not so engaged. Such activity is therefore low. This may be seen as surprising since modifications to at least level 4 first year undergraduate provision might be seen as a means of furthering Apprenticeship policy relatively effectively. In the debate between adapting the course to suit the student or changing the student to suit the course the latter seems to be the preferred option as can be seen from the work undertaken on bridging and access. This might be understandable, especially in terms of the number of apprentices likely to be admitted at any one time in the near future.

Similar proportions can be identified in terms of the development of new programmes which are designed to be apprentice-friendly. Of 20 respondents six had engaged with their partners in the design of new programmes to facilitate entry to HE via the Apprenticeship route with a further two under development. The main contribution to the development of such programmes seems to be financial, with support through the LLNs' development funds and the process of establishing appropriate partnerships as one might expect of an LLN.

The development of bridging/access programmes relevant to the needs of apprentices emerged, however, as a major development in which LLNs were involved, often quite directly. Of the 23 LLNs which answered this question only 9 were not engaged in this aspect of curriculum development. Of the remaining 14 LLNs, 5 had already developed bridging/access provision and significantly a further 9 were in the process of developing such provision.

Involvement was often direct. Again, with an activity which straddles level 3 and level 4 activity and therefore the FE/HE sector divide it should not surprise us that LLNs feel the need for greater direct involvement in for example the management of the curriculum development (sometimes down to writing content) researching markets, providing publicity etc. As with new course developments and revisions to existing programmes, LLNs were active in facilitating partnerships between stakeholders and in providing funding, in some cases including HEFCE Additional Student Numbers (ASNs).

DEVELOPMENT FUNDING	FACILITATING LINKS	ASNS	PROJECT MANAGEMENT	WRITING CONTENT	RESEARCH	MARKETING
7	9	3	8	2	4	7

Of the 5 that had established such provision there was some diversity of approach. All focussed on what might be called 'preparation for HE' but 3 of the programmes were generic in approach and not related to any particular HE award. The fourth was specific to the Health and Social Care area linked to a Foundation degree and the fifth specifically to Sustainable Technologies in relation to a Foundation degree in the Construction area. They varied in credit value from 5 to 60 and also in level and duration. One had been designed at level 3, three at level 4 and one was delivered at both those levels.

It was clear that in some cases LLNs had not started with a blank sheet of paper but had drawn upon the provision already developed by other LLNs. The GMSA Step-In programme was sometimes referred to as a starting point (and sometimes the finishing point) of the bridging/access programme. This was evidence of the openness and generosity that is a characteristic of the LLN network. Such cooperation is also evidence of good practice.

GMSA's Case Study (6) makes passing reference to the generic Step-In to HE project which the South East London LLN (SELLLN) Case Study (1) exploited. *'The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (LLN) had developed a generic bridging module into HE currently validated by the University of Bolton. They were generous in allowing SELLLN to exploit this idea and use the module as a basis for a 30 credit level 4 module but specifically focussed on the creative and cultural industries sectors.'*

Some information was available from those LLNs which were still in the process of developing their provision in this area although by definition it was not so definitive. Of the 9 LLNs in this position 5 had decided to make their bridging/access programmes specific to particular HE courses and/or awards. A further two were not yet sure. Of the 5, two specified FD awards and a third the Bachelors award. A fourth, whilst not specific about the award was clear that the focus was on engineering. The bridging programme was specific to the 'advanced' mathematics that apprentices needed to acquire, in their view, prior to entering engineering at HE level. Interestingly two of the respondents focussed on the idea of the summer school as a means of delivering the content of such programmes thereby also giving the learner some idea of what to expect from HE. Again levels varied between 3 and 4 as did credit value when known and duration, pace and nature of study.

Thus LLNs appear to see value in providing some form of bridging/access programme as a means of facilitating progression. Such programmes of course work at both ends of the equation. They can develop the specific and generic skills required by HE which some would argue are not necessarily possessed by apprentices. They also provide the apprentice with a taster of what to expect and thus motivate (one hopes) the learner to seek such progression as well as clarifying what routes are available for progression. They also provide evidence to admissions tutors and therefore confidence that the learner is able to benefit from the HE provision. This will be doubly so where the programme is specifically linked to a course/award.

In-depth interviews revealed several issues, however. The implications of credit and level appear to be something which had not always been fully resolved. Is the bridge/access module an additional imposition on the apprentice (always the case if at level 3) or is it, if level 4, treated as specific credit in the programme for which the apprentice is aiming? If credits are available at level 4 did this enable the student exemption from parts of the receiving programme or were they additional (but often required) credits? This issue is pertinent whether the access/bridging programme was specific or generic since most HE programmes now contain 'study skills' elements at level 4 for all students on the programme.

c. Progression Agreements

The third key response of LLNs to meeting the needs of the Apprenticeship market relates to progression and Progression Agreements.

At the heart of the LLN progression agenda has been the concept of the Progression Agreement or Accord. There was no HEFCE guidance as to what these might be and how they might look, so LLNs have determined their own strategies with their stakeholders and with the aid of the National Forum's Practitioner Group on Progression Agreements/Accords. There is a great deal of diversity of approach with some aiming for institution level agreements, others focussing at programme to programme level, some producing specialist Progression Agreements specific to particular groups of learners. Some eschewed the notion altogether in favour of general clarity across the LLN partnership in terms of normal entry to their institutions' programmes through effective IAG tools as the GMSA Case Study (6) illustrates. This diversity of approach makes data difficult to analyse and comparison dangerous.

Many of the case studies illustrate the centrality of Progression Agreements to LLNs' work on apprentices. The Leap Ahead Case Study (4) focuses on the role played by '*...Progression Agreement Champions... acting as a catalyst within their own institutions in enhancing and championing progression opportunities for learners, primarily, although not exclusively, through the development of programme level Progression Agreements.*' Like other LLNs, the SSSTW Case study (5) refers to the importance of the web in '*showing users which awards have Progression Agreements attached to them.*'

Five LLNs had developed Progression Agreement templates specifically for the Apprenticeship route and another four stated that these were under development. Of the 5 with templates, 4 had signed agreements in place.

The majority of LLNs (14) said they did not have specific Apprenticeship templates but this does not tell us much about LLN attitudes towards apprentices per se. It is more likely to reflect the diversity of approach towards Progression Agreements generally since from these 14 LLNs, 5 had Progression Agreements of one kind or another, involving Apprenticeships, in place and signed. The fact that five have templates in place, a further four have them in development and a number of agreements have been signed, does reinforce the view that Apprenticeships are higher up the LLN agenda now.

In total, 9 LLNs, representing just under a third of all LLNs, stated they had signed agreements in place. This was higher than expected and again demonstrates that LLNs collectively have already started to take the Apprenticeship agenda on board in a significant way.

Agreements varied even within single LLNs. Thus of the 9 LLNs which had signed agreements, 2 had agreements which facilitated three different types of relationship: guaranteed interviews, or guaranteed places or guaranteed entry. Five LLNs had agreements which variously facilitated guaranteed interviews or places. Rarer was guaranteed entry and mention was made by one LLN of 'parity of consideration'.

Guaranteed places	7
Guaranteed interview	6
Guaranteed entry	2
Parity of consideration	1

The most common form of relationship was the guaranteed places on a specific course. This is not the same as guaranteeing entry. It is a way of putting a marker down which says that x number of places will be reserved from within the cohort of entrants for a particular category of student (e.g. apprentices) which will be available to individuals provided the stated entry criteria are met (such as an Apprenticeship qualification and credit from a designated bridging module). This is very different to guaranteeing a place for an individual student which many would argue is inadmissible under equal opportunities provisions, following the Schwartz recommendations.²¹ No doubt the position of the two LLNs in this category is more sophisticated in reality than reflected in the survey response. As the widening opportunity agenda is pressurised by the effects of the recession where more 'conventionally' qualified learners put themselves forward for selection, the guaranteed place concept keeps the vocational learners' feet in the door and challenges admission tutors not just to pick the low hanging fruit.

The current distribution of apprentice related Progression Agreements reflected the pattern that was identified as likely, following the UVAC report and the information gained from the LSC via *fdf* mentioned in section 2 earlier.

SECTOR	HNC/D	Foundation Degree	Bachelor Degree	Other	No. of LLNs from the 9 LLNs responding
Biosciences	0	0	0	0	0
Construction	2	4	2	0	4
Creative and Cultural	0	0	0	0	0
Education/Early Years	0	4	2	1	5
Engineering/Technology	1	5	3	0	6
Environment/Land-based/Animal	0	1	0	0	0
Finance/Business/Management	1	5	2	0	5
Health/Social Care	1	5	2	0	5
Heritage/Archaeology	0	0	0	0	0
Hospitality	0	0	0	0	0
ICT	1	3	1	0	3
Leisure/Tourism	0	2	0	0	2
Public Services	0	1	0	0	1
Retail	0	1	0	0	1
Sport	0	2	1	0	3
Total	6	33	13	1	

The bulk of the agreements, as one might expect, relate to Foundation degrees (which should of course provide automatic entry to Bachelor programmes for successful learners but do not always). In terms of sectors, Engineering and Technology, Health and Social Care, Finance/Business and Management, Construction and Education/Early Years are the ones focussed upon by the LLNs in terms of the development of agreements.

21 Fair Admissions to Higher education. Department for Education and Skills 2004

d. Research

The fourth characteristic of the LLNs' approach to the Apprenticeship agenda has been through what might be called research and project activity.

Some LLNs included activity, within their responses, which was essentially curriculum development and these were excluded from the analysis and considered in 5b above. We probably underestimate here the amount of research and project activity being undertaken by LLNs. It was clear that what some were happy to label as discrete research or project activity others saw as normal everyday LLN activity. However, 10 LLNs stated they were engaged in such activity 8 of which appeared to fit the tighter definition adopted here. The aims of projects seemed to have two main characteristics but individual projects overlapped in terms of the aims adopted. These were:

- Mapping and gap analysis
- Identifying barriers to Apprenticeship progression and identifying resolution strategies

Hence, under mapping and gap analysis the SELLLN Case Study (1) makes reference to the '*mapping exercise of Level 4 opportunities for Advanced Apprentices available at institutions across London*'. One LLN, working closely with SSCs and professional associations had three projects running, focussing separately on Health, Construction and Housing sectors and variously aimed at mapping the provision of Apprenticeships available in the region and identifying where bridging and HE programmes were or were not available. Similarly another aimed to '*map and scope the availability and take up of Advanced Apprenticeships across all of the LLN's current curriculum areas and to map HE level provision*'.

In the context of identifying barriers to Apprenticeship progression and their resolution, the SSSTW Case Study (5) refers to work undertaken with Aimhigher which showed that '*these learners were more likely to progress if they had been work-based students in a college, rather than a private training provider environment as their exposure to Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is greater*'. One LLN was focussing its research on two specific FE colleges with a view to '*investigating the barriers preventing progression from Apprenticeship programmes in four key vocational areas*' and to '*investigate the impact of new assessor interventions in the provision of aspirational support*'. The North East Higher Skills LLN case study (3) focuses on reasons put forward by work-based learning providers, colleges of further education, universities and those working as practitioners in IAG about low progression rates and sought to examine these views against those of over 200 vocational learners themselves.

The LLN National Forum has a Research and Evaluation Strand and it is clear that LLNs are engaging in research (defined broadly) across a wide spectrum of activities many of which are pertinent to the issue of apprentices although not specifically focussing on them. Detail of what is being done in this area is not currently reflected on the Strand's web page but it is pleasing to note that the Forum has now decided to collect and disseminate information about research and project activity from the LLNs more systematically in e-format. What was noticeable from the replies received from the LLNs, was that there appeared to be little or no co-operation between LLNs on the Apprenticeship research/project front. LLNs appeared more likely to be working with Aimhigher (see below). More systematic information and even coordination through the Forum may go some way towards more effective cooperation and use of resources in this and other areas within the LLNs' remit.

e. Collaborative activity

The fifth key response of LLNs to meeting the needs of the Apprenticeship market can broadly be described as collaboration.

Unlike research, in relation to curriculum development generally, some 9 out of the 15 LLNs which answered the question indicated that they had worked alongside other LLNs or agencies. In-depth interviews reinforced the notion that co-operation provided benefits and economies of one sort or another, which we have seen (above) in relation to the development of the bridging/access provision.

Co-operation with neighbouring LLNs is evident. Thus for example the London based LLNs have developed a cross-London Information, Advice and Guidance Group collectively running conferences for the IAG sector. The four Yorkshire based LLNs have worked together in their dialogue with their regional Train to Gain Enhancement Fund about the potential for a (sub) regional programme to deliver a range of enhancement modules to support apprentice progression to HE – initially in engineering/manufacturing. The SELLLN Case Study (1) illustrates how cooperation with other LLNs has been important to many aspects of its work including the development of its strategy towards apprentices, specifically in the creative and cultural industries sector. Cooperation was necessary; to facilitate effective coverage of the London area providers, to undertake a ‘mapping’ exercise of level 4 opportunities for Advanced Creative Apprentices and as a route into private training providers. But co-operation can be achieved across considerable distances as well, as the SELLLN Case Study (1) also illustrates with the development of the Step-In module mentioned above.

Most LLNs signified close working relationships with one or more professional bodies, SSCs, private training provider networks and particular businesses as one might expect and the supportive role of **fdf** in the development of programmes and the funding of research/scoping exercises is noteworthy. But significant were the many references to Aimhigher in the responses, reinforced during the in-depth interviews, in relation to jointly run and/or funded projects. The broadly defined original remit of LLNs might have created tensions in some circumstances and indeed HEFCE circulated a letter attempting to clarify the respective roles of each, especially at the boundaries. But several LLNs have established very beneficial links with Aimhigher which have brought about benefits to local apprentice learners as the case studies show. GMSA’s Case Study (6) indicates how the first pathway pilot involving Progression Agreements was presented via Aimhigher’s ‘uni4me’ website. SSSTW LLN’s Case Study (5) illustrates the close relationship established with Aimhigher in the area of research where ‘the LLN was also invited to join a steering group overseeing a small research project funded by Aimhigher. The research looked specifically at the progression of Advanced Apprentices into HE experiences across Staffordshire’. Similarly substantial collaboration with Aimhigher has benefitted learners in the YHELLN area – Case study (2). The local Aimhigher Partnership had originally commissioned a project to raise aspirations and awareness of Advanced Apprentices. YHELLN was invited to collaborate to ‘enhance and extend the work of the project in order to engage with the wider population of Advanced Apprentices and Level 3 work based learners in the Humber area’. Multiple benefits can be derived from such cooperation: economies can be made, confusion to the learners reduced and sustainability accomplished as the SSSTW case study (5) indicates. ‘This LLN is now working with Aimhigher to create a portal that will link to the ALPS [Aimhigher Learning Pathway] database and will show users which awards have Progression Agreements attached to them. It will also link to the detail of the Progression Agreements highlighting the partners in the agreement and the detail of what is guaranteed for the learner.’

Collaboration is important and will become increasingly important as LLNs seek ways to embed their many successful strategies into institutions and processes which, unlike some LLNs, are likely to keep functioning over the next few years.

f. Impact

What is important of course is the extent to which the key activities are having an impact. Generally speaking it is too early to say.

Of the 18 LLNs which responded to this question only three were able to assert that, as a result of their interventions as an LLN some apprentices had progressed onto HE programmes. Some apprentices had progressed to Foundation degrees in Education/Early Years (between 1–5) and similar numbers had progressed to HND/C programmes in Engineering/Technology and Finance/Business. Some may have entered bridging courses in those areas and Construction. Of the remaining LLNs, six were unsure whether any apprentices had progressed through actions taken by the LLN and a further 9 stated that no apprentices had progressed to date.

It is difficult to interpret this data. To some extent it will reflect the nature of the data gathering processes of the individual LLNs which might not gather this level of information. It will also to some degree be related to timescales and the point at which individual LLNs collect data from their institutions. A key factor will of course be when they actually began to focus more actively upon Apprenticeship progression. In this case it might well be that the impact of activity may well become apparent after the LLN has finished its work.

This would be reinforced by a view expressed in the in-depth studies and some questionnaire responses. In the case of apprentices there may be a delayed impact. Apprentices enter the world of work because this is their favoured career route and it is not until they have gained a few years' experience in work that they begin to recognise that advancement might be facilitated by going into HE using their apprentice qualifications and experience to gain higher qualifications to enter management and supervisory positions.

As one respondent to the questionnaire said:

'this route...will probably never be a primary route. The majority of students who have taken an Apprenticeship have done so because they want to work rather than study. There are some apprentices who want to progress to HE, but it is likely that the majority will not do so immediately after completing the Apprenticeship; it is likely they will want to work for a while before considering HE.'

6. Good Practice

In developing the recommendations which follow in section 8, I have drawn upon what I perceived to be the good practice which is evident from the survey and visits undertaken. What is seen by one as best practice, of course, is not necessarily identified by another in the same light?

For those LLNs which choose to give a greater focus to apprentices in the development of their network policies I would commend the following:

1. Developing an explicit Apprenticeship strategy
2. Aiming, *inter alia*, to build the longer term capacity of others
3. Undertaking or drawing on sound market research to enable the strategic targeting of specific employers and/or employment sectors specific to the locality and then developing or adapting processes with these groups in mind.
4. Working closely and directly with local training providers and their networks. This offers distinct advantages, including ready access to the specific Apprenticeship market and a staff resource which, where possible, should be utilised in the execution of the LLN's strategic approach. Sound contacts of this kind can also contribute to the longer term sustainability of those approaches.
5. In order to increase impact, cooperating with other organisations which have Apprenticeships on their agenda. (Aimhigher appeared to be an important partner for a number of the LLNs working on Apprenticeships but this will not be universally the case. Other potential partners may be available to share the resource burden but also to provide a basis for longer term sustainability).
6. Working closely with, and influencing, the widest possible group of local IAG agencies to ensure that apprentices are a significant part of their focus and that they are well informed of the progression opportunities to HE in the region and the role of the LLN.
7. Making use of existing processes such as local 'champions', bridging and access programmes or on-line IAG tools. This can allow the development of economic and speedy interventions to enhance Apprenticeship take up. However, there is the danger that apprentices can remain marginalised unless a specifically focussed Apprenticeship strategy accompanies such initiatives.
8. Where bridging and access programmes are developed or adapted, it is important to ensure that this does not disadvantage the Apprenticeship award holder. The credit worthiness and level of such programmes should be transparent and their contents designed to respond to the specific needs of the apprentice client group.
9. Pursuit of a vigorous Progression Agreement policy, but this should be based around the notion of *guaranteed places* in order to retain a presence for Apprenticeship award holders at a time when 'non traditional entrants' face fiercer competition from traditional 'A' level holders.

7. Conclusions

LLNs are clearly at different stages of development in relation to their strategies towards Apprenticeships. The general picture can best be summarised through a series of quotes from the LLNs themselves:

'Working with apprentices was not a specific objective in our original Business Plan. However, we are now concerned to develop work to support progression to HE for this target group.'

'We anticipate an increasingly tight challenge to actually establish progression routes into HE as there are no spare ASNs. However, we are trying to plan for the longer term and to support economic recovery.'

'This is a particularly hard nut to crack!'

It is hoped that this report goes some way towards showing how the nut may be cracked. But to crack nuts you need nutcrackers. As one respondent said;

'The recent shift in policy and expansion of apprentice programmes means it has naturally risen up the LLN agenda but too late for many activities to be fully developed and tested.'

The impact of LLNs' *specific/adaptive* activities remains relevant but difficult to measure. In the long term any uplift in apprentices entering the HE sector may not be credited to the role played by erstwhile LLNs some years previously. Nevertheless those interviewed in the in-depth studies felt that their activities were still important. Of the 16 responding 9 LLNs had identified potential apprentices for progression into HE.

Other factors will also intervene in the near future which will impact upon Apprenticeship progression and indeed widening participation policies generally. The downturn in the economy, the cap on numbers and the enlarged applications to HE generally may well mean that over the next few years 'unconventional' students will find it even more difficult to progress into HE. The barriers may have become higher.

8. Recommendations

In framing the recommendations I have distinguished between those which are of immediate relevance to the LLNs as they continue their work at an operational and local level and those which are important to other stakeholders who are more likely to be able to influence policy at a national level.

Operational recommendations

1. 1. LLN's should, if they wish to focus on apprentices as an important part of their constituency, develop an explicit Apprenticeship strategy which aims, inter alia, to build the longer term capacity of others.
2. Given limited resources, LLNs should continue to act strategically in targeting specific employment sectors drawing on national and local research to determine where intervention is most likely to be effective.
3. LLNs, at a local level, should seek to work closely and directly, wherever appropriate, with:
 - a. local training providers and their networks,
 - b. Aimhigher partnerships.
 - c. other LLNs
 - d. and where possible employers especially SMEs
4. The development of bridging and access programmes suitable for apprentices should be pursued, based on existing examples of good practice in such provision.
5. The current ambiguities surrounding the credit worthiness of such programmes should be clarified in a way that does not disadvantage the Apprenticeship award holder so that full recognition can be given for activity at an appropriate level.
6. In order to sustain the activities and benefits of the approaches taken by LLNs beyond their lifetime, especially in the area of IAG, greater emphasis should be given to influencing the wider group of IAG agencies in the locality to ensure they are fully versed in the progression opportunities available and in the nature of HE in the region.
7. In view of the current pressure on widening participation strategies brought about by the economic downturn LLNs should pursue a vigorous Progression Agreement policy based around the notion of guaranteed places in order to retain a presence for Apprenticeship award holders.
8. Those involved in the admissions processes to HE, both with academic and administrative responsibilities, should be encouraged by LLNs to 'normalise' the Apprenticeship award in the entry criteria for their programmes and to publicise these effectively through prospectuses, entry profiles and other marketing devices.
9. LLNs should continue to encourage innovation in teaching and learning in order to make HE more accessible to non-traditional learners once accepted onto programmes.
10. LLNs should consider the good practice identified in section 6 and elsewhere in this report.

Policy recommendations

1. Given that a number of LLNs have already, or are about to, come to the end of their funding, Government, funding bodies and other stakeholders should consider, as a matter of urgency, how best to retain and build upon the effective processes established by the LLNs to support apprentice progression and indeed the national widening participation policy generally.
2. LLNs should seek to operate more collaboratively as a national network of LLNs in the pursuit of Apprenticeship policies. The National Forum should proactively develop a coordinated strategy, working with the National Apprenticeship Service, but also with SSCs, **fdf**, funding bodies and other stakeholders to make best use of the leverage that LLNs can provide locally.
3. The National LLN Forum has an important part to play in encouraging, focussing and co-ordinating research and project activity reflecting the good practice of its members in the context, *inter alia*, of Apprenticeship activity. Given timescales, distributing findings in a fast and effective manner is important. Case studies reflecting best practice will provide a effective starting point.
4. The decision of UCAS to establish a points profile will go some way towards a 'normalisation' of the Apprenticeship award in the entry criteria for HE programmes. Other agencies also have a key role to play, such as:
 - a. the National Apprenticeship Service through timely initiatives,
 - b. SSCs through framework development,
 - c. **fdf** especially through its new website section for Advisors²²
 - d. employer representatives and professional bodies by promulgating the positive attributes of apprentices,
 - f. Government through application of consistent policies.
5. **fdf** should consider the role it might play in the future in supporting the maintenance and continued development of Apprenticeship Progression Agreements, based on the notion of guaranteed places, through its Endorsement Service.²³
6. Given the time scale for LLN activity HEFCE and **fdf** might wish to consider how they could monitor the longer term impact of LLNs in terms of progression into level 4 programmes, and Foundation degrees specifically, so that the real impact of LLNs can be evaluated more effectively in the future. The role of Progression Agreements might be one mechanism upon which to focus.
7. The National Apprenticeship Service, HEFCE, **fdf** (especially through its regional structure) and other stakeholders might wish to consider how they could encourage the continued development and use of Progression Agreements for Apprenticeships (and more widely - for example in relation to the 14-19 Diploma) so that the national widening participation agenda can be supported during a time of recession and the recommendations of the Leitch report implemented more effectively.
8. Given its responsibilities, the National Apprenticeship Service should engage in a dialogue with **fdf** and the LLN National Forum, using this report as a starting point, to consider how they can support it in meeting its objectives in assuming 'end to end responsibility for the delivery of Apprenticeships'.²⁴

22 Expected to be launched in August 2009

23 Tatum, S: **fdf's** Endorsement Service in *Forward*, Innovating Workforce Development. Issue 18 June 2009 - **fdf**

24 <http://www.Apprenticeships.org.uk/> (accessed 4/8/09)

Commentary by the National LLN Forum

Clarifying and improving pathways into higher education for vocational learners is at the heart of the Lifelong Learning Network agenda and apprentices are a very specific, relatively numerous and highly qualified group within the vocationally qualified community. As such, apprentices appear to be ideal candidates for progression to higher education – why then do so few progress and why are programmes aimed at supporting the progression of this group so rare?

One answer could be that the Apprenticeship qualification is a popular and successful method of providing highly skilled vocational practitioners to employers who understand and value the route. The case for progression of large numbers of their skilled employees into higher education needs to be more clearly articulated and focussed on small employers rather than the continued showcasing of large company schemes that appear to be a feature of most research. Apprentices in SMEs are perhaps 'harder to round up', often geographically distant from each other (and therefore not as easily targeted for group intervention programmes), but that is not a valid reason for excluding them, or their employers, from the debate.

Nevertheless, it is surprising that this report is the first to draw on the LLN contribution to improving progression for apprentices; perhaps this is because few of the original business plans of LLNs were specific about apprentices and the national debate has been slow in gathering momentum resulting in delayed and fragmented responses. The current economic downturn and the pressure on university places are likely to further delay positive action for this group.

The content of this report, the suggestions and projects detailed are provided primarily as a resource which relevant agencies, not just LLNs, can access, adapt and adopt for the benefit of apprentices in their geographical area. Further, it is hoped that the issues raised will be addressed by all interested parties and make a significant, and grounded, contribution to the debate.

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September 2009

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