



Evaluation Interim Report

Linking London Lifelong Learning
Network

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1 | Executive summary

Linking London Lifelong Learning Network has commissioned CFE to conduct an evaluation of its activities over the course of its HEFCE funding period. This interim report provides summary findings from research conducted with Linking London's partner institutions, the central team and other stakeholders. CFE collected respondent views using an online survey and in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face and by telephone.

This interim report provides initial findings only; in the 2011 final evaluation report these interim findings will be refined and augmented with additional analysis, secondary research, case studies and the results of a further online survey.

The interim report provides our initial findings on the following aspects of the evaluation:

- > **Governance and management:** Overall, partners and stakeholders viewed Linking London's governance and management structures as appropriate and effective. The Board and Steering Group were consistently well attended. The success of the Operational Practitioner Groups has varied between groups, and some have proved more effective than others. There was some evidence of ambiguity over the roles of the Steering Group and the Operational Practitioner Groups. Partners and stakeholders commended the central team for its effectiveness.
- > **Profile and communications:** Linking London's profile is high among those who participated in our research, and one of their key areas of impact was deemed to be raising the profile and awareness of progression for vocational learners. Linking London's events and publications were widely praised for their quality and usefulness.
- > **Activities:** Linking London has exceeded its targets for Progression Agreements and curriculum developments, and they were deemed to have made effective interventions in both of these areas. The Network has also had a particularly positive impact in the area of information, advice and guidance, through the publication of useful resources and research on universities' entry criteria. Staff development was also seen as a key area of success for Linking London, with good attendance at events that staff in partner institutions found useful.
- > **Impact and change:** Partners and stakeholders suggested that the greatest impacts had been made in: the tangible outputs such as over 70 signed Progression Agreements and over 600 learners through the distribution of ASNs; raising awareness of the issues relating to progression for vocational learners; and bringing partners together for networking and collaboration.

Overall, the evaluation up to this point has shown that Linking London members are positive about the success and impact of the network up to July 2010, which has been reinforced by 23 members choosing to contribute funds to remain involved in the network under the new subscription membership model. With uncertain times ahead in further and higher education, the network has committed to remain flexible and responsive to new circumstances as they develop.

2 | Method and respondents

This chapter details the method used to inform this interim evaluation report.

Linking London emailed an online survey link to a range of their contacts, including partner institutions and other stakeholders. A total of 83 respondents completed the online survey. As summarised in the table below, 34 were universities, 17 FE colleges and 32 other stakeholders.

Type of respondent	Frequency
University partner	34
FE college partner	17
Other Stakeholders	32
Total	83

Table 1: Summary of survey respondents by organisation type

CFE also conducted in-depth interviews with 18 individuals from the central team and partner institutions, as well as 10 additional scoping interviews. Seven of the in-depth interviews were with universities, five FE colleges, three of Linking London's central team and two other stakeholders. The scoping interviews were conducted with five members of the central team, four universities and one further education college.

This document provides interim findings based on the online survey and interviews. We present findings on the following areas: governance and management; profile and communications; activities; and impact and change.

3 | Governance and Management

This section considers the governance and management structures set up by Linking London, looking at each of the core groups in the structure, namely the Board, Steering Group, Operational Practitioner Groups (OPGs) and the Central Team.

Under their funding guidance from HEFCE, LLNs had some autonomy to determine their own approach to creating governance and operational structures, which has resulted in LLNs across the country adopting different models. The structures put in place by Linking London have evolved over the life of the Network, as its priorities and circumstances have changed.

We asked the survey respondents which, if any, Linking London meetings they had attended. We found that the 83 respondents have attended a range of Linking London meetings: 23 had attended the Steering Group, while 14 sat on the Board, and 50 had attended OPGs or other groups; 14 respondents stated that they had not attended any Linking London meetings.

Several partners we interviewed were slightly unsure over the identity and roles of the structures within the Network. This led to some partners, as well as central team members, speculating that a simpler, more streamlined, governance structure could have been preferable.

I think I've sat on both Steering Group and the main Board...the fact that I'm a little bit confused about the difference between the Steering Group and the Board...indicates perhaps that the structure was a touch over elaborate for the kind of organisation it was..I suspect that in terms of governance it was kind of top heavy and probably could have done with a kind of leaner model.

University partner

However, the governance structures of the Network were not judged to have hampered Linking London's ability to respond quickly to changes on the ground and, overall, survey respondents judged that Linking London's governance and management structures were effective, as shown in Figure 1. The central team itself – and the Director in particular – also received positive comments from partners at interview for their role in driving the Network and providing information and support on progression issues.

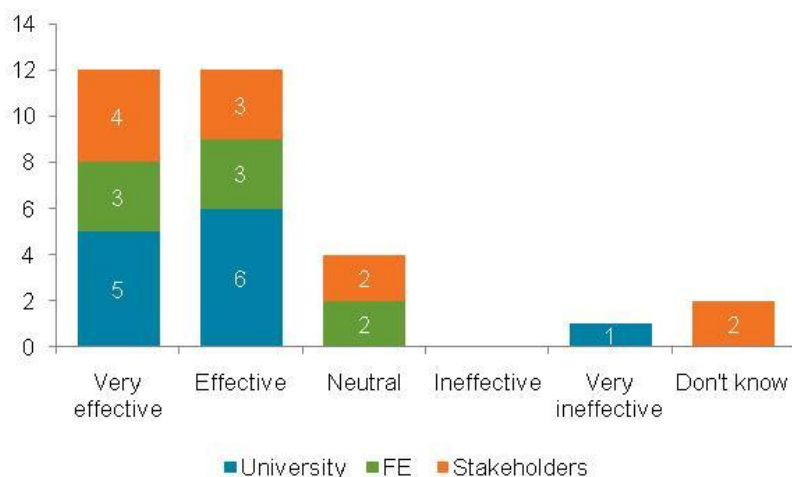


Figure 1: How would you rate the effectiveness of Linking London's current governance and management structure? Base 31

The Board

The Board principally comprises senior members of staff from partner institutions, the Linking London Director, as well as other stakeholders, from Sector Skills Councils and local Aimhigher partnerships, for example. The Chairman of the Board, John Annette, is an employee of the host institution, Birkbeck, University of London. At the end of 2009, the Board had 36 members.¹

From our interviews, the central team felt that the Board is comprised of members of sufficient seniority within their organisations to perform its oversight role effectively, as well as being able to raise the profile of the Network among partners.

Within our partnership, we've actually hit the kind of just above middle management: people with some influence. We don't get vice chancellors coming to the Board, but we do occasionally get pro vice chancellors and we do get vice principals... In a sense, that's probably right because no one would want us to be just a talking shop.

Central team member

As shown in Figure 2 below, respondents to the online survey who had attended Board meetings largely judged them to be effective.

¹ Linking London, *Progression*, p. 26.

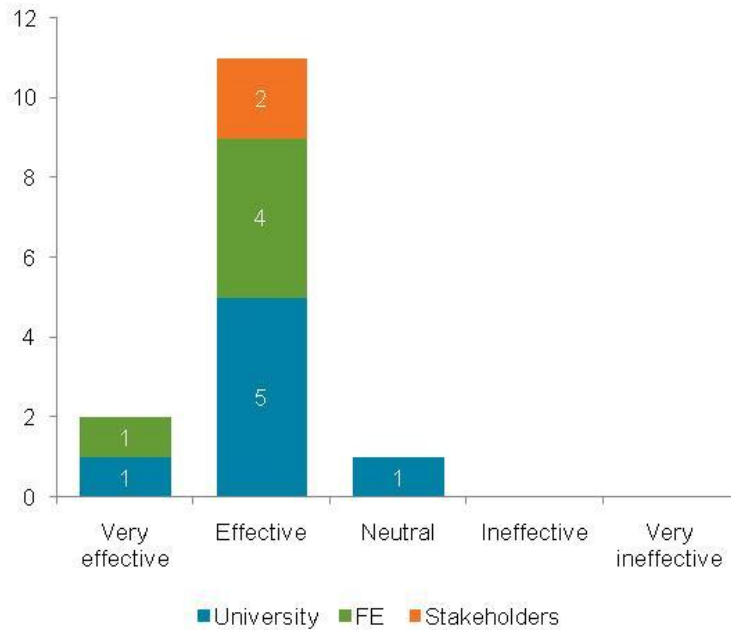


Figure 2: Overall, how effective do you think Board meetings are? Base 14

One of the key indicators of the success of the Board, as acknowledged by central team and Board members, is the level of attendance and engagement in Board meetings. These have been consistently well attended, and the chart at Figure 3 plots the attendance at Board meetings, the number of apologies received and, by simply adding these together, the potential total size of each Board meeting.² The chart shows that the potential size of the Board peaked in the middle of the project – with more than 41 potential attendees towards the end of 2007 – and has tailed off from the end of 2008.

I certainly think it's been successful. Looking at the last Board meeting and just basing success on whether the Board members turned up, it was a very well attended meeting. So, I think there's still an enthusiasm from the Network to continue to be involved and to make sure that their voice is heard.

Central team member

² Data derived from the recorded minutes of meetings.

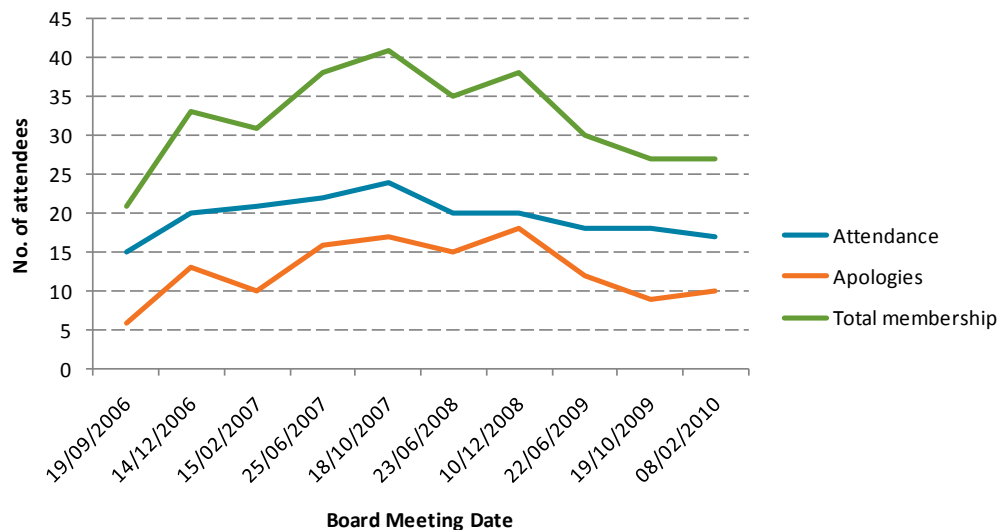


Figure 3: Attendance at Board meetings, September 2006 to February 2010

The Steering Group

The membership of the Steering Group has comprised the Chair of each of the Operational Practitioner Groups (OPGs, see below) and the Management Executive Group (the LLN Manager and Team Managers). It is also chaired by the Chair of the Board. Recently, as the LLN has opted to subsume the work of the OPGs into the Steering Group, membership of the Steering Group is being opened to all members.

The Steering Group's role, as outlined in its Terms of Reference, is predominantly to advise the Board and central team. There was some concern among stakeholders, including Steering Group members, that the Steering Group was an unnecessary additional layer and that there may have been some duplication between the business of the Board and that of the Steering Group.

I must admit that I have felt that perhaps there has been some unnecessary duplication of business across the two...So sometimes I've wondered...what we've added to considering things...I think that, earlier on, perhaps when we had a lot of the practitioner groups and they were active, there were reports coming from the practitioner groups to the Steering Group and then on to the Board. So it felt a bit like...a treadmill perhaps of handling business – but committee structures are all like that.

University partner

Nevertheless, those survey respondents who had attended Steering Group meetings mainly judged them to be effective, as shown in Figure 4 below.

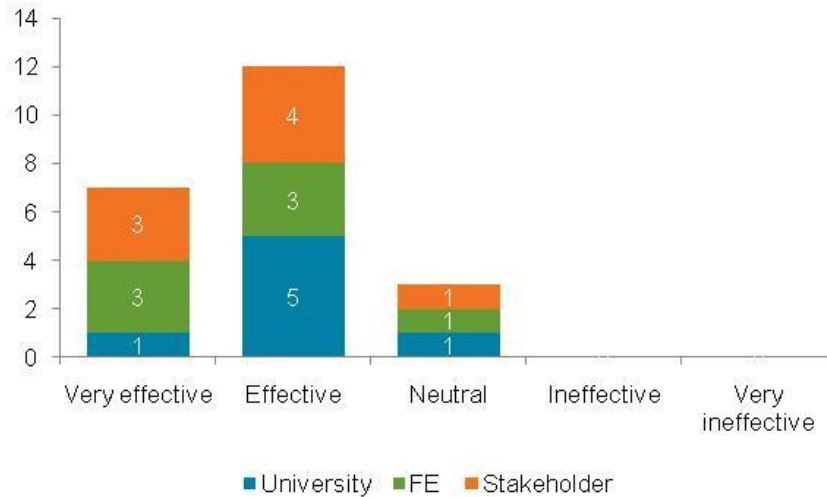


Figure 4: Overall, how effective do you think the Steering Group meetings are? Base 23

Attendance at the Steering Group has fluctuated from meeting to meeting, but it has been consistently well attended at between 10 and 20 members, as shown in Figure 5. There was, however, a tailing off of attendance through 2009 and, with this being recognised by the Linking London team, online meetings have been initiated (the first of these was held in January 2010). Since, the membership of the Steering Group has been revised, and it is now open to any members of the network who wish to attend, which accounts for the spike in May 2010. One interviewee, in particular, suggested that this had reinvigorated the group:

I suppose now it's opened up from the strategic level to the operational level, which I think is good, it's healthy...Now, opening it up to the wider membership, it will be interesting to see if we get more, almost operational, ideas coming through.

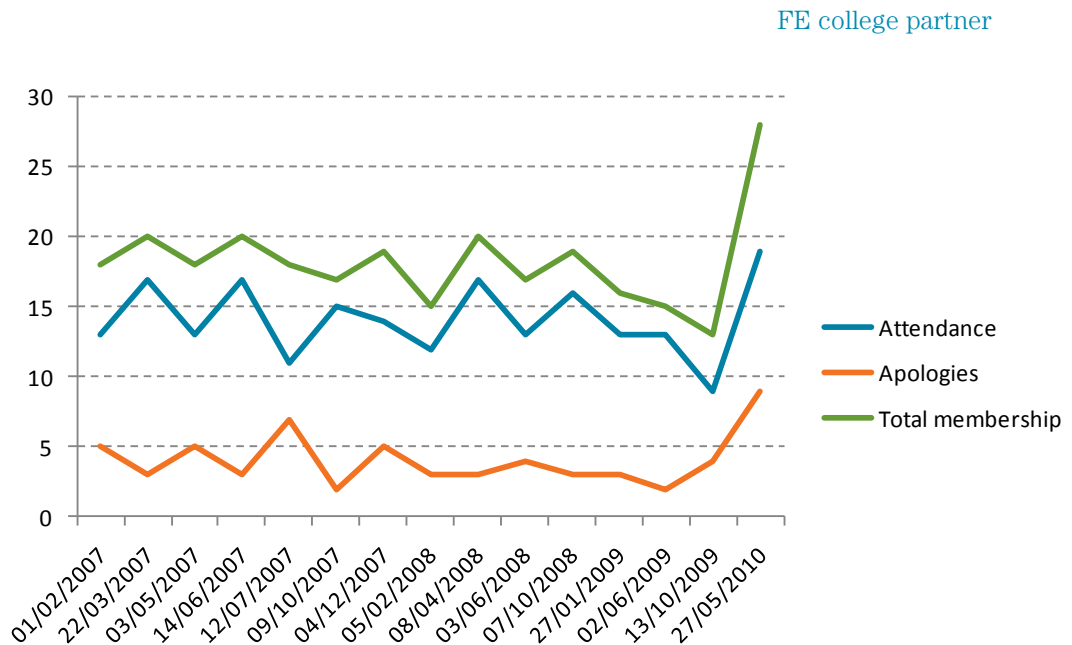


Figure 5: Attendance at Steering Group meetings, February 2007 to May 2010

The Operational Practitioner Groups (OPGs)

Linking London has run a number of Operational Practitioner Groups (OPGs) over its first four years of operation. These groups are made up of operational and practitioner-level staff from partner institutions and were originally conceived as a way to bring the operational expertise of staff at the “chalk face” to assist in meeting the progression outcomes of the Lifelong Learning Network. As shown in Table 2, the OPGs have been based both around specific subject areas and on institutional processes related to progression. The OPGs changed as the Network’s priorities evolved and in response to their perceived effectiveness.

OPG	From	To	No. of meetings
Education	March 2007	June 2007	3
Health (later incorporating Sport)	March 2007	January 2008	4
Public & Voluntary Sector	March 2007	June 2007	3
Credit relationships group / LLN Progression Subcommittee	May 2007	May 2010	8
Guidance / IAG	March 2007	July 2010	17
Admissions	March 2010	July 2010	1

Table 2: The lifespan of OPGs, 2007 to 2010

For some of the OPGs, their role has evolved over the duration of the Network. For example, the curriculum OPGs morphed into combined staff development events. The IAG OPG, which is the longest-standing, has been the closest to retaining its original remit and has taken a predominantly advisory role to the central team’s IAG work – signing off publications and resources, and providing a steer for the central team.

In practice, our interviews and online survey have suggested that the success of the OPGs has varied between the different groups – part of the reason that some OPGs have lasted longer than others. Figure 6 below shows that those who had attended OPGs were not on the whole negative about the groups, and from our interviews it seems that partners did appreciate the usefulness of OPGs for networking and promoting partnership working and communication.

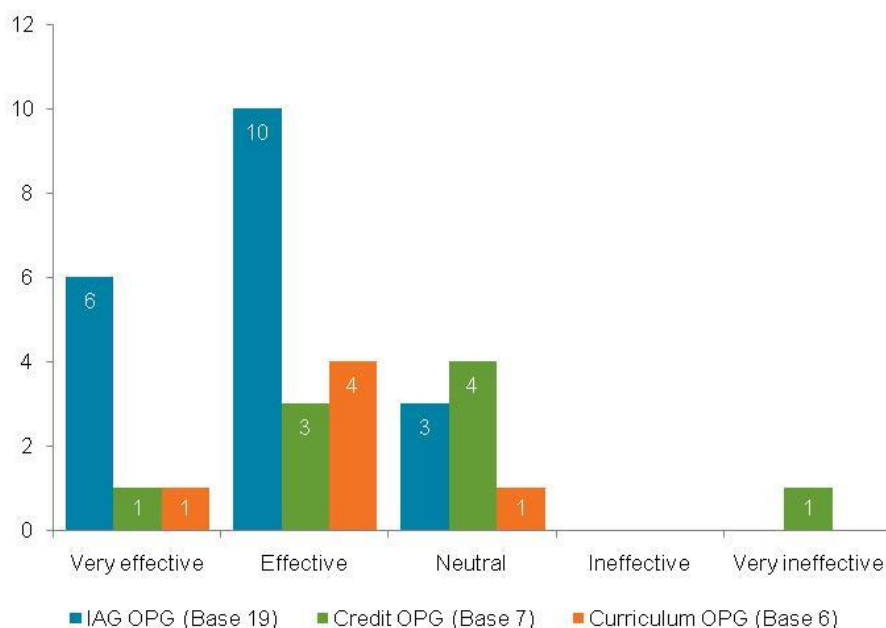


Figure 6: Overall, how effective do you think the OPG meetings were?

The variability in success of OPGs is part of the reason for their being disbanded for the latest phase of the Lifelong Learning Network. The business of the OPGs will be assumed by the Steering Group, as a standing item on its agenda.

The central team

Linking London is characterised by a centralised operating model, particularly when compared with other Lifelong Learning Networks. This necessitated the need for a relatively large central team working to deliver the Network’s objectives. Overall, interviewees considered the central team, and individual staff members, to have been effective in their roles. In particular, the team was praised for its flexibility and ability to react to changes in the policy landscape, its responsiveness to the membership base, and for providing each partner institution with a link person within the central team. There were suggestions from some interviewees that the central team may have been over-sized at points in the Network’s history – it has been as large as 14 individuals. We should note however that not all of these were full-time equivalent staff, and the central team was deliberately enlarged by recruiting three Network Officers and two secondments from a partner university, in order to gain a higher profile among partner institutions.

The role of the host institution is also worth mentioning. As the host institution, Birkbeck, University of London’s role has been to provide the infrastructure required for the management of the LLN, including: office space, IT infrastructure, human resources, and finance; they also provide key positions such as the Chair of the Board and Steering Group. For their part, there was the suggestion that Birkbeck’s visibility in the sector has been raised through their hosting of the LLN. The role of Birkbeck has received praise from both the central team and the broader membership base, both in terms of their support to the Network, but also their neutrality.

They’ve been a very, very good host and total probity over finance and clear lines of division between us and them.

Central team member

My feeling of other Lifelong Learning Networks is that they are much more centred in the institutions where they are housed, and I think that

has been a put-off. But I've never felt that at all with Linking London...I think that's probably a credit to Birkbeck.

University partner

4 | Profile and Communications

This section considers the profile of Linking London and its communicative activities, including, awareness of Linking London, methods of communication, Linking London’s publications and resources and Linking London’s events.

Linking London uses a variety of methods to raise awareness and communicate with its partner institutions and wider stakeholders. Figure 7 shows that awareness was high among survey respondents of Linking London’s main methods of communication.

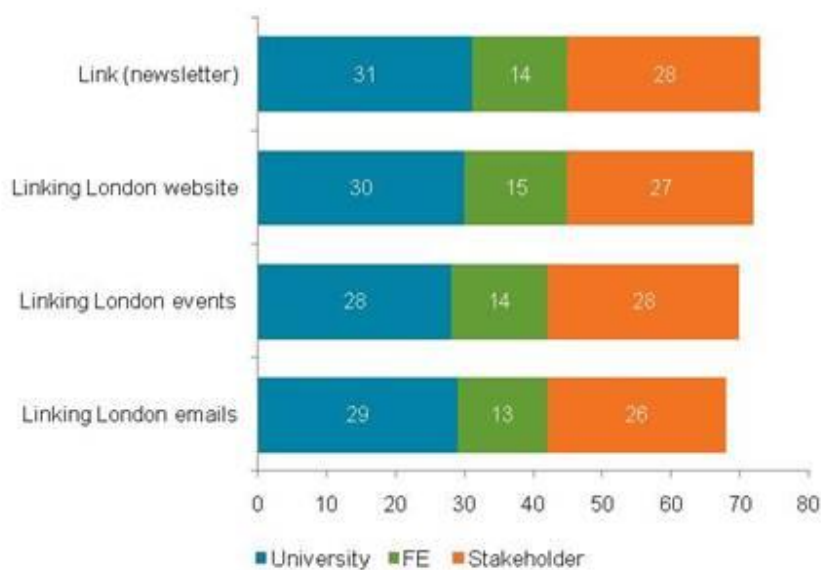


Figure 7: Which of the following marketing and communication activities are you aware of? Base 83

One would expect awareness to be high among those who are engaged with the Network, but there was also some suggestion from our interviews that active representatives from partner institutions cascade the relevant information within their own organisations.

That actually took some time to nurture really, because previously it was, you know, just me, but I think as an individual within an institution, what I've tried to do is push the Network internally, so colleagues can see the value in the Network – and that's not just about widening participation.

University partner

This has been facilitated by Linking London through the designation of a named “link” person at each institution, who acts as a dedicated point of contact within the Linking London team. This has been important in the development of the Network, particularly given that partner institutions’ wider awareness of the Network will no doubt affect their decisions whether to fund continued membership of the Network for 2010/11.

You are reliant on the link person being receptive and being involved, responding promptly and disseminating information to who they believe are the relevant contacts. I mean, I think it's important that the link person does have some sort of clout within the organisation, that they are somebody that has a relatively senior position. I think that, overall, it's been very positive. I think that some, as is the nature with all this sort of work really, work more effectively than others.

Central team member

Linking London has also established a high profile for the Network and its partners through its advocacy role for vocational progression. On behalf of its members, this has included correspondence with Government, such as a recent letter submitted to the Department of Education to highlight various issues facing vocational learners, and meetings with the Ministers responsible for the 14-19 Diploma, for example. Respondents to the survey reinforced the finding that one of Linking London's key impacts has been raising the profile and awareness of the issue of progression of vocational learners to higher education: 63 of 76 respondents to the question said that they had made a very positive or positive impact in this area.

It was clear from our interviews that Linking London's publications, as a tangible output, are one of the areas of greatest impact. Partners spoke highly of the quality of the publications produced and, more importantly, their usefulness as a resource and the fact that some are actively used by staff in partner institutions – demonstrating genuine 'front-line' impact. It was also clear from our interviews that some partners tend to disseminate the publications widely.

The publications: again, huge resource. We request them fairly often, because they fly around different parts of the School. I think in some of the other networks I've been involved in, you know, the lack of such a publication has been quite a hindrance.

University partner

We've used their handbook for students on preparation for university, so that booklet, we loved it and we used that. We've also used their cards. They've got the orange progression cards, so we've used all of that, and we've used specifically certain pathways that they've developed. We've used the engineering stuff [a leaflet promoting progression agreements] a lot. There is a huge amount of literature, I know, that we've been given throughout the year....So in terms of that area of work, we have used probably all the materials a lot.

FE college partner

Overall, a large majority of survey respondents thought Linking London's marketing and communication activities are either effective or very effective, as summarised in Figure 8.

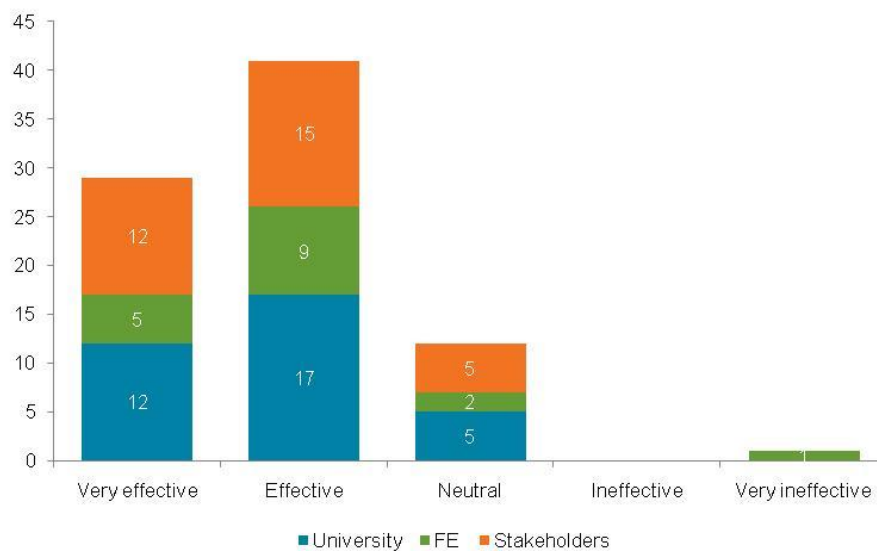


Figure 8: How would you rate the effectiveness of Linking London's marketing and communications? Base 83

Interviews also suggest that most respondents are satisfied with the communication they receive and that the Network produces resources for a broad audience compared with other LLNs:

Linking London appeared to produce more, in terms of guidance for their membership, for a broader range of people, in terms of their documentation [and] guidance.

Stakeholder

Interviewees found Linking London's website to be a useful portal for information, and for accessing resources:

The website went through a drastic overhaul...and it's now a very good website, because it has lots of resources. So, obviously it has the information about the Network, but there's also a lot of resource information on there as well.

University partner

Interviewees had a mixed reaction to the effectiveness of email correspondence from Linking London. Some interviewees appreciated the Network's email updates and insights in to the policy landscape, while others felt that they received too many emails from the Network and partners. Clearly there is a balance to be struck, which may vary from institution to institution. One interviewee suggested that the Network could edit emails to display core and non-core information separately. Overall, the central team has taken decisions about information to include and exclude based on what it judges necessary; the team is conscious of the necessity not to overload institutions with non-priority information.

Perhaps the most visible of Linking London's communication channels has been their events. These have included running a number of Network events and conferences. The Network held 21 events in the academic year 2008/09 and 23 in 2009/10. These events cover a wide range of topics relating to the Network's aims. Respondents to the survey had attended events relating to a variety of topics: 30 had been to the Linking London Annual Conference in 2010; 28 had attended events relating to Progression Agreements; 26 had been to events relating to

curriculum development; 20 had attended staff development events; and 18 had attended events relating to IAG.

Figure 9 shows how respondents who had attended events on different subject areas judged the effectiveness of each type of event. As can be seen from the chart, responses were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of events.

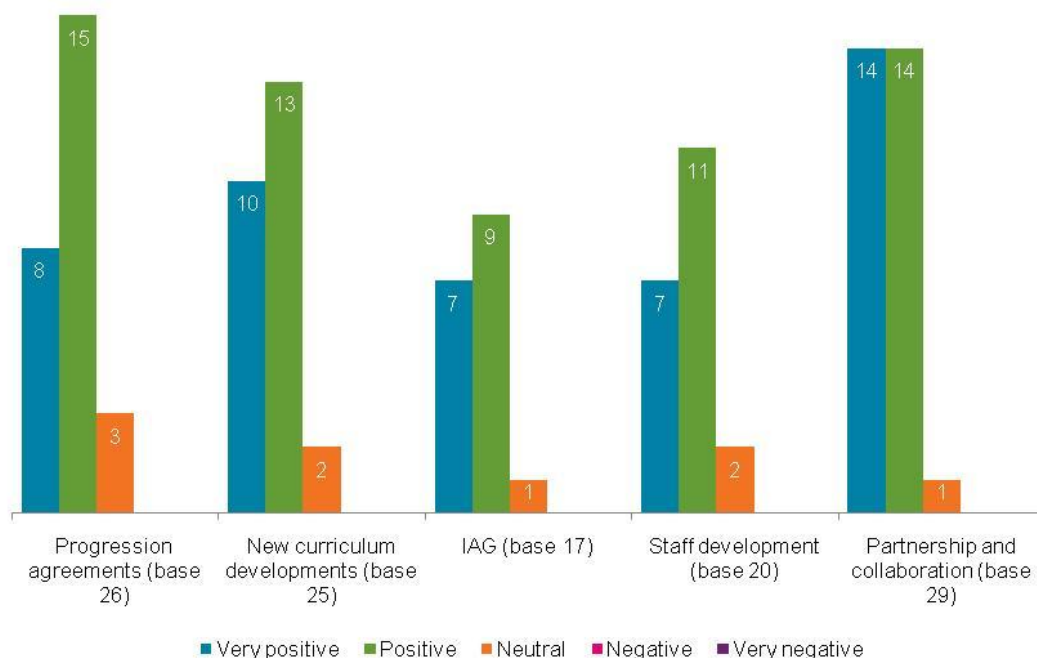


Figure 9: Overall, what impact has Linking London's programme of events had in the following area of work? Multiple bases

Linking London has evaluated all of their events, through feedback forms completed by delegates. These have also been overwhelmingly positive, and Table 3 demonstrates this for a sample of recent events for which feedback data was available.

Event	Date	Feedback
Access to HE Diploma and BTEC National Update	14 October 2009	82% of attendees rated the event 'Excellent' or 'Good'
Using Data to Support Progression	21 October 2009	100% of attendees rated the event 'Excellent' or 'Good'
Functional Skills and the Vocational Learner	8 December 2009	83% of respondents said that the event had fully met their needs across all or most aspects
Going for Gold: Vocational Progression in the Sports Sector	20 January 2010	85% of attendees rated the event 'Excellent' or 'Good'
Successful Knowledge Transfer Seminar	3 February 2010	63% of attendees rated the event 'Excellent' and 37% rated it 'Good'
Progression and the Professions	11 February 2010	50% of attendees rated the event 'Excellent' and 40% as 'Good'

Table 3: Linking London Event Feedback

Interviewees did comment that the events and conferences run by Linking London have been very useful in building links with those in a similar position within different institutions, which may then lead on to other opportunities for collaboration outside of Linking London's core area of work.

I think the annual conferences have been very good. Networking events, which have helped bring people together, and as well as being very informative they've had a good range of speakers....Formal events, but there's a lot of networking goes on behind the scenes, and that's very helpful.

University partner

I think the Lifelong Learning Network has been a really good forum for cross sector colleagues, for coming together and airing their views... So when ...a colleague from another institution, who I know from the Network, who phones me up and says, 'Will you be on my steering group? I've got some money to do this particular piece of work', I will know him. So I think it enhances those relationships, value added almost.

University partner

5 | Activities

A crucial part of Linking London's role is to facilitate and fund activities to improve progression for vocational learners. These include developing progression agreements, curriculum developments, staff development, and information, advice and guidance activities.

We asked survey respondents about the activities they have undertaken with Linking London. Among partner institutions staff development activities and progression agreements were a common activity. Other stakeholders were more likely to have worked on developing information, advice and guidance resources and delivering events.

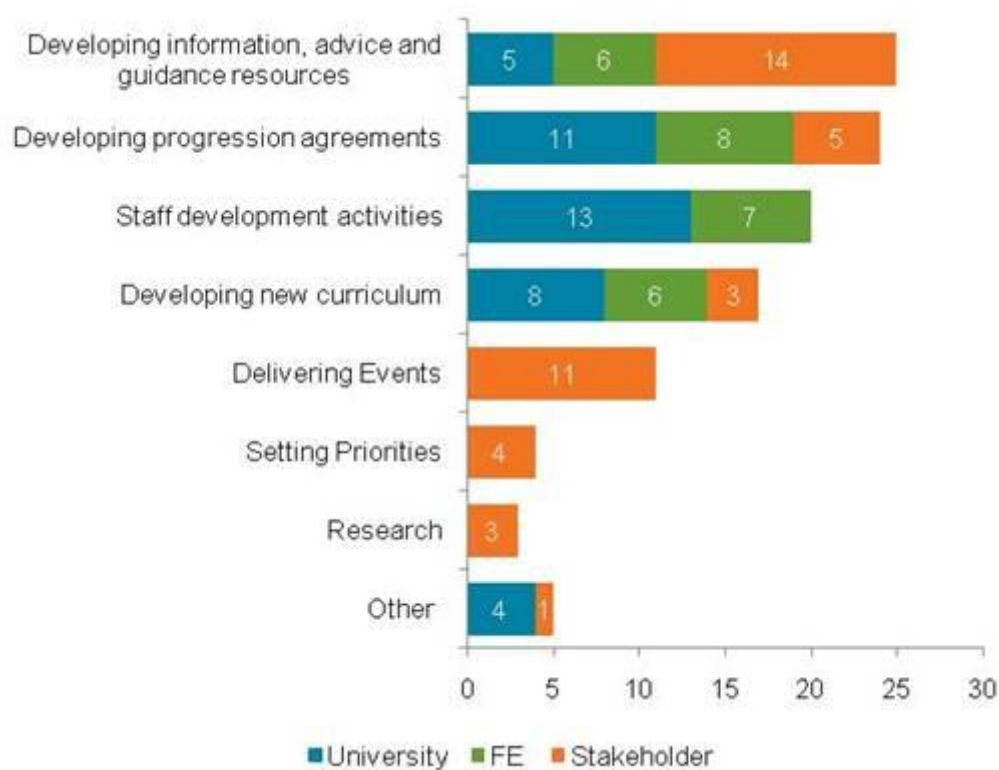


Figure 10: Have you worked with linking London on any of the following activities? Base 83

Development funding is a key mechanism through which Lifelong Learning Networks have been able to impact on the landscape of vocational progression to higher education. LLNs have allocated part of their budgets to providing funds for which partner institutions can bid to fund a range of projects.³ Eighteen survey respondents had accessed development funding, while 26 had not. The development projects of these 18 respondents were spread among the priority areas of the Lifelong Learning Network, with developing new curriculum being the most common area of work.

³ See HEFCE, *Lifelong Learning Networks*, www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/

Feedback from partner institutions through interviews has suggested that they feel the bidding process for funding is straightforward and appreciate the support of the central team in ensuring bids are appropriate.

The process of application is very straightforward. And you can go directly in and apply or, what we're doing with one at the moment, we're going to use the expertise of one of the Linking London staff. ... We've already had a discussion and one of the Linking London staff with expertise in that area is going to help to develop it with us.

FE college partner

When we asked the 18 survey respondents who had accessed development funding about the impact this funding has had, the responses were almost entirely positive, with no negative responses (see Figure 11). In the next sections we go on to look at LLN activities in priority areas in more detail.

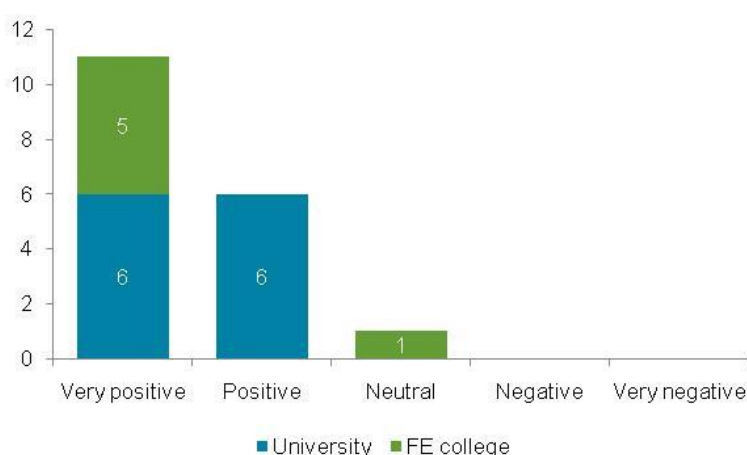


Figure 11: How would you rate the impact of development funding? Base 18

Developing Progression Agreements

Progression Agreements are one of the core elements of the work of LLNs, as laid out by HEFCE.⁴ Linking London's targets for the number of Progression Agreements they expected to achieve in each of the first three years of their operation are shown in Table 4 below.

	Year 1, 2006/07	Year 2, 2007/08	Year 3, 2008/09
Progression Agreements	5 - at least one per discipline area	5 - at least one per discipline area	8 - at least one per discipline area

Table 4: Linking London Progression Agreement targets

Linking London has significantly exceeded its targets for Progression Agreements. By the end of the 2007/08 academic year, there were 21 progression agreements in place, and by the end of the 2008/09 academic year, there were 52 signed and implemented Progression Agreements. At the time of writing, there are 72 Progression Agreements in place across the Network.

Over 100 of the 150 additional student numbers that Linking London distributed in 2007/08 were attached to the Progression Agreements that had been developed by that point. By the end of the 2008/09 academic year, more than half of Linking London's progression agreements

⁴ HEFCE, *Progression agreements*, www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/progress/

had ASNs attached to them: 27 out of 52. The ASNs allow the Progression Agreements to guarantee places for vocational students. Linking London's central team feel that those Progression Agreements with guaranteed ASNs attached have been the most successful.

I think some that were linked to the ASNs [were most successful]. We distributed additional student numbers to those institutions that bid...successfully for them....Progression Agreements ... that aren't ASN-related are more of a challenge.

Central team member

The implementation of Progression Agreements represents a successful output for Linking London, but their ultimate impact is determined by the number of learners that benefit from them. To the end of the summer of 2010, 2250 learners had the potential to progress to higher education via the 72 Progression Agreements that had been signed through Linking London up to that point.

Stakeholders that responded to the survey were broadly positive in their assessment of the role that Linking London has played in developing Progression Agreements, as shown in Figure 12.

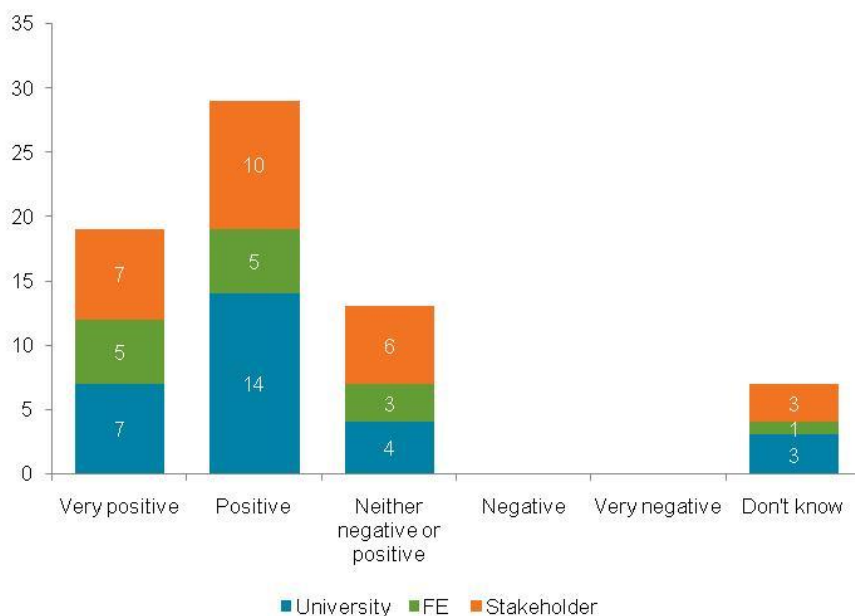


Figure 12: Overall, how would you rate the impact Linking London's activities with partners have had on developing Progression Agreements? Base 83

Partners felt that, through Progression Agreements, Linking London had cemented existing relationships, raised awareness of vocational progression, and opened up specific progression routes that were not previously available. For some institutions, they have both generated new partnerships and strengthened existing ones.

With Linking London we were able to add, I guess what would be like another tier to those agreements so they, kind of, solidified them even more. We broadened out by two institutions, three institutions, and the number of agreements that we had.

University partner

I don't think we've created new formal relationships where there was no relationship before. I think what it's done is it's really enhanced and

developed the relationships with key people that we've always taken students from, but probably never spoken to, except on the day before Clearing.

University partner

Cementing and deepening existing relationships is a positive achievement for Linking London. Although there have been examples of Progression Agreements between institutions that would not have previously worked together, by their nature these are more difficult.

Both central team members and partners reflected on the importance of a sound implementation plan for developing Progression Agreements after initial institutional buy-in had been gained:

There are two parts to Progression Agreements. One is to get institutional buy-in and commitment to actually developing a Progression Agreement from the sending and receiving institutions. The second part... is the equally important, if not the more important bit. It's making that piece of paper come alive, so that students and staff at the sending and receiving institutions know about it and have systems in place to promote it and market it, and also monitor it as well.

Central team member

It's easy to sign a piece of paper, but actually working out and working through what the piece of paper means takes a lot of time and resource.

University partner

Progression Agreements are intended to be sustainable and may be updated should courses or entry criteria change in future. Survey respondents who had worked on Progression Agreements felt they were either completely or partly embedded within their institutions. Our interviews with partner institutions also revealed several positive responses to continuing to use Progression Agreements:

I think what it shows is that, let's say, the approach that Linking London has facilitated has actually now become part of mainstream operations.

FE college partner

They'll certainly continue to be used...it's something we're committed to doing, and that we'll be committed to doing should Linking London end. I think that's important.

University partner

Curriculum development

As with other Lifelong Learning Networks, new curriculum developments have been a core part of Linking London's development projects. Each curriculum development is managed by the institution(s) bidding for the funds, using their own expertise around writing modules or liaising with employers. The LLN central team provides support where needed in the form of a dedicated manager for curriculum development. Many of Linking London's new curriculum developments have been new foundation degrees, with a smaller number of full Honours degrees and short course provision. The Network has tried to encourage more of this shorter course provision in order to appeal to new and different types of employers, as explained by a member of the central team:

The bulk of it's been foundation degrees, and we've tried to steer away from that in the last year or so by re-emphasising to the Network that we would like to see shorter course provision....Not to downplay the importance of the foundation degree stuff. It's just a case that [we] wanted to look at it at the end and not see it so weighted towards foundation degrees and to see more innovative modular stuff, which would be a bit more unusual or less within the institution's comfort zone.

Central team member

The development funding bidding process has the advantage that partners have the freedom to access funding for projects they want to develop as an institution, or group of institutions, as long as this meets Linking London's funding criteria. Overall, respondents to the online survey were largely positive about the impact that Linking London's activities with partners has had on developing new curriculum areas (Figure 13).

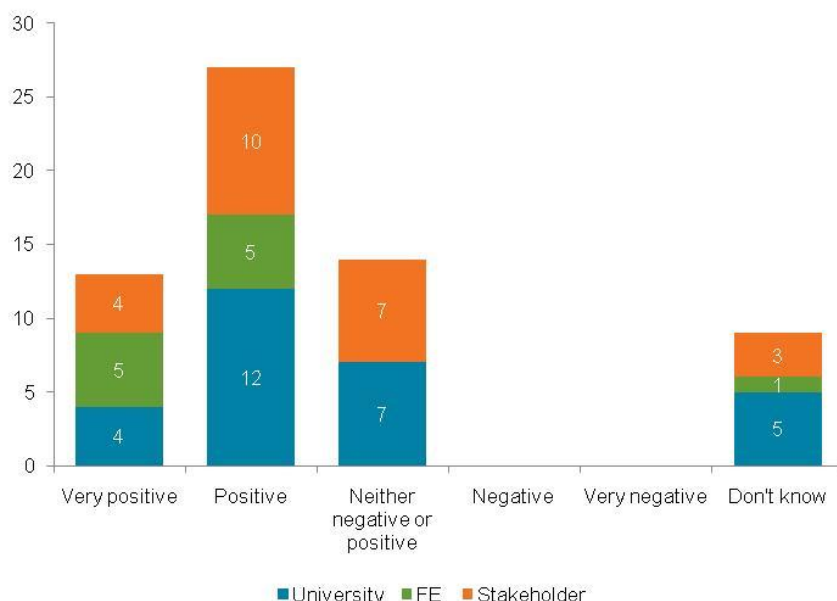


Figure 13: Overall, how would you rate the impact Linking London's activities with partners have had on curriculum development? Base 83

There were no negative responses to the survey question and partner institution interviewees gave testament to development projects both raising aspirations and offering new opportunities for progression, in the form of new pieces of curriculum. At the interviews there was a suggestion from several partners and the central team that some bids lacked originality or innovation. However, judging innovation does depend on the viewpoint and experience of the particular institution concerned. Given the diversity of experience of vocational learners across universities, some institutions did feel that the new developments were innovative.

This might not be innovation to other types of institution which are already geared up to vocational education, but for a department like ours, the opportunities that it's provided to create a curricula, which is very different from the traditional social science curricula. It has been innovative, for us.

University partner

Information, Advice and Guidance activities

Linking London's work on information, advice and guidance (IAG) has included sharing good practice, collaborative work with providers and IAG agencies, support to update institutions' UCAS entry profiles, developing IAG resources, such as resources for the 14-19 Diploma, and IAG staff development events. Linking London has taken the view that it is not directly learner facing, rather seeing their role as "advising the advisers".⁵ As noted in the section on governance and management, the IAG Operational Practitioner Group has been seen by the central team and other partners as being one of the more successful OPGs.

The Network appointed a dedicated staff member with responsibility for IAG, who had previously worked as an adviser. A member of the central team described the LLN's approach to IAG:

So, really, it was being a step removed from students and employees, and working with employers through organisations like sector skills councils and working with students indirectly through tutors and advisers. So, by up-skilling staff who are on the frontline of delivering IAG...and providing them with staff development resources that plug gaps around the issues of vocational progression to HE. Working with our institutions to make those pathways clear, we felt, was a more effective way of going about it and would, in the long term, and looking at it, as sort of, a legacy, have a longer-term impact.

Central team member

The IAG OPG has been seen as a useful group for promoting IAG on vocational progression across the Network. Currently the OPG acts as a strategic steer, setting the Network's IAG priorities and then reviewing progress and publications. IAG also gives a good example of a work area where Linking London has worked outside its network membership to work across the capital.

At some point during the life of that OPG, it became clear that things needed to be done on a Pan-London basis, not just around IAG, but IAG was a particular strength for Pan-London working. So, there's a group of [the IAG Manager] and his counterparts who meet Pan-London and they share resources, and we share programmes of events now, as well.

University partner

One interviewee showed concern over the disbandment of the OPG and hoped the new Steering Group meetings would be as effective.

So, I mean, it's difficult to know whether the person responsible for the IAG work and all the initiatives that have been developed over the three years in that area, will be getting less, sort of, steer, in a way, from the people who are on the OPG. ... Whether or not he will still get that degree of feedback, I don't know, with the new structure. I guess that would depend on the individual members and whether they will feel that it's important still to continue to make the feedback.

University partner

⁵ Linking London, *HEFCE Monitoring Report 2007/08*.

A priority for the Network, which was highlighted in partner interviews, was developing the “HEI shop window”, addressing the messages about the acceptance of vocational students that universities give to potential applicants. This includes the institutions’ entry profiles described on the UCAS website.

Effectively, what are they saying to potential applicants? That’s something that I think we are particularly-, we saw, as a priority, right at the beginning...was, ‘What does your own website say?’ Crucially, what does the UCAS website say to full-time applicants who have to use the UCAS website? It gets millions of hits every month. So, if you can get information on that site right, you’re having a long-term major impact on progression.

Central team member

Overall, respondents to the online survey were extremely positive about the impact that Linking London’s activities with partners has had on developing IAG resources (Figure 14).

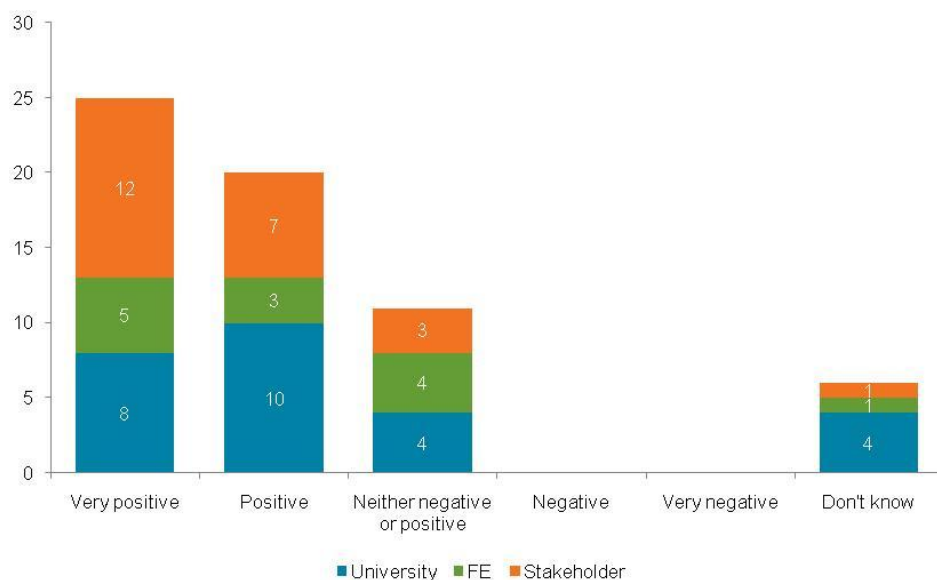


Figure 14: Overall, how would you rate the impact Linking London's activities with partners have had on developing IAG resources? Base 83

Interviewees were generally impressed with the quality and presentation of the resources produced by Linking London. Interviewees suggested that resources have made their way to advisers on the ‘front line’, with progression guides that explain the different routes into and through higher education having been particularly useful. Other resources have also proved popular; for example, Linking London’s publication, *Supporting Vocational Learners Progress to Higher Education: A Guide for Advisers*, has received nearly 650 downloads from the website alone.⁶

One interviewee, from the higher education sector, did comment that it was difficult to know if practices would be embedded, but Linking London has had considerable success at raising awareness of vocational progression.

⁶ As at August 2010.

I think there will be certainly a legacy from the work of Linking London because, you know, once you've raised awareness, you've raised awareness, so you've actually influenced, for example, admissions teachers in HE to actually look at the non-traditional qualifications.

University partner

Staff development activities

Stakeholders saw staff development activities as one of Linking London's key successes. Linking London offers a range of staff development opportunities aimed at increasing awareness and sharing expertise and best practice. Linking London held 114 events between 2006 and 2009, with a total of 1,927 participants. As shown in Figure 15 below, overall, respondents to the online survey were positive about the impact that Linking London's staff development activities with no negative responses received.

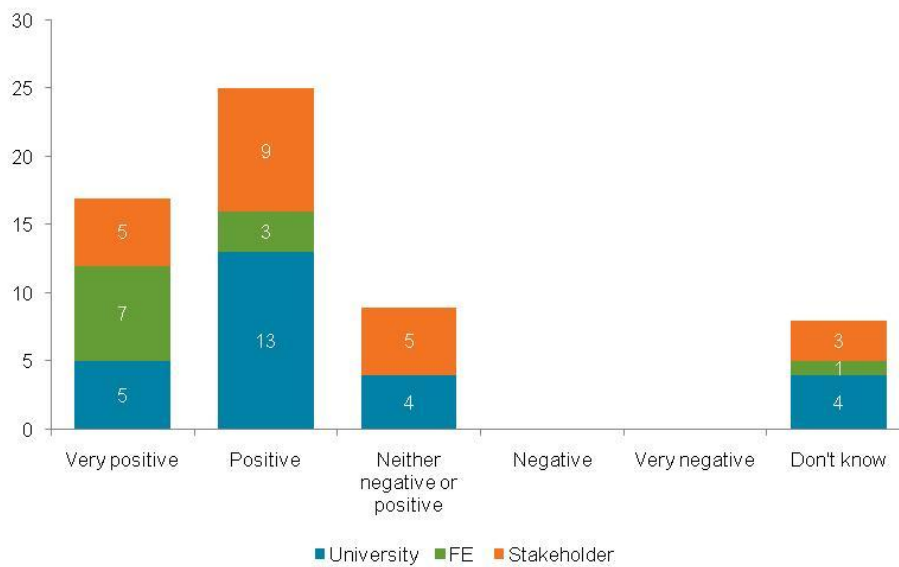


Figure 15: Overall, how would you rate the impact Linking London's activities with partners have had on staff development activities? Base 83

Interviews with Linking London partners supported the views that staff development events had a positive impact. They were seen as useful from two perspectives: firstly, enabling staff and departments to build up the required knowledge on complex subjects, including the dissemination of Linking London's work; and, secondly, as another networking forum for partners and broader stakeholders. These events have also engaged a broader range of staff members from within partner institutions than those who are directly involved in development projects or OPGs.

The ones that my colleague has been attending on diplomas and diploma qualifications, he has found invaluable, because he would have never had the time nor the effort to sit down and focus on unpacking what is...very tricky and complicated to understand.

University partner

Some of the events they've put on have been very good and I think they've really given people an opportunity to really think about, and get their heads around, some of the more difficult things that they have to do.

University partner

The majority of the survey respondents, including all higher education institutions, felt that information received from staff development events was being embedded within their organisation. Interview respondents also testified to information from events being disseminated and embedded within their institutions.

I've sent a couple of emails out today and passing on what I learnt from [the event]. In the same way, we've had people go out to diploma meetings, who I know have come back and they've brought back the information and disseminated in the college. ...there has been a lot fed back into the college.

FE college partner

6 | Impact and Change

This section discusses partner and stakeholder views on the impact and change that Linking London has brought about in its different work areas.

Throughout the evaluation we are seeking to determine the impact that Linking London's activities have had on partner institutions and on the vocational progression landscape in their constituency. Some respondents felt that it was too early to judge the full impact of the outcomes that Linking London has achieved to date, yet it was clear that individual strands of activity have made impacts.

The survey asked respondents for their assessment of the impact of Linking London's activities on a number of work areas (Figure 16). The areas of most positive impact were partnership and collaboration between the members of the Network, and highlighting the issue of the progression of vocational learners; this resonates with some of the key areas of impact identified in the interviews. There were also strongly positive attitudes towards improving progression for vocational learners, and changing institutional culture and attitudes to vocational progression. On the latter area, there were also a large number of neutral responses and we should acknowledge that changing institutional cultures and attitudes is likely to be an extremely difficult task for an external organisation to bring about, and certainly difficult over the time period concerned. The importance of changing cultures is understood by the central team and is something they are continuing to emphasise as they enter into their fifth year of operation.

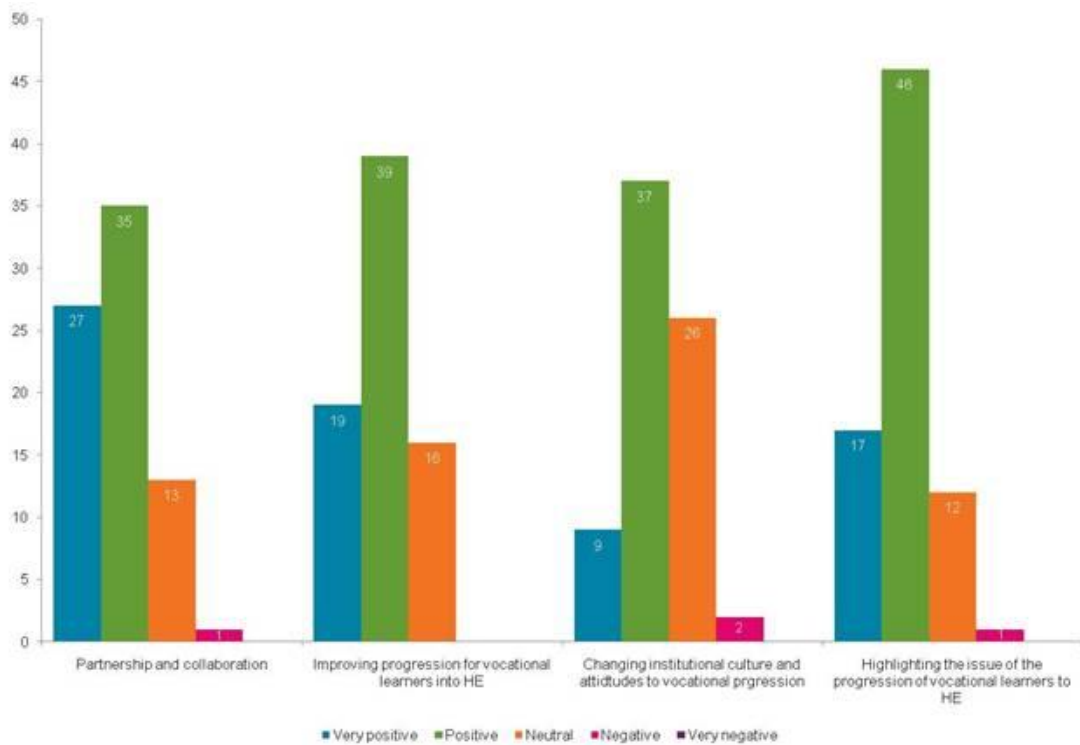


Figure 16: How would you rate the impact Linking London has had on... Base 83

Interviewees had a variety of perspectives on the single area where they felt that Linking London had made the most impact. For some, it was in the tangible outputs: over 70 signed Progression Agreements and over 600 learners through the distribution of ASNs. Other areas mentioned included, in particular, raising awareness and understanding of the progression for vocational learners, as well as the networking and partnership facilitation role fulfilled by Linking London. There were some identifiable impacts in the form of institutions changing their own processes, for instance where new Progression Agreements have been signed, and in entry criteria information that institutions make available.

Through the online survey, many partners and stakeholders told us that work undertaken by, or through, Linking London would not have happened if it were not for that intervention (see Figure 17) – arguably the key indicator of impact or the added value that Linking London has created. The funding distributed by Linking London has demonstrated impact by incentivising activity outside of partners’ own core funded activities.

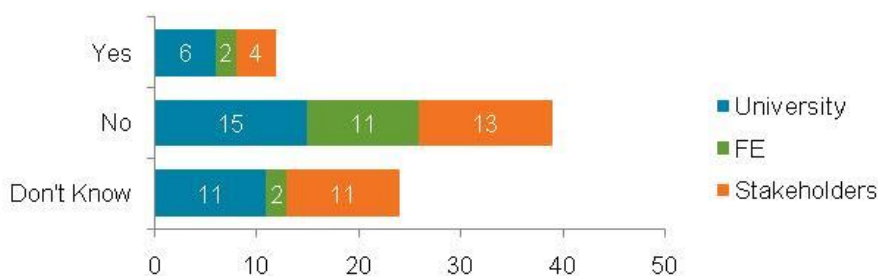


Figure 17: Would these activities have occurred anyway, without the involvement of Linking London? Base 83

At interview several respondents also testified that the activities they had been involved with would not have happened without the Network’s support, which is particularly helpful for staff with busy workloads.

Not necessarily, no, I don't think it would have been done, actually. I do think it is down to LLN, because they gave the funding for it and we have enabled that to happen.

University partner

It's always difficult, to be honest, to do the 'what if' in hindsight, but one thing I know is that the staff are increasingly stretched in terms of workloads, and the fact that we were able to leverage in some funding to give staff relief, to develop the courses and external links...made an enormous difference. I would be surprised if we had been able to develop those degrees as quickly or as well as we have done [without support from Linking London].

University partner

As shown in the chart above, 12 survey respondents felt that the activities they had been involved with would have happened anyway, without Linking London support. Some interview respondents were also sceptical about institutions bidding for development funding for projects that they would have undertaken anyway.

Well, I look at the poster presentations and wonder whether some of those projects weren't already, you know, in the pipeline, and the money was just a useful, sort of, bonus, in a way. You know, it's not really for me to

say. Certainly our project here...wouldn't have been done without the money.

University partner

Despite some reservations, overall, the majority of survey respondents did feel that Linking London adds value to the work of their organisation, as shown in Figure 18. Of those 11 partners and stakeholders who stated the Network had not added value to their organisation, we find most of these had not actually participated in Network activities, therefore perhaps have experienced fewer positive impacts.

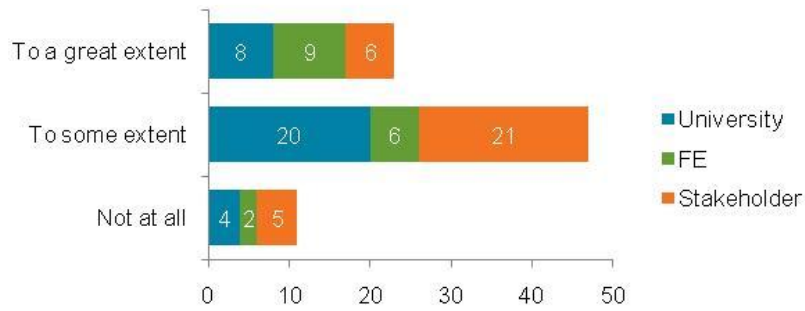


Figure 18: To what extent do you feel that Linking London adds value to the work of your organisation?
Base 83

7 | Interim conclusions and points for consideration

We finish by drawing some interim conclusions and highlighting a number of points for Linking London to consider during their final year of operation.

Interim conclusions

The evaluation up to this point has shown that Linking London's members are broadly positive about the success and impact of the network up to July 2010. There is a shared feeling that Linking London has been successful in raising awareness of the issues surrounding the progression of vocational learners and has provided a good forum for bringing partners together. The central team is highly regarded, particularly its ability to be flexible and adaptable to what has become a highly changeable environment.

Members also point to a range of tangible outputs, including over 70 signed Progression Agreements and over 600 learners supported to progress through the distribution of funds for Additional Student Numbers. Other specific areas of success include:

- > The quality of Linking London's publications and other outputs, particularly around IAG, where there was clear evidence of their publications being used on the front line.
- > The value of staff development activities and events hosted by Linking London.
- > Overall awareness and engagement with the Network and its activities.

Partners also indicated that much of the activity that has taken place – such as the development projects funded at individual institutions – would simply not have happened without Linking London's intervention.

Points for consideration for Linking London

The external funding and policy environment

HEFCE has already indicated that it will not provide additional funds to Lifelong Learning Networks, beyond some re-profiling of previously allocated expenditure. This has led to LLNs either closing, or developing new operating models. The imminent Comprehensive Spending Review, the Browne Review of higher education funding and student support and the expected skills and HE white papers will all dramatically affect the funding and policy environment. Many of the stakeholders that participated in the evaluation were clear that the focus and funding of Linking London will have to adapt to face these challenges. Our research suggests that Linking London is well equipped to do this, particularly as they have a strong and committed membership base and a highly effective central team. This autumn would be the right time to develop a sustainability strategy that builds on these strengths and outlines how the new operating model will evolve.

Relationships with partners

The commitment to the network of many partner institutions has been clearly shown by their agreement to pay membership subscriptions, but the transition from a HEFCE-funded network to a membership organisation is likely to be challenging. It will be important for Linking London to review the success of their new operating model at regular intervals, and to address any emerging concerns as they arise. Fundamentally, the network must be able to demonstrate that

partner institutions' subscriptions are a worthwhile investment, particularly as FE and HE budgets become increasingly constrained. Capturing and disseminating evidence of added value to partners will be an important part of retaining existing members and recruiting new ones. Some members felt that in the future, FE colleges may derive more benefit from membership than universities. In part, this reflected speculation about the likely increase of HE delivery by FE Colleges as a mechanism for widening participation. One partner also mentioned the anticipated rise of private providers in the HE sector (they already enjoy a strong position in the FE sector), and suggested that a previous Board decision not to involve private providers could be revisited. Linking London should also monitor relationships *between* partners, in the face of fears expressed during the evaluation that universities might scale back their relationships with FE colleges because of restrictions in funding for student numbers.

The focus of activities

This will be the final year for which HEFCE funding for development projects is available. Our research suggests that development funding has acted as a valuable resource for members and has encouraged participation in wider network activities. Linking London must consider how it can continue to add value to partners, without providing funding opportunities, post July 2011. Linking London's partners were pleased that the network has increased its focus on progression from and through Apprenticeships. This is one area of recognised growth that the Government continues to support (and may potentially fund), and Linking London should seek to benefit from this. Some of the other specific areas where partners mentioned that they would like to see Linking London focus included employer engagement and progression for work-based learners, and new models of delivery for Foundation Degrees.

The team and governance structure required in the future

Through effectively merging the OPGs into the Steering Group, Linking London has created a simplified network meeting group structure for its future operation. The new group arrangements should provide a more streamlined operational structure, but the network should make assessments of how successful the new arrangements are and consider any modifications that may become necessary. The size of the central team has reduced over time, which is in line with the reduced funding available to maintain staff members. How the team continues to change over the coming year should be in response to the new and continuing activities that the network pursues.

Concluding remarks

Linking London members were understandably concerned over the future of the Network and, indeed, widening participation policy in general, given the current political environment and the impending cuts to further and higher education budgets. The final part of CFE's evaluation is a 'sustainability workshop', which will contribute to developing the Network's strategy. It is clear that many partners would like the network and its activities to continue, but, given the uncertainties over the coming year, perhaps the best advice is that Linking London remains flexible and responsive to new circumstances as they develop.

I am optimistic because I think they have been so successful and have got such a good reputation...It's a difficult time for all of us, but I'm confident that they do have the flexibility to be sustainable and to survive.

FE college partner