

Lifelong Learning Networks: Sharing Success

Creating Progression Routes.

Since 2005, The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) has funded 30 Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), all hosted by English universities. The networks are predominantly a partnership between university and further education colleges and comprise groups of institutions in a city, area or region working together, often with other key stakeholder organisations. They have focused on progression for vocational learners into and through higher education. The Networks have created new learning opportunities; forged agreement across institutions on how qualifications are valued; helped people understand how they can progress through the system; and worked with employers to meet skills needs.

The challenge

Increasing the opportunities of those holding vocational qualifications by clearly defining the options available to them, is the principal challenge. Often within higher education admissions there is a lack of clear and accurate criteria for learners with vocational qualifications. Entry requirements can be variable and inconsistent, which presents issues for both vocational learners and their advisers. Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) have successfully tried and tested a number of methods to improve progression, particularly of non-traditional learners.

What worked well?

Progression agreements have been central to providing clear routes through to higher education from vocational courses. They are the result of negotiated partnerships between two or more colleges and universities - they can also be between an employer and a college or university. The networks ensure transparency and clarity about progression routes for learners and put a guarantee in place to ensure that vocational learners are given equitable treatment regarding progression. One Network solved an issue where potential Sports Scientists could not get into their local degree course without traditional A-Levels. Yet graduates from the course could not get jobs as they had no coaching qualifications. Network-facilitated discussions led to work placements for undergraduates and acceptance of vocational entry qualifications. Overall, progression agreements can be seen as the catalyst to starting a change in attitudes and cultures in institutions towards progression pathways for vocational learners.

In addition to progression agreements, Networks have had a positive impact on establishing appropriate Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) support systems. Activities in this area have focused on raising the skill levels of IAG practitioners and learning provider staff, as well as enhancing front line staff's knowledge of the changing 'Higher Education offer' and progression routes. Many of these activities were underpinned by initial research and analysis of staff needs and identification of significant gaps in awareness or understanding. Action included events focused on specific topics, conferences and the development of some accredited provision. There has been a strong focus on improving knowledge and understanding across and within institutions to ensure that FE staff understand the HE admissions process, the diverse range of opportunities available in HE and the qualities HEIs are looking for in applicants. Activities also ensured that staff have a better understanding of existing and emerging vocational qualifications, accreditation, employer engagement and the strengths and qualities of learners on vocational programmes. Some events were discipline-specific, others focused on topical issues such as new or amended qualifications at Further Education level. Where



appropriate, key external partners were involved, including business or sector 'champions', employers, Aimhigher and Sector Skills Councils..

A number of networks have invested in on-line information and advice tools. Interactive websites such as the Lancashire Network's Visaroute are easy to use and enable learners to find a list of progression routes that match their qualifications, experience and expertise as well as lots of other useful information about courses.

www.visaroute.org.uk/

Case studies

Title: National Progression Agreements
Network: VETNET (National network of veterinary schools, universities and colleges)
Involved: University of Reading

A number of overarching national agreements have been developed by Lifelong Learning Networks. These agreements require course providers to identify entry requirements from specified Level 3 vocational courses onto identified higher education programmes. Once defined, these requirements apply to applicants with the vocational qualification regardless of where they study in the country. For example, the University of Reading has identified what BTEC National Diploma Animal Management students need to achieve to be considered for entry to their Honours Degree in Animal Science programme. The development of this national agreement grew out of work between Reading and its local further education colleges to establish progression routes for local students. Once agreed, it was a relatively simple matter for VETNET to extend the agreement to learners across the country.

Title: Progression Agreements
Network: Linking London LLN
Involved: City University London, Birkbeck, University of London, and five London colleges

Linking London brokered a unique and innovative progression agreement aimed at students wishing to pursue a career in nursing. The agreement is between City University London and five London colleges – Tower Hamlets, Lambeth, City and Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Hackney Community College and one other university, Birkbeck, University of London. It facilitates student progression from Access Diploma courses and Certificates of Higher Education, adult nursing at City University's School of Community and Health Sciences. The agreement aims to increase the number of students in Higher Education from under-represented groups through better collaborative working, to ensure the NHS workforce reflects those sectors of the community who use the service. The agreement includes a commitment from all partners to work together to support students in their studies and ultimately a career in nursing.

This is a large agreement and is unusual in featuring cross-university progression (from Birkbeck, University of London to City University). It also involves progression to a very popular and oversubscribed course, so it offers real advantage to vocational learners. City University has advised colleges how to improve access provision and information, advice and guidance for students. One of City University's aims is that this agreement will help to reduce time invested in interviewing students as the standard of the students from the further education colleges will be assured.

Title: Life Pilot (on-line IAG tool)
Network: Western Vocational LLN
Involved: South West Universities and colleges

Lifepilot is designed with the working adult in mind looking to progress in their chosen career, or move into a completely new field. It provides a range of information designed to provide a starting point for adults who have the potential to study a higher level course, by way of their experience. Individuals are able to use the website to find the right course for them based on their qualifications (if they have any) and work experience. Not intended as a full guidance tool, Lifepilot's core strategy is to raise confidence and encourage adults to believe they can be successful higher education learners. Some of the website's key features include: video clips of students sharing their experiences of higher education and how they overcame some of the perceived barriers to studying; materials to build skills for study and update knowledge and a personal development planner. www.life-pilot.co.uk

For more information:
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Impact

Funding council monitoring reports indicate that over 8,500 progression agreements have been signed and implemented with over 19,500 learners expected to progress each year. Networks have produced and distributed 200,000 paper-based information, advice and guidance resources. A further 15,000 people have benefited from one-to-one information, advice and guidance interventions; 53,000 from group support and there have been nearly 900,000 hits on LLN web-related information, advice and guidance systems.

Recommendations

Institutions should:

- > Consider continuing or establishing partnerships between higher education, further education, schools and colleges to gain a better understanding of the curriculum at all levels to help ensure a more worthwhile progression is offered. Consider putting progression agreements in place.
- > If joint approaches to progression are to be pursued, ensure that there is commitment from senior level, academic and operational staff.
- > Appreciate that many students intend to continue studying the same subjects in higher education as in further education. , Providers should get smarter about how they engage with students who already have several years' knowledge in the subject area. Consideration needs to be given to whether degree courses are conversion or continuation and how to engage students without the subject becoming repetitive.
- > Use interactive on-line information, advice and guidance tools. Put course content, study commitments and what students might expect on-line for easy access. Use case studies and examples of successful students to help potential learners relate.
- > Identify potential barriers for learners and address them through your marketing and information, advice and guidance provision.
- > Show them what is on offer: Don't rely just on traditional methods e.g. open days, website and course prospectus, be innovative in your approach. Go to the workplace, the community, industry related events.
- > Be creative in how you approach the learners, think about where they are on a regular basis and go to them. Always provide options for interaction and practical tasters of courses, this helps learners visualise what it might be like to undertake your course.
- > Taster days at higher education can demonstrate to employees and employers the benefits to be expected from better qualified people.

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