

Lifelong Learning Networks: Sharing Success

Developing Curriculum.

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

Lifelong Learning Networks set out to facilitate the progression of vocational learners into and through higher education with innovative and relevant curriculum development, remove barriers, promote bridging provision, fill gaps and align vocational courses with the higher education offer, often with the involvement of employers and other partners such as Sector Skills Councils.

What worked well?

The Networks have been instrumental in a wide range of curriculum developments, including foundation degrees, bridging modules, undergraduate degrees and courses at postgraduate level, such as individual modules to suit employer needs. Often the curriculum development process was preceded by a mapping exercise where Networks, at their outset, sought to match Level 3 vocational courses with accessible routes into Level 4 courses before working on new or modified curriculum to fill any gaps. In most cases courses have been designed with the input of employers – to meet their specific needs.

These developments have often implemented innovative approaches to enable work-based and part-time learners to study more flexibly in ways more suited to their circumstances and the requirements of their employer. This could be through online or distance learning, workplace delivery or with flexible approaches to staff release. Furthermore, some Networks successfully implemented credit recognition procedures that enable learners to gain academic credit at higher education level for previous learning gained formally or acquired through life experiences, including work.

A number of Networks collaborated to develop Credit Frameworks. These agreements accredit learning in the same way across the sub-region. Crucially for the benefit of vocational learners, the Credit Framework ensures recognition for small bites of learning and single units, as well as prior experiential learning such as that gained in the workplace. For widening participation in higher education, such approaches are ideal for those who have gained considerable knowledge or experience through work, but do not have the academic qualifications to recognise this. The Kent and Medway Network brought partners together through the signing of a Framework. Partner institutions agreed to a set of ten common principles of good practice that enable and support the progression of learners, with the aim of contributing towards the development of a skilled workforce for Kent and Medway. The Credit Framework is available to download from their website.

<http://www.gohigher.org.uk/the-work-of-the-lln/the-kent-and-medway-lln-credit-framework/>



More recently, Lifelong Learning Networks engaged with the development of Higher Apprenticeships – such as that in Engineering Technology developed by the University of Greenwich, with the support of Kent and Medway Network and South East London Network. They work at a national level to support the development of a Higher Apprenticeship in Construction – which is at the heart of the current Government's skills strategy.

Case studies

Title: Higher Apprenticeship in Construction
Network: LLN National Forum
Involved: Construction Skills, University Vocational Awards Council

Lifelong Learning Networks are working with the University Vocational Awards Council and Construction Skills to facilitate and support the development of a Construction Higher Level Apprenticeship Framework (to include Foundation Degrees) as part or all of the Technical/Competence Qualification required by the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE). The project was initiated by the Lifelong Learning National Forum following the publication of their paper ['Developing Higher Apprenticeships in England'](#), published in May 2010

Those partners involved propose that the Foundation degree(s) would be delivered on a part-time basis. Assessment and validation of work-based learning and effective use of Accreditation of Prior and (Experiential) Learning would be core to delivery. They are also aiming for coverage throughout England, with appropriate FE delivery partnerships and opportunities that cater for and respond to the geographical mobility of the workforce in the construction sector. It is anticipated that the Higher Apprenticeship Framework (incorporating appropriate Foundation degrees) will be available for delivery from September 2011.

Title: constructionsite.org.uk
Network: Leap Ahead and Skills for Sustainable Communities LLN
Involved: Universities, colleges and stakeholders in the East Midlands

The *constructionsite* web-based repository provides 'bite-sized' units of learning and resources centred around a Foundation degree in Construction Leadership and Management validated by Nottingham Trent University; the repository was developed by the combined efforts of the two LLNs in the East Midlands, which each had construction as a key regional focus and recognised leadership and management as a particular skills need. The aim of the repository was to enable easy access to resource material for teaching staff, learners and employers. This was achieved through an e-learning environment and including examples of new learning technology, thus providing support for higher level construction curriculum development as well as opportunities for CPD. The *constructionsite* portal, which provides an example of the collaborative working facilitated by LLNs, is intended to be sustainable and has received strong support for its continuation, with a Steering Group having been established and chaired by the East Midlands Further Education College association.



Impact

Up to the end of the 2008/09 academic year, Networks had initiated over 1,150 new or modified curriculum developments. Of these, nearly half of the new developments (270) are Foundation degrees, while 60 are bridging modules to aid the transition from vocational qualifications to higher education provision.

There have been 56 new developments at undergraduate level, while 135 other undergraduate courses have been modified to improve their suitability for vocational progression. Over 700 of these developments involved employers, and nearly 300 involved Sector Skills Councils. There is optimism among the Networks and their partner institutions, that these developments will be sustained or embedded in institutional practice to ensure ongoing opportunities for vocational learners.

Recommendations

Institutions should:

- > Continue to work in partnership at a regional or sub-regional level to ensure that there are not gaps in provision and doors are not closed to vocational learners.
- > Continue to engage stakeholders – such as employers and their representatives – in these developments, to ensure that the provision meets the needs of the local labour market, and builds upon the approaches to engagement witnessed within Lifelong Learning Network activity.
- > Ensure that courses for non traditional learners are designed to be flexible with regards to entry requirements, delivery times and assessment methods.
- > Support employer based trainers and teachers with staff development, buddy support and easy to use paperwork.
- > Consider different modes of delivery such as short or long courses, weekend courses, blended learning making use of on campus work, work based learning and use of the institutions' virtual learning environments.