

# Lifelong Learning Networks: Sharing Success

## Meeting Skills Needs.

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 are groups of universities and colleges, most often operating at a sub-regional level, with the intention of improving the progression of vocational learners into and through higher education. Most Networks have identified and focused upon a number of key sectors important to their local economic context and skills needs. Through this sector focus, and by working in partnership with local employers and supporting local employees into and through higher education, Networks have played a key role in meeting skills needs in their sub-regions.

### What worked well?

Many Networks set out to understand local and sub-regional labour markets, their skills needs and where additional course provision was needed at a higher education level to meet these needs. Through labour market analysis Networks used sub-regional priorities to inform their focus and structure. Once established, Networks worked with Sector Skills Councils, Chambers of Commerce, Regional Development Agencies and Business Links to understand local needs, and there are examples of Networks undertaking their own research into local employer demand for higher level skills. By galvanising groups of higher education institutions and further education colleges at a sub-regional level, focusing on progression to Level 4 and beyond, Networks have formed a key part of the response to skills needs in their economies. At a micro-level, Networks have actively engaged with employers, and aspects of their work, such as curriculum development initiatives, have addressed specific skills needs with individual employers.

Across many of the Networks, employers have been engaged in curriculum development, particularly at the design stage. Both public and private sector employers have been involved with the creation of vocational programmes, including short, flexible courses in management, modules delivered on construction sites and new courses to meet their own Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requirements sometimes including postgraduate or higher-level skills provision. For example an NHS Trust and a university have worked together to develop a bespoke workforce development CPD programme to bring nursing staff up to speed, with optional assessment and credit.

On a national scale, through the Lifelong Learning Networks National Forum, there has been work in engineering, healthcare and construction. Other Networks – such as VETNET (National Network of Veterinary schools, universities and colleges) and the National Arts Learning Network – are addressing the needs of specific sectors, while LLNs have also responded to key national skills agendas such as the progression of Apprentices to higher education, in line with government priorities.

## Case studies

**Title:** Supporting economic priorities in Lancashire  
**Network:** Lancashire LLN  
**Involved:** 17 universities and colleges in Lancashire

The Lancashire Network, was established in 2008 and has concentrated activity on six economic areas that were identified as county-wide priorities and were central to the *Lancashire Skills Strategy*. These are advanced engineering and manufacturing, as the UK's manufacturing powerhouse for more than 200 years, with one in five of the industrial workforce employed in high technology production; construction; digital and creative industries; health and social care, which employs more people than any other sector in Lancashire; leisure and tourism, with over two million tourists visiting Lancashire each year; and environment and sustainability. The Network sought to address higher level skills needs in these key local sectors through collaboration and the signing of progression agreements potentially benefitting 34,500 students per year; supporting employers' skills needs through nearly 40 curriculum developments involving employers. This includes a Foundation degree in Advanced Skills for Advanced Materials developed with NWTexnet; and the development of *Visaroute* an online information, advice and guidance tool that enables learners to explore progression routes in the priority sectors.

**Title:** Centre for Work and Learning  
**Network:** Sussex Learning Network  
**Involved:** 11 universities and colleges in Sussex

The Sussex Learning Network consists of eleven partners, aiming to improve vocational progression to higher education in seven key sectors across the sub-region. With most of their objectives met by the end of their funding period in 2008, the network sought to embed activity in partner institutions and embarked upon a new direction to meet sub-regional skills needs. From May 2009, it entered a new phase in which employer engagement became its key focus, through the development of the Centre for Work and Learning supported by funding from the Higher Education Funding Council of England's Workforce Development Programme. The aim of this initiative is to deliver innovative work-based and work-related learning at higher education levels, through universities and colleges in the region. This is being done through a variety of methods, such as capacity building in institutions, curriculum re-modelling, new methods of curriculum delivery, and increased use of off-site, blended and e-learning.

## Impact

Where higher education providers have sought to understand and respond to the specific skills needs of business it can have a direct impact on the local and regional economy. Skills for Sustainable Communities LLN commissioned research into the experiences of employers that supported the progression of Advanced Apprentices into higher education. Employers that participated in the research stated that when employees accessed appropriate training and education provision it resulted in a more highly skilled workforce which they linked to increased productivity and profitability.

## Recommendations

Institutions should consider the following:

- > Linking in to national skills priorities - providers that have been engaged with the LLNs should use the knowledge and experiences gained to continue to inform the development of higher level qualifications and Apprenticeships, in line with the current Government's priorities.
- > Groups of universities and colleges can continue to address local, sub-regional and regional priorities, in a collaborative manner, engaging employers in the process and looking particularly at areas where progression from Level 3 to Level 4 is not widespread.
- > Education providers need to recognise the diversity and needs of employers from each sector and even individual organisations.
- > A flexible approach needs to be adopted along with a continued review of skills gaps within the local area. Sectors and individual businesses are adapting to changing and uncertain economic conditions.

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