

Lifelong Learning Networks: Sharing Success

Increasing social mobility and widening participation.

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

Widening access and improving both the extent and breadth of participation in higher education is a crucial part of the mission of Lifelong Learning Networks, and one approach to increasing social mobility in the UK. Often seen as a fundamental democratic concept, social mobility is the idea that individuals can rise to the highest rank in society irrespective of social background – thus meaning that individual ability and effort determine social success, rather than inherited status or ascribed wealth.

In 2009, the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills commissioned research to investigate the impact of lifelong learning upon social mobility. The report found that new qualifications enhanced social status and that the greatest upward social mobility was observed for individuals who make the jump between having no qualification higher than level 3, to holding a degree or higher degree. However, historically, access to higher level skills has not been available to all, and participation has been particularly low amongst vocational learners holding a level 3 qualification or below. Widening participation in higher education means to address the long standing discrepancies between different social groups entering higher education, in particular by improving access to higher levels of learning for under-represented groups.

What worked well?

Lifelong Learning Networks have been strategically involved in a number of projects and activities that have aimed to widen participation and increase social mobility. The Networks have been working to support the progression of vocational learners into higher education through a range of work including employer led development of higher apprenticeships, development of bridging modules and enhanced Information Advice and Guidance.

Many Networks have successfully developed alternative entry routes and made changes to admissions processes, for example seeking parity for students with vocational entry qualifications, accepting alternative forms of evidence of ability, and reviewing the fairness of the interview process for equity groups. Overall, Networks have worked to encourage universities to take a more personalised approach to admissions.

For some Networks, work to monitor and track learners from different backgrounds developed as a key component of their wider research remit. To overcome difficulties in monitoring which types of students were taking advantage of the work of LLNs and what happened to them once they reached university, some

networks commissioned or undertook longitudinal case studies of learners. For some, this option allowed Networks to overcome specific difficulties like training potential learners applying whilst in work, or the reluctance of higher education partners to pass on monitoring information once a learner had entered higher education.

Case studies

Title: Research to track progression to Higher Education
LLN: Kent and Medway LLN
Involved: Members of the Kent Association of Further Education Corporations (6 colleges from Kent & Medway LLN) in partnership with Aimhigher

A key element of demonstrating the impact of Lifelong Learning Networks involves analysis of progression data, to understand how Network activities have enabled progression for individuals from a variety of backgrounds, and in particular for under-represented groups. There are, however, significant challenges in collecting and comparing progression data across a large number of providers, to facilitate the tracking of student progression.

The Kent and Medway Network was proactive in tracking student progression from the outset of its activities, but found that existing student data on prior education was patchy, due to low completion rates and the fact that internal progression within an institution was often not captured. Therefore, the network embarked upon a data-matching exercise, using 2005/2006 Individual Learner Record data provided by the Learning and Skills Council to map local progression. Further work with the Higher Education Statistics Agency has enabled indicative national figures on student progression to be produced, which will become clearer over the next few years as further student outcomes are realised. A strength of this research is the ability to track learner progression by postcode, and gender, enabling colleges to take into account the impact of learner progression upon under-represented groups. Kent and Medway LLN's work to track its own progression rates successfully provided new insight into its impact upon social mobility and widening participation. On a local level, it was identified that 61% of learners that progressed in Kent and Medway lived in an area characterised as deprived by at least one of the indices of deprivation. It was also possible to compare how vocational learners fare against traditional academic routes, in terms of progression. It was noted that such longitudinal research would become clearer with time, but would also benefit from a more comprehensive national research project, to obtain more definitive data on learner progression.

Title: Admissions Research
Network: National Arts Learning Network (NALN)
Involved: Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design; Chelsea College of Art and Design; Cleveland College of Art and Design; Cumbria Institute of the Arts; Herefordshire College of Art and Design; Leeds College of Art; London College of Communication; London College of Fashion; Norwich University College of the Arts; Plymouth College of Art; Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication; The Arts Institute at Bournemouth; University for the Creative Arts and Wimbledon College of Art.

The National Arts Learning Network commissioned Professor Penny Jane Burke and Jackie McManus to conduct significant research to admissions practices of higher-level art and design courses, in the context of widening participation policy. The research was conducted in five case study universities, drawing upon institutional admissions statements, prospectuses, website material and interviews with admissions tutors. The resulting research report, *Art for a Few*, confirmed that fair admissions practice is a significant factor in widening participation policy, and noted a highly institutionalised and obstructive applications process, coupled with an elitist culture which implicitly shaped the selection process, exacerbating inequalities and exclusion in art and design courses. The report therefore identified a significant barrier to widening participation, and raised several conceptual and theoretical issues that may contribute to the lack of diversity in the sector. The research successfully identified key issues with art and design course admission practices, and highlights potential barriers that may polarise access to courses in the subject. On a wider scale, the report raises vital issues for the whole higher education sector, enabling all institutions to reflect on best practice for admissions. A key feature of the research was the sensitivity of the issues involved, and the need to raise controversial questions in order to better understand how participation in the arts sector can be widened. Copies of the report can found here www.ukadia.ac.uk.

Impact

There is encouraging evidence about the ways in which some institutions are linking widening participation to learning and teaching and implementing more inclusive practices to improve the student experience, and to promote student retention and success. There is also a growing awareness of the need to use institutional data to improve retention. Also admissions requirements are now more explicit when referring to non-traditional qualifications.

Recommendations

In the National Forum's view, gathered from the experience of all Lifelong Learning Networks, institutions should try to:

- > Recognise the importance of course admissions departments in the widening participation agenda, and reflect on their own processes to ensure that fair and inclusive admissions practices are undertaken.
- > Provide comprehensive and easy to access sources of information, advice and guidance.
- > Deliver pre-course information, advice and guidance on course content, expectations and student commitment in a variety of ways -such as from progression sessions, familiarisation and taster sessions.
- > Support none traditional learners in recognising and developing their transferable core skills to improve their overall employability.
- > Give consideration to developing partnerships to provide relevant, flexible programmes.
- > Monitor widening participation and equality policies, interventions and target groups to understand whether appropriate impact is being made.

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