

Introduction

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fdf and Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) share a focus on widening access to higher education through embedding vocational pathways, and have collaborated around their shared agenda both regionally and nationally. Work has particularly focused on sectoral and regional Foundation degree development and on progression in the workplace. As examples, in developing resources for workplace advisers, **fdf** drew upon and referenced LLN resources and initiatives and we have jointly commissioned research into Apprenticeship Progression, Apprenticeships and the role of Lifelong Learning Networks (downloadable from the **fdf** website) that has informed ongoing LLN practice and **fdf** project work with the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

This latter example demonstrates the added value of research in ensuring new initiatives and developing practice built upon evaluated past experience. It is therefore important that the legacy of LLN initiatives is preserved, particularly in the light of the continuing under representation in higher education of students from lower socio economic groups, and the following article details how one important aspect of their practice – research activity – will continue to be available to practitioners.

Lifelong Learning Networks: vocational learners and research

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Lifelong Learning Networks

The establishment of Lifelong Learning Networks

The case for LLNs was made by Sir Howard Newby, then Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in the Colin Bell Memorial Lecture in March 2004. Their purpose was to widen participation by combining the strengths of diverse higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) in prescribed regions to increase the number of vocational learners progressing into and through higher education.

Crucial to these regional partnerships was the involvement of employers. By better meeting their needs, LLNs would help create a better qualified workforce in a changing and competitive global economy. They were varied and followed no common structure. Some were based on already well-established relationships, large partnerships consisting of five or more HEIs and associated FECs. Others were smaller and, in some cases, only consisted of one HEI and a small number of FECs.

Funding was generous – the average amount for an LLN was approximately £3.5 million, for a period of three years. Activities, whatever the structure, were, and are, very similar: the establishment of progression agreements between HEIs and FECs for vocational learners; the development of innovative curricula and flexible learning; employer involvement in these developments; and provision of accessible information, advice and guidance for people outside formal education structures.

Thirty LLNs were originally established. Some have morphed into other areas with other funding streams such as the HEFCE-funded employer engagement projects, but fundamentally their priorities remain the same. There are currently 28 networks remaining. The majority will reach the end of their funding period by July 2011.

The Lifelong Learning National Research Forum

In an attempt to bring coherence to what is now known as the LLN movement, a Directors' forum was established and its activities funded by HEFCE. As this forum matured it became clear that although HEFCE had not imposed central priorities and each network developed according to the economic and social priorities of the area within all of them, 'research' in the widest sense of the word was used to underpin and inform projects, initiatives and developments. In reality, the research took three main approaches according to the type of project undertaken. Some followed an academic approach, others were action-based and the remainder centred on scoping.

What also became very clear was that this wealth of information, unique in that it was centred completely on the needs of vocational learners and the infrastructures and policies surrounding them, was in danger of being lost. This wealth of information reflected the expertise which was developing within LLNs where people uniquely were not only working across further education/higher education/ employer partnerships but were also working across HEIs where natural partnerships did not exist. In many respects they were leading the cultural changes so desperately needed if vocational learners were to be regarded with the same parity of esteem and equity as traditional academic learners.

The realisation that this work, which underpins the whole LLN movement, needed to be preserved was recognised by Directors and the national research forum was established. Its purpose was to:

- Act as a focal point for the collection, dissemination and discussion of research being undertaken by LLNs
- Seek ways of promoting joint research projects between LLNs, including work across sectors

- Act as a forum to encourage the publication or presentation of research by LLNs
- Develop the capacity and capability of LLNs to undertake research either individually or collectively
- Provide a research base that can begin to inform national policy in areas relevant to the LLN agenda
- Create and maintain links with other agencies that share an interest in the LLN research agenda
- Support the quality of research across the network of LLNs

The forum had representation from LLNs across the country. As it became established it was very clear that the penultimate point concerning creating and maintaining links with other agencies that shared an interest in the LLN research agenda was actually much stronger than originally perceived. Organisations which have expressed an interest are: The University Vocation Awards Council (UVAC); The HEA; The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE); The Further Education Research Association (FERA); and **fdf**.

A strategy whereby the research that the LLNs were undertaking could be used to enhance other forums and to further share practice and strategies to enable vocational learners to achieve became – and is still developing as – a very powerful tool. It is able to inform the current policy developments, including the emphasis on progression of higher-level apprentices and the framework outlined in Higher Ambitions (BIS 2009).

Very significantly underpinning all of the work of the LLNs and driving the research is the identification of barriers to social mobility and putting practice in place to alleviate them. Furthermore, LLNs will become part of the educational historical landscape, as have other significant initiatives including **fdf**. Their legacy will be important in that the cultural and practical changes they have pioneered will change the further/higher education interface and the life chances of vocational learners. The full impact of this will not be realised within the lifetime of the LLNs. Therefore, the importance of this needs to be documented, in order to inform future developments.

The work of the National Research Forum

An absolute priority of the forum was to capture the work already undertaken by the LLNs; it was recognised that there needed to be a dedicated resource to do this. The majority of the LLNs contributed financial support to employ a consultant for two days a week for a period of 12 months. In actual fact, this resulted in two consultants for one day a week each being appointed, as they had complementary

skills which it was thought would benefit the research and both had previously worked in LLNs. Through this work the forum realised that the intervention was almost too late and it was fortuitous that action had been taken when it was, as detailed reports became more difficult to find as contracts ended and staff left LLNs. This work is now complete and will initially be housed on the National Forum website.

A structure is now in place to ensure that the forum can at present be the repository of the work. Alongside this support are offers to new authors, through a practitioner project, as well as a written resource concerning publishing

research. A further development is the publication of an eBook. Part of the researchers' role is to compile this eBook. Currently 12 chapters have been commissioned covering a wide range of topics. Particular attention has been given to the dissemination of useful findings and implications for practice. The timescale for completion of this work is June 2010. A deliberately stringent timescale was set so that it could usefully inform future developments and policy. Some of the topics covered are as follows and the descriptions are indicative rather than comprehensive.

Advice and guidance

Here, the work covers employer attitudes and support, the absence of guidance for adult vocational learners, the importance of impartial information advice and guidance that the LLNs have been able to provide and the need for more information about continuing professional development which can be directly linked to higher education awards such as Foundation degrees.

Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) and admissions

Areas covered here are the accessibility of APEL, assessment and administration of APEL and how successfully learners are supported.

Progression of learners

This includes the perceptions of higher education by vocational learners, the perceived value of HNCs by employers compared with other qualifications such as Foundation degrees and the impact of social class on progression on to higher-level art and design courses; higher-level study skills; and transition to higher education. This explores what they are, how successful interventions are and the role of further education in this area.

Employer engagement

Employer needs are explored both in the private and public sector, how new ways of working are developing, the involvement of assessment of employers in work-based learning assessment and the relevance of language barriers to work-based learning curriculum development. Innovative developments are explored and their success evaluated.

The future

A main priority for the National Forum is that there is a repository for its work when the funding period for the LLNs and its national forum, located at Higher York, ceases. Intrinsic to this is that not only does it need to be housed but also there needs to be ongoing channels for the work to be received, reviewed and new authors supported.

There also needs to be strong links with FECs where although there is not a research brief, many practitioners are involved in research – often through higher degrees or as part of projects they are involved in. Increasingly this will become more important for those FECs that want to extend their higher education work.

Most importantly the centrality of this work with its contribution to enabling vocational learners to access high quality higher education; at a place and time which suits their needs, as well as meeting the needs of their employers is crucial to developing the skills agenda today and in the future.

References

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2009). *Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy*. London: BIS.