

Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network. Initial Report to HEFCE October 2007

Background

The Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) was awarded HEFCE funding from April 2007. The funding allocated was £3.8 million over a period of three years until July 2010. In addition a further £70000 was allocated from the Learning and Skills Council to be used to support work-based learning in prescribed activities. The LLN took the decision to use this to support access to Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) in the workplace.

The Network covers a diverse geographical and social and economic area. This in itself present challenges as there are areas of high urban deprivation such as Stoke on Trent as well as rural deprivation in Shropshire. Furthermore there are areas of affluence. The partnership comprises of 15 FE colleges and 5 Higher Education Establishments. The official launch of the LLN took place in May 2007 and was well attended.

Operational Groups

The operational thematic and discipline groups are now well established and led by the partner HEIs. These are as follows:

- Technology (Staffordshire University)
- Health and Care (Staffordshire University)
- Creative and Media (Wolverhampton University)
- Public Sector/Public Services (Wolverhampton University)
- IT, Enterprise, Leadership and Management/Cross-Cutting Themes (Keele University)
- Information Advice and Guidance and Student Support (Keele University)
- Progression and Credit (Keele University)
- Data group (Staffordshire University)

Systems for allocation of a devolved budget for each of these groups is now established as is an equitable process decision making process for the allocation of project funding for them.

A group where the leads from each of these groups meet is also established, as is the steering group. The steering group meets on a regular basis and has membership from higher and further education, the school sector, Connexions, Aimhigher and employers from the region. A broad stakeholder group meets three times a year to inform the direction of the LLN.

Staffing Structure

Since the appointment of the Director in May 2007 a main priority has been to establish a staffing structure to meet the needs of the LLN and to recruit staff. This is currently as follows:

- Administrative Assistant – in post
- Coordinators for Health and Social Care, Public Services/Public Sector and Art and Media. It is anticipated that there will be a start date of 1st October for all three posts.
- Technology – Appointed start date 1st November
- IAG, Progression/Credit and Cross Cutting Themes Coordinators currently advertised.
- Research Officer – start date 1st January
- Vocational Progression Coordinator. (This is a Staffordshire University post but the responsibilities are significantly associated with the LLN) – start date 17th September
- Data Officer – Interview date November
- Finance Officer – Appointed
- Employer Liaison - advertised
- Project Manager – Currently under review

A problem has been the recruitment of staff as the posts had to go through job evaluation and this caused considerable delay. It is anticipated that a full quota of staff will be in place by December 2007. Given this late start the possibility of extending the project for a completion date in September 2010 rather than the current July 2010 is a possibility worth exploring.

Strategic Priorities

Involvement of FE Colleges

Priorities with FE colleges are now identified and an FE/HE driven agenda has now been agreed. An overview of these priorities is as follows:

- Further development of Foundation Degrees in new curriculum areas
- Progression from the Train to Gain programme and level three NVQs
- Discrete modules in Leadership and Management to meet the needs of employers
- The establishment a range of CPD modules
- Engagement with public particularly in the area of regeneration and professional development needs.
- Development of progression routes from the new diplomas for the 14-19 agenda.
- Development of level zero, foundation year courses initially with health and social care

- Engaging the Open University in a specific project to establish progression routes across the LLN.
- A combined Aimhigher/LLN/Connexions project to raise awareness of vocational progression routes from level three into HE awards

This has been achieved through extended discussions with FE Principals and Appendix 1 gives an indicative summary of their expressed interests. The appointment of staff to the LLN will mean that this strategy will be able to be taken forward.

Engagement with Employers

Two forums for employers have been established. The public sector/services forum has met and the health forum will meet in October. Links have also been developed which will use the expertise already in place, for example at Stoke on Trent College which has strong employer links and similar arrangements will be established in other areas. The strong employer focus already established at Staffordshire University will also be integrated within the LLN. This is specifically through the Enterprise & Commercial Development unit. The work with Trade Union Reps is also an important way of engaging employers

The work with employers is also engaging with the priorities of Advantage West Midlands, local strategic partnerships through their local area agreements and the LSC through their strategic Train to Gain partnership. Discussions are now underway to ensure that the LLN is represented within their Higher Education strategic plan.

It is also the intention to encourage short term secondments from either Further Education or employers so that the various sectors within the LLN will have representation and influence in a very practical way its direction.

Development of Progression Agreements

Progression agreements are an important component of LLNs. The network has commissioned work to ascertain the current situation concerning the existence and use of progression agreements across the LLN. Furthermore, information about their uses and relevance is being disseminated across the LLN. It is anticipated that guiding principles will be established and agreements which meet the needs of partners will be established. A particular relevant area of interest from schools and colleges is progression from the new diplomas to establish them as a viable entry into higher education.

Information Advice and Guidance

This is essential to the success of the LLN. Currently there is work being undertaken to provide training to Trade union Learning Reps to enable them to support others in the workplace as well as providing information for managers. There is also work being undertaken to establish the feasibility of offering a foundation degree in advice and guidance which will meet the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders across the LLN. In the curriculum areas mapping is underway to establish the quantity and quality of IAG in the workplace.

There is close liaison with other organisations offering IAG, and a project is underway with Connexions and Aimhigher to support learners who would not normally consider higher education.

Budget

Due to the late start of the LLN. The budget is under spent however there are plans to address these issues as projects will now be taken forward as the staffing structure is in place. See Appendix 2 for current summary.

Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) and Data Return

The LLN was awarded 100 ASNs and has used model two for distribution. Currently Keele University is using 30 of them and Staffordshire 70, Wolverhampton does not wish to use them. The uses of them is currently under debate and it will be an initial task of the data officer when in post to return and track data related to the ASNs

Regional and national links

The LLN is embedded into the regional structure and works constructively with the three other LLN across the Midlands region. It also has strategic links with the East Midland LLNs.

The Director now meets with the national group.

Jill Ward (Director LLN)

October 2007

Appendix

Appendix 1 – FE interest in engaging with specific developments (attached to email)

Appendix 2 – LLN Budget (attached to email)