

NIACE Research and Development



Key Findings



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Lifelong Learning Networks Developmental Support

Abstract

Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) are a new initiative in Higher Education, part of the Joint Progression Strategy of the Higher Education Funding Council, the LSC, and the DfES, with a view to improving vocational progression to HE from its current low level of less than 50%. This joint NIACE and HEFCE project running from January to June 2005 was both observing and supporting the LLN development, especially in the areas of local progression accords, curriculum design, and the 'lifelong' dimension in the title. The LLNs were to be partnerships of further and higher education, with active involvement of the regional economic and strategic bodies, and the Sector Skills Councils. LLNs were set up in response to an invitation to HEFCE-funded institutions, and unusually there were few 'rules' or deadlines, planners having freedom to develop LLNs in the light of local circumstances and needs. Most LLNs are sub-regional, a few are national and thematic, focusing on specialist disciplines such as veterinary science. By the summer of 2005 about 30 LLNs were in process of development, with a total of about 40 envisaged.

Research methodology:

Desk-based scrutiny of LLN plans, policy and other documents from HEFCE and other agencies. Detailed discussions with a selection of LLNs, including visits and attending meetings and awareness-raising events, formed a significant part of the project. Reporting to HEFCE, and the production of a final report.

Key Findings

The main conclusions of the project are:

- ❖ The LLN initiative is developing with commendable momentum and enthusiasm. Planners recognise the virtue of LLNs for both local/practical and conceptual reasons. Wide interest is expressed in all the sectors involved (including commercial).
- ❖ Against this, there is a context of anxiety about, for example, the 'top up fees' future, about the mortality rate of 'latest initiatives', or the front-loading of time, energy and resource. Other anxieties exist, but it is NIACE's view that these are outweighed by the positive attitude to the LLN project as a whole, and they can for the most part be readily addressed.

- ❖ Some issues, however, such as the variability of fees for similar programmes within one LLN, are perceived as both potentially damaging and only controllable by outside intervention.
- ❖ The emphasis on credit/progression accords is accepted as critical and immediate. Where examples already exist these are being built on, but the density of established progression models is not high. Most are local compacts for specific single pathways. Networks adopt a cautious approach to the timescale for establishing CAT schemes.
- ❖ Curriculum is on a longer timescale, owing to the rate of development of closely related strategies and bodies such as the SSDA and SSCs, most of whom are only at the beginning of their ability to interact with the LLNs.
- ❖ In neither the cases of credit/progression or curriculum are there current working examples which could be simply rolled as models for all LLNs; indeed this would be counter to the philosophy of LLNs as growing dynamically from their own local conditions and localities.
- ❖ Lifelong learning is on the one hand at the heart of the LLN concept, while on the other a longer term vision which at this evolutionary stage is honoured more in the rhetoric than the immediate plans.
- ❖ The completion date of the project is very early in the emergence of LLNs. Much remains to be done as the Networks develop, and crucially become populated with learners. NIACE strongly supports the LLN initiative, and finds in its larger 'lifelong' vision a concept close to the NIACE philosophy.

Recommendations

- ❖ Lifelong Learning Networks should not lose sight of the vision of genuine lifelong learning as the context for their development of vocational pathways. This should include the concept of both mid-career re-engagement with the LLN, and broader issues of personal and community development.

Output

- ❖ Seminar: *The Tertiary Moment*. November 2004
- ❖ Seminar: *Lifelong Learning Networks Project Dissemination*. June 2005
- ❖ Project report: *Lifelong Learning Networks Developmental Support*

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