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# Bringing Higher Education **within Reach**

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# Introduction

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At the time of writing, there are 30 Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) operating in England, and many of them have contributed to this e-book, *Bringing Higher Education within Reach*. The Sussex Learning Network (SLN) was one of the first LLNs to receive funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and began life in September 2005.

This e-book has been produced following the completion of the SLN's activity, after three years of HEFCE funding, in September 2008. It offers an opportunity for us and others to reflect on our own (and others') achievements in the lifelong learning agenda outlined by Howard Newby in 2004.

While widening participation initiatives such as Aimhigher have focused on the 'demand side', Newby pointed to the 'supply-side'. How could colleges and universities become more accessible for vocational learners? LLNs were tasked with bringing those 'supply-side' changes about by, for example, improving the vocational HE curriculum offer, providing relevant information advice and guidance (IAG), and establishing progression pathways between courses.

These challenges have been met with a great diversity of activity. LLNs have also added considerable value by creating new ways for institutions to plan together and collaborate, by supporting staff development, and engaging employers and learners.

LLNs produce regular reports on their activity which are there for anyone to read. However, we wanted to disseminate this work in an innovative way, to provide a sense of what it is like to work at the changing face of vocational higher education. We wanted to link to other media and resources, to reflect the breadth and the frequent interconnectedness of our work, and to allow the reader to experience the issues in a more immediate way. An online format makes this possible.

*Bringing Higher Education within Reach* provides a fresh look at salient aspects of LLN activity, as selected by the practitioners closest to that work. Most of the contributors are SLN-based practitioners and researchers, many are based in LLNs across the country and some represent national or advisory bodies. The articles range widely (in terms of location and focus) taking in new course provision, new teaching methods and new ways of working with employers. As such, they highlight many success stories as well as areas of further enquiry and development.

The contributions are experiential accounts of lifelong learning practice and delivery, drawn together at a unique moment, when the community of lifelong learning practitioners are active and in dialogue. We have often taken very different approaches to our shared priorities, and it is here that the value of drawing them together becomes clear. We believe that practitioners in all areas of vocational education can benefit from this resource – both now and in the future.

**Those contributing to this e-book have done so in a personal capacity and the views expressed here do not reflect those of the Sussex Learning Network or of any other organisation.**

## Guidance for readers

The e-book is organised into themes, which are identified in the eight section headings.

### Section 1

*Changing the curriculum: making skills, knowledge and experience count* samples the SLN's work on curriculum development and concludes by looking forward to the introduction of the 14–19 diplomas.

### Section 2

*Progression and partnerships: finding ways forward* offers a range of perspectives, from specific case studies to discussions of broader issues relating to progression into and through higher education.

### Section 3

*Does Information, Advice and Guidance really make a difference?* includes accounts of the SLN's IAG work in Sussex and looks ahead to "Learning Opportunities in the South East", a new partnership between the four LLNs in the South East region.

### Section 4

*What can we learn from research?* features accounts of several different practitioner projects. SLN funding enabled practitioners to explore themes and issues relating to the experience of vocational learners and those who support them. Not all are academic research; some are case studies or 'think pieces'.

### Section 5

*Education, training and me: what students say* offers a learner perspective, with contributions from four students who have taken a non-traditional route into higher level vocational learning.

### Section 6

*Where are the employers and what do they want?* considers the pertinent and challenging field of employer engagement, sampling the work of different LLNs across the country.

### Section 7

*Lifelong learning networks: past, present and future?* is our concluding section. Ruth Williams discusses the challenges for evaluating LLNs which have been given freedom to develop plans and activities independently. In "Sussex Learning Network: 'a network of networks'", Chris Baker, SLN Director (September 2005 – August 2008) and Sarah Hardman, SLN Deputy Director, reflect on the difference made by thus far by the SLN and LLNs generally, and examine the lessons there may be for the future.

## Style guide

We have also clearly labelled each contribution according to its style.



'Think-pieces' provide the reflections or opinions of the writer on a particular activity or development.



'Case studies' examine the delivery of a particular project or activity in detail.



The 'research' label indicates contributions that summarise or evaluate the findings of a specific piece of research.

We have exploited the e-book format so as to allow easy navigation between sections and chapters, and as a pdf, it is automatically searchable. It links to multimedia items and other web-based resources, and we will make every effort to check and update sources on a regular basis. "*Bringing Higher Education within Reach*" is a free resource, intended to inform and enliven work in lifelong learning.

## References

Newby, H. (2004) The Colin Bell Memorial Lecture. *Doing widening participation: social inequality and access to higher education*. Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/previous/speech.asp>

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Pat Forster and Pat Herbert for editing this jointly with Rebecca Duffy, Chimney Design for realising the design potential of the e-book format and of course, the many contributors who have volunteered their expertise and time to make this possible.

## Note

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## Valuing vocational learning and providing clarity of progression: HEFCE's vision for Lifelong Learning Networks

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In 2004 Howard Newby, the then Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), introduced the idea of networks of higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) to link together to “provide support for learners on vocational pathways” (Newby, 2004, p.17). The context was stark – around half of those qualified at [National Qualifications Level \(NQF\) level 3](#) in vocational programmes entered HE compared with almost 90% of those on academic programmes.

HEFCE's vision, led by Newby and the Widening Participation team, was to create a number of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) across England. At the heart of every network would be arrangements to facilitate progression to HE for vocational learners and, in so doing, to bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities for these learners. In June 2004 a letter sent jointly from HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) formally invited colleges and HE institutions to work together to bring about “a step-change in vocational progression”.

From the outset, the HEFCE approach to LLN policy has been fluid and constantly developing. Internally at HEFCE we saw this policy as a departure from our standard policy process. LLNs were developed with a considerable amount of iterative process between HEFCE's Widening Participation team and regional teams, and institutions. HEFCE was flexible in its approach to receiving bids – there was no formal deadline for bids or formal limit on funding available to LLNs, although a three-year cap was placed on funding.

Initially, in 2004, HEFCE anticipated that ‘pilot’ networks or demonstrators would be developed and followed by further networks in the future. The policy developed faster than we may have initially anticipated and by 2007 we had 29 LLNs across the country. In March 2008 the final LLN was granted funding in Lancashire, completing nationwide coverage by LLNs. The LLNs' remit was to build links between the curriculum at level 3 and level 4. This has often been an interesting task, as LLNs have looked to instil a key element of partnership working between further education colleges (FECs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) which may not have worked together in the past.

A distinctive feature of the LLN programme was the condition that LLN partners should include the full spectrum of institutions across the HE sector. Institutions inevitably compete as well as collaborate, and navigating this in partnership working is not always an easy task.

A key process for LLNs was to work with partner institutions to develop and align the curriculum from level 3 vocational courses to level 4, without compromising entry requirements.

The path for LLNs has not been uniform and, from the outset, HEFCE recognised that this would be a diverse policy. LLNs were designed to meet specific needs in their localities and for many this led to different interpretations of how the core processes of the LLN would be developed. The diversity in approach has been explored particularly in a recent publication by HEFCE, *Seminar report on progression agreements and accords* (May 2008). The publication demonstrated that, although LLNs are all operating around the core process of progression, there is no single approach to securing progression opportunities for learners undertaking vocational qualifications, and through diversity comes a wealth of opportunities.

As the LLN policy has developed over the last four years, the policy context in which LLNs sit has also evolved. Tasked with engaging employers and Sector Skill Councils (SSCs) as part of their remit from the beginning, LLNs are now finding that their experience and expertise in this area can provide real value to the employer engagement and work-force development agenda. Due to the partnership nature of LLNs, they are also uniquely placed to assist HEIs and FECs with conveying progression opportunities to learners now undertaking 14–19 diplomas.

In late 2007, HEFCE commissioned the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) to undertake an *interim evaluation of LLNs*. The evaluation was deliberately formative in nature and provided HEFCE and LLNs with a chance to reflect on the progress to date, and how to approach the future of the programme. (See Ruth Williams' article in Section 7, *Evaluating Lifelong Learning Networks*, which is itself a reflection on the evaluation process.)

Funding for the initiative was always intended to be short term – across an average of three years – to enable the networks to establish and cement the practices needed in institutions that contribute to and influence wider institutional culture change in the HE sector in attitudes towards learners with vocational qualifications. Looking towards the future, LLNs are now considering where they are best placed for future sustainability. The keys to this are building upon the relevance they have gained in their partner institutions, and demonstrating the achievements that they have made in promoting a culture shift for vocational learners entering HE.

## References

HEFCE in association with Lifelong Learning Networks National Practitioner Forum, (May 2008). *Seminar Report on progression agreements and accords*. Available at: [www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/progress](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/progress)

Newby, H. (2004) The Colin Bell Memorial Lecture. *Doing widening participation: social inequality and access to higher education*. Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/previous/speech.asp>