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## **Sussex Learning Network, a “network of networks”: past, present and future?**

- 7.1 Evaluating Lifelong Learning Networks *Ruth Williams*  
.....
- 7.2 Sussex Learning Network, a “network of networks”:  
past, present and future? *Chris Baker and Sarah Hardman*  
.....

# Evaluating Lifelong Learning Networks



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## Introduction

The focus of this short article is on the [interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks \(LLNs\)](#) that the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information of The Open University was commissioned to undertake by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) during 2007 (HEFCE, 2008). It is not the intention to go into the detail of that evaluation, but instead to do two main things: to discuss the main challenges that the project team experienced in undertaking the evaluation, and to explore some of the challenges that LLNs are likely to experience as they reach the end of their HEFCE funding periods.

## The interim evaluation

Among its terms of reference, the interim evaluation was required to identify the emerging processes and trends to inform future policy and practice on LLNs. It was intended as an initial progress check, which would assess the current impact and outcomes of the Networks. In assessing impact and outcomes, the project team was asked to look at LLNs' progress against five 'indicators of success'. These indicators were defined as:

- The three key processes for LLNs: curriculum developments that facilitate progression; establishing appropriate information, advice and guidance (IAG) systems; and establishing robust progression agreements
- Progress made against milestones or targets as set out in LLNs' original business cases
- Evidence of institutional commitment, partnership working and stakeholder engagement
- Responsiveness to key regional and sector developments
- Methods for determining and disseminating good practice.

The evaluation involved desk research of all LLN business plans and their monitoring reports where they existed. Visits were made to a selection of eight case-study LLNs that agreed to take part in the study, and interviews were undertaken with the core staff of the Networks, heads of institutions and other staff, and representatives of the stakeholder organisations involved in the partnerships.

## The challenges of the interim evaluation

There were several challenges experienced by the project team in conducting the evaluation. Two are discussed here: the nature of HEFCE's LLN policy making and implementation process, and the identification of impact and outcomes of LLN processes and activities.

First, in terms of the policy making and implementation process, the LLN initiative was innovative. It was a departure from the standard 'top-down' HEFCE approach involving institutional bids for funding, which would then be assessed against criteria prescribed by HEFCE. As an exception to this standard process, plans for LLNs were developed through dialogue and negotiation between the proposers and HEFCE officers. Apart from the expectation that all LLNs would address the three 'key processes' (i.e. curriculum developments to facilitate progression, establishing appropriate IAG systems, and establishing robust progression agreements), individual LLNs were able to determine their own models and mechanisms for improving progression opportunities for vocational learners. LLN policy was therefore developed through an iterative approach, which was shaped by dialogue and negotiation, and subsequently by practice – one which has been called a 'bottom-up' approach.

In a HEFCE internal critical review of bottom-up approaches to policy making, undertaken by HEFCE officers concerned with the LLN initiative, it was noted that the approach taken had been designed to sharpen and refine the aim and objectives of LLN policy (HEFCE internal report, November 2007). The paper acknowledged that there were high and low risks to this approach. On the one hand it was low risk because *"evolution of policy through practice, minimises the risks of poor take-up from the sector and unsustainability"* (ibid).

On the other hand, the approach could be high risk in that it *"increases the risks that expenditure is not planned and controlled, and that the activity and performance is so variable that it cannot be managed or evaluated within established frameworks"* (ibid). It was also recognised that the iterative approach might actually act as a barrier to innovative proposals coming forward. It was not the explicit intention of the interim evaluation to explore the extent to which these risks have materialised or to assess the effectiveness of the policy making and implementation process. No doubt these are issues that HEFCE and/or the summative evaluation of LLNs (due in 2009/10) will wish to explore further.

However, there were (anticipated) implications that the project team needed to grapple with, the main one being that the iterative nature of the policy approach had led to quite distinct differences between LLNs. Networks varied greatly in terms of their scope, focus and ambitions. All were at different stages of development (given that bids could be received at any time). They differed from one another in that they had unique local/regional contexts and, in responding to these contexts, the focus on the type and range of curricula areas and employment sectors varied from one LLN to another. Furthermore, in addressing their local/regional contexts, each Network had developed its own approach to and interpretation of the three key processes.

Thus the iterative nature of LLN policy making meant that the project team needed to be sensitive to the approach taken in order to understand the context within which individual LLNs had developed. Furthermore, in some of our interviews, it emerged that the fluid nature of the policy making and implementation process was a challenge for some LLNs in keeping pace with developments. Additionally, LLN policy was evolving alongside other policy considerations (for example, Higher Level Skills Pathfinders, the employer engagement agenda, 14–19 diplomas, Foundation degree awarding powers), which led to a perception among some LLNs (as expressed by some LLN core team, partner institution and stakeholder interviewees) that the policy landscape within which they were trying to establish themselves and operate effectively was complex, confusing and lacked a certain amount of clarity and consistency.

In terms of the second challenge – the identification of LLN impact and outcomes – it became very clear to the project team that the LLN process (as defined by the ways in which individual LLNs were approaching the three 'key processes') is not 'a quick fix'. LLNs comprise diverse sets of institutional partners and stakeholder organisations. Institutions, whether they are post-1992 or post-2004 universities, FE colleges or research-intensive universities, have different missions and traditions and therefore different interests in and expectations of the LLN objective and process.

Thus LLNs have had to grapple with the complexities and the ‘politics’ of their networks, and that takes time. For example, mapping and scoping activities of existing provision are required to identify potential gaps in curricula that are inhibiting progression opportunities, to articulate and make visible progression routes, and to provide baseline data. Relationships and understandings need to be cemented among the partner institutions and stakeholder organisations that are part of the Networks to ensure that the LLN process is an effective one. As the interim evaluation report points out:

*“...the processes of building-up relationships with institutions and stakeholders, that are genuinely inclusive, are complex and time consuming – especially in large partnerships. Further, LLNs need to establish themselves as new and independent organisations (i.e. independent of any single institution). Thus, the setting-up phase for most LLNs of establishing systems and structures, even for those LLNs with pre-existing partnerships and networks, has taken time” (p25).*

It was evident to the project team that there had been much activity in identifying need and gaps, and developing relationships and shared understandings. However, in terms of ‘impact’, especially on vocational learners, it was too soon to make an assessment of the LLN process. Instead, the focus of the project team shifted to explore the plans LLNs were implementing regarding the collection and use of measurable data to identify impact that would provide information, in due course, about the success of LLN activity. Not surprisingly, we found examples of a variety of approaches and a number of these were highlighted in the interim evaluation report.

### **The interim evaluation’s conclusion**

The main conclusion of the evaluation was that it is too soon to make substantive and well-evidenced statements about progress. The LLN process has taken time to become embedded, but the foundations have been established for improving progression opportunities for vocational learners. LLNs are making progress and much has been achieved in a relatively short period of time. This is evident in terms of the three key processes, whereby new and more accessible curricula have been developed and there is improved alignment between existing curricula, IAG provision has become more accessible and coherent, and there are improved progression pathways between different episodes of learning.

The formation of LLNs has enabled enhanced partnership working and understanding between their partner institutions and stakeholder organisations, and in many cases opportunities have been established where none existed before. The resources that have flowed from the initiative have made things happen. As the interim evaluation report states: *“Hard cash has also been a powerful tool in some LLNs for gaining buy-in and building relationships among partners through ASNs, through invitations to bid for project and curriculum development funds, and through funding of institutional staff to undertake specific LLN tasks” (p26).* Furthermore, a cadre of dedicated and enthusiastic staff has emerged – in the core teams of LLNs, in the partner institutions, and in the stakeholder organisations – that is contributing to the success of the LLN process.

### **The longer term challenges of the LLN process**

In the longer term, there are a number of challenges LLNs are likely to face as they reach the end of their HEFCE funding periods. Here just three related challenges are briefly discussed, which the interim evaluation was able only to highlight rather than assess. How far these emerge as actual challenges, and as challenges that LLNs are successfully overcoming (and have overcome), will be tested out by the summative evaluation due to take place in 2009/10.

The first challenge is the extent to which LLN activities become embedded into the every day practices and processes of the partner institutions of the Networks. As mentioned above, the LLN process takes time and much resource has been invested by LLNs to win support for the LLN objective and the key processes from staff at all levels in institutions and to modify institutional practices and procedures.

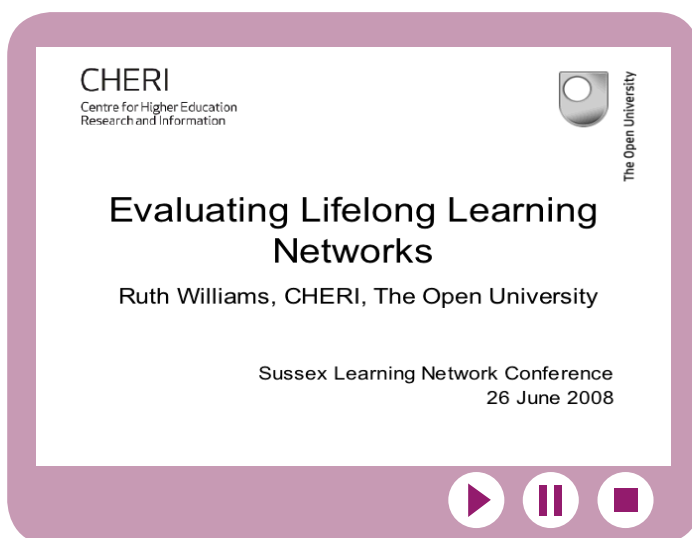
It was clear from the interim evaluation that there was much support from institutional leaders and the staff that were making the LLN objective operable. However, the LLN process is a small part of an institution's overall business, and is one of a number of issues seeking the attention and priority of individual members of staff. They have other concerns and pressures relating to their day to day business, as well as the additional requirements of responding to external bodies (such as the funding councils, professional bodies/associations and the quality assurance agency) on a wide variety of matters. But this will always be a challenge whatever new initiative comes along.

The second challenge is sustainability. What happens once the HEFCE funding period comes to an end? What is it that LLNs do that will be valued by their partner institutions; what is it that these partners will want to sustain; how will LLN practices and processes continue to be embedded; will replacement funding be provided by the partner institutions or will it be sought from other sources? These are all questions that LLNs are addressing (or have addressed), and they are also closely related to the third challenge – institutional commitment.

How will levels of commitment be sustained once HEFCE funding is removed? HEFCE funding has provided the means to make things happen – as mentioned above, 'hard cash' is a powerful tool. If no replacement funding is found (from within partnerships or from other sources), will some institutions wish to continue and be able to continue with their commitment to the LLN process? The evaluation found that some institutions were more committed than others, although it did not find any pattern that matched levels of commitment to 'type' of institution.

The key to sustainability and institutional commitment is the extent to which the LLN objective is shared among the partners in a Network, the extent to which practices and processes have become embedded and have helped create those shared understandings, and the extent to which the LLN process has prompted a cultural shift within the partner institutions. Can all of this be done within a three-year funding period (the limit put on HEFCE funding)? As the interim evaluation report puts it: *"embeddedness is as much about changing hearts and minds as it is about practice and procedures; the latter might be done in three years, whereas the former will probably take longer"* (p29).

It will be evident to readers of this short article that much of the discussion about the challenges mentioned above is speculative. It will be for the LLNs to demonstrate how well they meet and are able to overcome them. It may be that for some LLNs these are not challenges at all and for others there are concerns of a different order. These are issues and questions that will become clearer as the LLN process matures and that the summative evaluation will be able to address.



Please press play to view a powerpoint presentation from the 2008 Sussex Learning Network conference

## References

B. Little and R. Williams (2008), Interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England. [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2008/rd05\\_08/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2008/rd05_08/)

## Sussex Learning Network, a 'network of networks': past, present and future?



**Chris Baker and Sarah Hardman >**

As Director of the Sussex Learning Network (SLN) between September 2005 and September 2008, Chris Baker was responsible for establishing the organisation, giving it leadership and direction and ensuring the work was sustained beyond the initial phase of development. He has now returned to his post as Director of the Centre for Widening Participation at The Open University.

As Deputy Director of the Sussex Learning Network, Sarah Hardman's remit has included the development of a framework and models to support learner progression into and through vocational higher education. She also deals with planning student number allocation, financial planning and management, and marketing.

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### Introduction

It might seem presumptuous to talk about the past, present and future of an initiative that is still less than six years old, but the three are inextricably linked.

When Howard Newby delivered the *Colin Bell Memorial Lecture* in March 2004, he provided the context and briefest of outlines of what was to be the latest in a series of initiatives designed to widen participation to higher education in England. This time the remit was to tackle a specific aspect of the problem, namely the poor progression rates of those studying **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)** level 3 vocational qualifications. The way of doing this was to intervene on the side of supply rather than demand. In the first instance, this meant adapting the curriculum to make it more relevant to the needs of vocational learners. This was at a time, Newby argued, when the distinction between academic and vocational was becoming increasingly outmoded.

The vehicles for delivering this latest attempt to lay siege to the fortress of social inequality were to be called Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). They would be based on existing partnerships and deliver a wide-ranging curriculum by combining the strengths of further and higher education. At the heart of these networks would be arrangements between the partners to support progression for vocational learners which, according to Newby, would bring a "systemic change in educational progression" (p19).

The LLNs were to go beyond mere collaboration, and instead provide connectivity not just between providers in higher and further education but to a range of other existing initiatives, ranging from knowledge transfer through to Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the CoVEs in further education. Above all, Newby argued, *“the Network would add value because it is learner-centred, and learner driven, but on a scale, and with a variety of provision that no single provider can offer”* (p18).

The response to this latest rallying call was by no means euphoric. A few months later the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) began a debate on the future of post-compulsory education that was marked by the publication the following year of *The Tertiary Moment: What road to inclusive higher education?* (2005). This was an attempt to make public the results of a seminar held towards the end of 2004. The editor of the volume, Chris Duke, pointed to one of the real tensions that had emerged, that between building on what we have, and creating anew:

*“The keenest source of likely resentment and resistance is proving to be a sense that existing arrangements and past efforts are now to be pushed aside in favour of a new idea.”* (Duke, p9)

A “resentment”, perhaps too strong a word in this context, did nevertheless spill out across the pages as the following comments illustrate:

*“The job description of the LLNs falls short of the name”* (Duke, p6).

*“the danger that they will be – or will be perceived to be – yet another otiose bureaucratic networking structure”* (Taylor, p29)

*“... the intention is that the networks should concentrate only upon vocational provision for young learners. Clearly, this is an important area... Nevertheless, such an orientation is a travesty of a real commitment to lifelong learning... [and] the more transformative adult learning perspective”* (Taylor, p29)

*“The real challenge for LLNs is to move towards the skills agenda, which is about people and economic planning, not simply about how to expand an HEI or FEC.”* (Layer, p51)

*“the [LLN] policy represents at best a half-hearted attempt to change the parameters of lifelong learning. It looks more like an attempt to repair the rust in a car that has been off the road for a few years than a radical redesign of new vehicle”* (Vincent, p93)

*“My analogy of a car seriously overstates the sophistication of this vehicle. It is more a collection of children meeting in different places to hammer together carts out of whatever recycled materials they can find lying around”* (Vincent, p95)

Despite this obvious sense of foreboding, brought about no doubt by over exposure to a surfeit of partnership fatigue, the momentum built up around the concept of Lifelong Learning Networks was already taking shape. In June 2004 HEFCE and the LSC issued a joint invitation to institutions to bid to establish the first LLNs. These first networks would be pilots, or in Newby’s own words, *“demonstrators’ that test what works and develop models capable of being generalised”* (Newby, p18). Regrettably, the first setback the new initiative was to encounter was that the letter of joint intent soon became the sole concern of HEFCE. In the absence of any funding from the LSC the opportunity to provide connectivity nationally fell at the first hurdle.

Undeterred, the putative partners were urged to embrace this new initiative which were described by Kevin Whitston as having “no single model [other than] a starting point [that] must be what potential networks wish to propose, and what they believe they can deliver” (2005, p104). This approach to policy making proved to be both a strength and weakness of the LLN endeavour.

It certainly marked a departure from the approach taken with Aimhigher where the parameters were more closely established at the outset. In an internal audit report to HEFCE, Simon Perks, who was on secondment to HEFCE from KPMG, commented, “The LLN initiative, as a new policy development implemented using an innovative bottom-up approach, presents a comparatively high risk to the Council” (2006, p5). A risk which, at that stage, Perks concluded they would manage. Whether or not it is too early to assess the lessons learned about ‘bottom-up approaches’, this was certainly not an approach that was to be repeated in the subsequent launch of HEFCE’s employer engagement strand.

## Addressing the challenge

In 2005, David Watson, the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Brighton, explored in an article entitled *Will lifelong learning networks work?* some of the fundamental issues around HEFCE’s plans for LLNs. Crucially, would they prove to be yet another “episode of temporarily funded, over-hyped ‘parallel play’” (p187)? To prevent this, Watson argued, Lifelong Learning Networks would have to “operate effectively in what [was] already a crowded field” (p187).

In the latter part of the same piece, he went on to describe what he hoped one of the first of those networks being created in Sussex would achieve. He ended with a promise that “we shall do our best not only to make it work but also to keep you informed as to how we get on” (p204). That wish to be open to public scrutiny and to foster debate has characterised the Sussex Learning Network (SLN) from the outset. This brief article is intended not to cover the issue of ‘how we got on’, but to tackle some of what we have learned in the process. The former is covered by the SLN’s very full [three year report](#) that can be read in conjunction with this e-book.

So now, three years on, have we succeeded? What have Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), and the SLN (as it comes to the end of its initial three years of HEFCE funding) achieved? What has been the impact, and what is the legacy? Have LLNs really made a “step change in vocational progression in and through HE”<sup>1</sup> ?

After three years, and a significantly shorter period for some of the later funded LLNs, the body of evidence is not vast. In addressing these questions, however, a number of sources exist to which we can refer. The Open University’s Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) has been commissioned to carry out an interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks, and Ruth Williams writes in this chapter of the experience and initial findings from this process.

In 2007, the [national forum](#) for Lifelong Learning Networks, established to enable the sharing of practice and peer support, was asked by HEFCE to support a process of peer review between pairs of LLNs. This process provided a framework through which LLNs could begin to evaluate their achievements and impact, draw comparisons and learn from each other’s practice, and act as critical friends. The Sussex Learning Network partnered with two other LLNs, Higher York (another of those funded in the early stages) and Kent and Medway LLN (a neighbouring LLN, funded a year later).

<sup>1</sup>Internal HEFCE briefing, 2005

Following a process of questioning and review, the three LLNs produced a [report](#) outlining the key themes that had emerged. Many of these themes have been picked up and explored in the earlier sections of this e-book. Here we will look at what these recurring themes tell us about the successes or otherwise of the LLN initiative, and of the SLN at the end of its first three years of operation.

The SLN set out, as described by Watson, to be a “*network of networks*” (2005). The key themes emerging for LLNs at this relatively early stage reflect this challenge, and include:

- Communication
- Effective partnership working and network development
- Cultural shift and organisational change
- The medium to long term: LLNs’ sustainability and legacy

## Communication

One of the biggest challenges for any new initiative is getting the word out and creating a brand identity. For LLNs the challenge was increased by the fact that not only was their individual local initiative a new one, but LLNs as a construct were new and untested. Not all LLNs chose to go down the route of creating a distinct and recognisable brand, and convincing arguments can be made for either approach.

Whilst some aimed to work behind the scenes to strengthen and support the delivery of partner organisations, others, like the SLN, felt that establishing an identifiable and credible brand was key to the successful engagement of, and communication with, the range of audiences. In the case of Sussex, the SLN is a recognisable entity with a number of existing organisations covering the same geographical area. For a number of LLNs this is simply not the case. It is interesting to observe how some of the networks have even adopted different titles that attempt to overcome the association with an identity based on location.

The diversity of the different audiences led the SLN to devise two distinct brands, reflecting the internal and external faces of the network. The Sussex Learning Network brand itself was established early on, and acts as an ‘umbrella’ brand to communicate the network’s range of activities, both externally and amongst network partners.

As work on information, advice and guidance progressed, it became clear that this was where the SLN would expect to engage what might be termed the main ‘target audience’, consisting of learners, potential learners, and those who advise them. The distinctive brand of [Learning Opportunities](#) aims to convey a sense of approachability, and to engage learners and potential learners in higher education, something which hitherto may well have seemed daunting or out of reach.

The levels of success of LLNs in terms of communication are at this stage difficult to gauge. Some strategies are only relatively recently devised, whereas others, like the SLN’s, have had approaching three years to embed and gain momentum. For the SLN, measures such as usage of the Learning Opportunities website (an average of 6,000 visits per month), and engagement with conferences and events (1,211 attendees over the three years) give an indication of the success of the strategy.

Two elements of communication emerge as fundamental to the success of such a partnership initiative. Firstly, the willingness and genuine commitment of partners to communicating with and on behalf of the LLN. Mention of the LLN in institutional plans and strategies, and a commitment to cascading information relating to the network through institutions’ own internal communications structures makes a huge difference to the level, volume and quality of engagement, and thereby to the impact the network as a whole is able to achieve.

Secondly, being absolutely clear about the target audience, and identifying the most effective means of communicating with them are also key elements. LLNs have trialled a wide range of modes of communication; most making significant use of the web to communicate internally with partners, some similarly aiming to engage learners and potential learners via the web, whilst others have focused on face-to-face or paper-based communication with learners.

The SLN's predominantly web-based approach in communicating with both sets of audience has enabled an up-to-date and regular flow of information, and a two-way dialogue; for example, through the use of wikis. This has proved particularly important in maintaining the credibility of the service when conveying information that changes regularly, for example relating to issues such as funding or new course provision.

## Effective partnership working and network development

Partnerships are by their very nature artificial constructs that can be built for a specific purpose, or maintained and changed to suit different circumstances. The LLN model in general and our experience in Sussex can shed some light on all three of these dimensions of partnership working. The LLN model around which bids were constructed involved two distinctive elements. The first is the identification of the lead institution for the purposes of submitting a bid and accounting for the funding.

Experience suggests that the lead institution - at least in the initial stages of development - tends to drive the LLN, with other partners adopting active or passive roles. This may be influenced more by their position as employers of the LLN staff than their official role within its organisation. They are by dint of this relationship more in touch with developments. The idea that the LLNs should contain a research-intensive institution does not seem to have had an impact on the legitimacy of networks, if indeed that was what was intended.

Parity of esteem is a phrase more often associated with the status of vocational learning, but can equally be applied to partnerships. In the specific case of LLNs, the engagement of further education as represented by either individual colleges (FECs), their associations or the LSC is worth pondering. Certainly the decision of the LSC not to contribute to funding LLNs meant that what had started life as a joint initiative quickly became the province of the universities.

In the case of the SLN, this is evident if we consider that the bulk of funding went to universities to lead the curriculum areas, with only one college being given that role. The SLN's first year was therefore dominated by the HE stakeholders. Subsequent discussions around additional student numbers, the programme of events, the proliferation of sub-groups and the advent of research projects all served to draw in the colleges. The most compelling reason for their engagement, however, became the focus on Foundation degrees (Fds).

The involvement of colleges in the development and delivery of Fds opened up their participation in the LLNs, as did the dialogue that developed around the creation of the Sussex Vocational Progression Accord. So, if FECs were not part of the formative stage of the SLN in their own right, they certainly become instrumental in its maintenance and future development. The creation and support given to the bid for the Centre for Work and Learning would not have been possible without the direct involvement of the colleges as equal partners.

The position of the LSC locally contrasted sharply with that taken nationally. They played a full role at all levels in supporting the development of the SLN and ensuring it established strong links with FE Sussex and the new areas of development around the 14-19 agenda, information, advice and guidance (IAG) and the links with employers. This has led to them to directly providing and brokering funding to support the extension of the SLN work on IAG across the South East. This, in turn, has created a new partnership involving the four LLNs, the LSC regionally and SEEDA.

The lessons from the SLN are that a partnership based on networks is not fixed but organic, allowing new alliances and partners to join where appropriate. The LLN model can accommodate these changes even when the initial funding has ceased. The SLN remains an umbrella under which new activity can be supported. The peer review showed how the organisational structures adopted by LLNs differed markedly. It would be a shame if this wasn't explored in any evaluation. Certainly the issue of what is an optimum size for an LLN is worth pondering. Some are regional; others, in comparison with Sussex, cover large numbers of providers and stakeholders. There is no sense in which the resource given to individual LLNs took this into account.

## Cultural shift and organisational change

The use of the phrase cultural change is little understood and frequently misused. In many cases, it is a way of attributing blame. The presumption is that if only 'they' would do things differently all would be well. The 'they' in question can be the sector or part of it, individual institutions or particular categories of staff. In many instances, higher and further education are littered with examples of attempts to circumvent the problem: programmes designed to change matters by working alongside what is perceived to be the problem. They are enabled to do this by having separate funding streams that require compliance from agencies who wish to acquire these new resources.

From an insider's perspective, this manifests as successive waves of initiatives that will provide a short-term injection of funds and involve more work. For individual institutions, it is a case of always being responsive to the latest change in policy as a way demonstrating the vitality and flexibility of their respective organisations. This is an approach reflected by Barack Obama's challenge in his speech following the Democratic presidential primary in South Carolina. *"Don't tell me we can't change. Yes, we can. Yes, we can change. Yes, we can."* This is what caught the headlines, but earlier in that same speech he struck a far more cautionary note:

*"So let me remind you tonight that change will not be easy. Change will take time. There will be setbacks and false starts and sometimes we'll make mistakes."* (Obama, 2008)

The same sort of mixed message comes from HEFCE in relation to LLNs and change.

*"We have been clear that continuation funding is **not available** for LLNs. However we wish to support them as far as we can to sustain the positive impact they have on **progression for vocational learners**. This may mean that LLNs do not continue to operate in their current form and through the existing infrastructure. But we feel that LLNs should look to continue the practices and processes they have developed that contribute to **institutional and cultural change**".<sup>2</sup>*

The words in bold illustrate the tensions surrounding the LLN venture. No more funding, which means the changes needed to be made in three years or less, and a clear indication that all HEFCE were really seeking to preserve was the work done on progression. This is probably a distortion of the truth but does highlight the problem. Ironically for the President-Elect, HEFCE and LLNs, the one major driver of cultural change could be the meltdown of global economies and the assumptions underpinning sustained growth.

None of the above should be taken to imply that nothing has happened as a result of our experience in Sussex. There is considerable evidence that change has happened. Firstly, the new provision remains in place and learners are on courses which didn't previously exist across a range of subjects and institutions. Work-related and work-based learning has been put firmly on the agenda, as has the challenge of how we address those adults in work. Secondly, many of the staff employed in the institutions remain in place and are directly carrying through elements of the work begun in the SLN.

<sup>2</sup> HEFCE Lifelong Learning Network Update. August 2008. p3

Cross-institutional working has become a way of both planning, learning and doing business. Whilst David Eastwood might maintain that HE is “*notoriously not a planned system and HEFCE is not a planning body*” (Eastwood, p91), the SLN in its brief history has demonstrated the potential to become one. This may be seen as an unexpected consequence of change. The willingness of twenty-six partners to sustain the Sussex Vocational Progression Accord is a further example of how far we have come in a relatively short period of time.

The SLN has enabled institutions to follow their own very different priorities whilst identifying those areas that make for a collaborative response, even if this is about sharing the risk of more difficult challenges like employer engagement. What the SLN experience hasn't done is to convince the partners of the need to commit their own money to the endeavour. This is a feature of the original business case. Nobody was required to guarantee anything beyond three years, and in order to do so institutions need to be convinced about the added value that the SLN has brought. This is some way off and may not be judged until the next phase of development has come to a close. The Board has agreed to keep monitoring progress following the submission of the report of the first three years and this is to be welcomed.

### The medium to long term: LLNs' sustainability and legacy

In assessing the impact of any initiative, it is clearly essential to agree on the aims, and the means of measuring progress towards these. In other words, what do we want to achieve, and how will we know we are getting there? For LLNs, this proved not to be a simple task. Although working within a broadly common framework to improve progression into and through higher education, LLNs set about this in vastly differing ways. As a result, establishing a common set of measures was not easy. Much discussion between HEFCE and LLNs revolved around the identification of the 'learner constituency', as some LLNs struggled to articulate the specific groups of learners they were targeting, let alone those amongst whom they could claim any impact.

*“Networks will have to make their own decisions about this informed by the target groups identified in the LLN proposal. In the first instance, then, LLNs can define for themselves the ‘network learner constituency’ to include existing students together with the additional numbers that will flow from improved prospects for vocational progression.”<sup>3</sup>*

The tracking of target learners, and the definition of a 'baseline' against which to measure the impact of the LLN on these learners, is extremely complex, and will always depend on making certain assumptions: a range of factors will have come into play throughout a learner's 'journey' to higher education, and it is impossible to attribute an outcome to the LLN's intervention alone. This being said, LLNs have devised a range of mechanisms for measuring the impact of their activities on their 'learner constituency', some of which provide an indicator of success in the short term, whilst others will take longer to emerge.

The SLN identified three groups of learners that came together to make up its learner constituency. Firstly, those who had taken up the additional student numbers (ASNs) allocated through the SLN, secondly those applying through any of the progression agreements negotiated by the SLN and finally, the wider learner constituency: learners on or aspiring to vocational courses in Sussex. Where individual learners can be identified, impact can be measured to an extent.

The SLN commissioned a [study](#) of students taking up its ASNs which tells us, for example, that 60% of SLN learners are in work, and 43% are mature learners (over 21). What we cannot tell is the proportion of these learners that are now in higher education as a result of the SLN's additional student numbers. Are these learners who would have come anyway, or has the SLN really created an opportunity that did not previously exist for these individuals?

<sup>3</sup> HEFCE Lifelong Learning Network Update, November 2005

A higher proportion of these learners are local to Sussex compared to institutional baseline data, but would they have otherwise studied further afield, or not at all? The SLN has surveyed students on the impact of its marketing campaigns, and the promotion of foundation degrees generally, but there is no control group, and no way of saying for sure what would have happened 'if...'

The limitations of progression agreements as a measure of impact are the same. The SLN requires each applicant to quote a code on their application which will allow the institution to record applications, offers and registrations coming via progression agreements, and to flag and track the progress of any learner admitted via this route.

In the same way as with the ASNs, this will allow a fairly detailed level of analysis of these learners, but we will still be faced with the unanswerable questions: have these learners progressed as a result of the agreements? What would they have done otherwise? And as interesting, if not more so, why have other eligible learners not progressed in this way? Further qualitative research with identified individuals may go some way to addressing some of these questions, but this is a complex area, and individuals are often not able to unpick the range of factors that have led them to follow a certain path.

Still more problematic is the issue of the wider constituency, that nebulous group of learners and potential learners who have benefited from the SLN in some way, most likely through Learning Opportunities, the SLN's Information, Advice and Guidance service. The linking of IAG interventions to impact measurement is notoriously difficult to achieve in the short term, and as Plant points out, *"the impact of IAG on learner engagement, retention, achievement and progression is not widely measured"* (2007).

This is generally accepted as a challenging area, and whilst in the medium to long term changing trends in the recruitment of learners fitting the SLN's profile may be attributed at least in part to the intervention of Learning Opportunities, we would not expect to see any dramatic levels of impact in the short term. An average of 6,000 visits to the site every month, with over 700 of these actively involved to the extent of entering a specific question on the site, suggests a high level of engagement with the resources, and is a fair indicator of the impact the SLN can expect to achieve.

We have considered the direct impact on the learner constituency, but much of the impact of LLNs is closer to home, on the behaviours and culture of their own networked organisations. These are of course areas of change likely to affect learners over time. After an initial three years of funding, the LLN initiative may not yet have achieved the *"step change in vocational progression"* described by HEFCE (2005). But the frequently emerging themes of changing culture, and the development of effective and lasting partnerships throughout the establishment and initial work of LLNs, illustrate the existence of an environment in which this change is now eminently possible.

As ever with a short term initiative, one can argue the need for further funding, and a longer period of time to demonstrate results. In funding LLNs, HEFCE have offered the opportunity for 'bottom-up' development of locally relevant approaches, giving partnerships the space to trial innovative models of engaging vocational learners in higher education. LLNs have tackled issues of competition between institutions, and collaborative relationships have developed where institutions are planning and delivering in partnership.

A review of the curriculum has resulted in a range of new provision across the vocational subject areas, with some more flexible modes of delivery. IAG has drawn together and added to a vast array of existing resources to support potential learners in their decision making processes, and progression agreements have provided guarantees of progression into and through HE. At the end of its initial three years of funding, the SLN has increased the offer in terms of the vocational curriculum in Sussex, and has reached out to those not currently engaged to provide routes into higher education.

Perhaps more importantly, the SLN has provided a mechanism for providers of further and higher education, employers and IAG practitioners to come together, strengthening their mutual understanding and providing the space for collaboration and joint planning. Although the development of the curriculum, IAG and progression agreements have resulted in a set of useful resources in themselves, the additional and arguably longer lasting outcome will be through the partnerships created in the process. The peer evaluation of the SLN, Higher York and Kent and Medway LLN concluded that “the progression agreement was a tool and that a long term culture change was the desired outcome. It was also felt that the existence of agreements would go some way in encouraging FE/HE dialogue post the current funding period”.<sup>4</sup>

LLNs have been tasked with negotiating a complex landscape, and operating effectively amongst the plethora of related initiatives (Aimhigher; CoVEs; CETLS, Knowledge Exchanges, etc.) Further, LLNs would bring “clarity, coherence and certainty” (HEFCE, 2005) to learners around progression. As Watson asserted, “making [HEFCE’s] commendable ‘big idea’ work [was] likely to be complex” (2005).

As the first of the LLNs near the end of their initial period of funding, others will watch with interest to see which elements of their work are sustained, and how. The SLN has, with the three neighbouring LLNs in the South East attracted funding from the LSC and SEEDA to develop its IAG service to cover the South East region. The London LLNs have joined forces on a number of initiatives. As LLNs share approaches and look to maximise resources, other such collaborations may emerge.

Perhaps more challenging in sustainability terms is the embedding of vocational and work-based curriculum development into the networked organisations. Some have considered paid membership models, growth in demand, and generating income from employers.<sup>5</sup>

A final difficulty which all the LLNs have faced is the uncertainty about their remit. It leaves us pondering a number of questions. How do LLNs relate to Aimhigher, particularly in relation to the new 14-19 diplomas? What is their role in employer engagement when the emphasis of the new funding, soon to dry up, has been upon individual institutions rather than partnerships leading the change? What is their role in delivering the new target (following the Leitch report) that by 2020 at least 40% of the workforce should be qualified to level 4? How should the IAG work pioneered by some LLNs be linked to the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service?

Moreover, how can we continue to link the shared agenda of further and higher education in promoting higher level skills? Can LLNs provide a model for the proposed University Centres? Ironically all these are capable of being addressed within the LLN framework. But there is an element of confusion which any attempt at evaluation of the LLN initiative, scheduled for 2009, will undoubtedly encounter. It is wonderfully summarised in old joke used by a former SLN Foundation Group member in warning against ‘the law of diminishing mission’. Three workers on a building site are asked what they are doing. The first replies “I am building a cathedral”; the second, “I’m building a wall”, and the third, “I’m laying bricks”.

As labourers working for the SLN we have continued to share a vision of Sussex characterised by “equitable access to learning and skills, high rates of - and a wider base to - participation at all levels, and effective dialogue between providers, learners, communities and employers”<sup>6</sup>(SLN, p10)

It is for others and time to judge whether what we have built together is a permanent feature of the beautiful landscape of Sussex.

<sup>4</sup> Higher York, Kent & Medway LLN, Sussex Learning Network. Lifelong Learning Network Peer Evaluation report. May 2008 (unpub.)

<sup>5</sup> HEFCE Guidance on Sustainability. HEFCE, May 2006

<sup>6</sup> Sussex Lifelong Learning Network: Proposal and Business Plan’, November 2004 (unpub.)

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