

3 June 2004

To Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions
Heads of LSC-funded further education colleges

**Joint letter from HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council
HEFCE Circular letter number 12/2004**

**For further information contact HEFCE regional consultants or LSC regional directors
(see Annex B)**

Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal

Lifelong Learning Networks

1. HEFCE, the Learning and Skills Council, and the DfES are working on joint approaches to encouraging progression into and through higher education. We already work in partnership on the Aimhigher initiative, and we are now developing a joint strategy to advance vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education (the Joint Progression Strategy). As part of this, we are seeking to collaborate with our national, regional and local partners on a new initiative to make a step change in vocational progression – Lifelong Learning Networks. This letter explains more about our plans to develop this initiative.

2. The first stage is to explore the scope for developing Lifelong Learning Networks in individual regions. We envisage these as groups of institutions, including higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs), that come together across a city, area or region to offer new progression opportunities for vocational learners. They would:

- combine the strengths of a number of diverse institutions
- provide support for learners on vocational pathways
- bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities
- develop the curriculum as appropriate to facilitate progression
- value vocational learning outcomes and provide opportunities for vocational learners to build on earlier learning
- locate the progression strategy within a commitment to lifelong learning, ensuring that learners have access to a range of progression opportunities so that they can move between different kinds of vocational and academic programmes as their interests, needs and abilities develop.

3. The background to Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and what they seek to achieve was set out in Sir Howard Newby's Colin Bell Memorial Lecture. The text is available on the web at www.hefce.ac.uk under News and events/Speeches, and we provide more detail in Annex A to this letter.

Consultation

4. We want to develop the scope for LLNs in partnership with regional and local partners, including universities and colleges. In the coming weeks HEFCE regional consultants and LSC regional directors will be discussing these proposals with HEIs, FECs and other interested parties (including Regional Development Agencies and regional and local Learning and Skills Councils) with a view to developing initial proposals for at least one LLN in each region. We have written separately to the HE Regional Associations asking for their support in developing these conversations.

5. It is not proposed to invite bids for LLN funding at this stage. Regional consultants and regional directors will explore the scope for consensus in developing LLNs as 'demonstrators' or 'pilots' that build on local strengths, and which, across the country, test different approaches. We do not expect every network to be the same, and want to encourage innovative approaches to developing and supporting progression for vocational learners. In some areas, LLNs will build on existing arrangements and relationships, while in others there may be new possibilities that can be explored. Networks will also develop at different speeds, and the identification of one network in a region as a demonstrator does not preclude development work on other opportunities.

6. The aim of our discussions with providers and other partners over the next 3-4 months is to develop an understanding of the degree of interest, and possibilities for subsequent discussion with our national partners.

Development funds

7. We have set aside some funding to develop proposals, and HEFCE regional consultants will be happy to discuss what development needs might be and the levels of support we can provide.

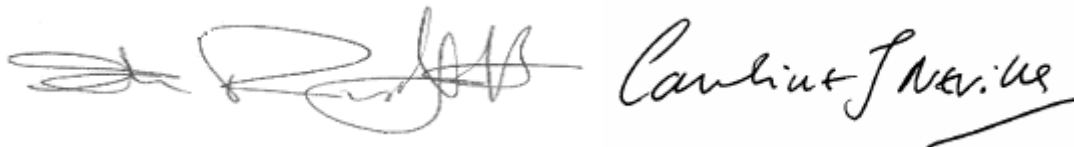
8. Since this is an innovative idea with a wide range of options, we want to be flexible in our approach to funding, and not constrain development by artificial deadlines. If appropriate, in September we could consider with our national partners a number of full propositions for initial funding, with business cases that address the characteristics of LLNs in some detail. We would want those discussions to be informed by a regional perspective from our Regional Advisory Groups. If institutions can develop a full business case before then that has regional support, we could consider it; but we will not constrain other groups that may want to explore the issue over a longer timetable.

9. When we have established the level of interest and what the possibilities are, we will discuss these with our partners and tell the sector exactly how we intend to progress this initiative.

10. We do not wish at this stage to set any prescribed limits to the funding aspirations of prospective LLNs. However, we would envisage that the most ambitious LLNs might be supported by significant resources to cover start-up costs and then receive on-going recurrent funding, drawn from a range of sources. Higher education providers could also be awarded additional student numbers from HEFCE, to accommodate increased demand arising from the take-up of progression opportunities. More modest development would clearly require a lower level of investment.

11. We will be happy to answer any queries you may have about Lifelong Learning Networks and look forward to working with you to establish them. Contact details for HEFCE regional consultations and LSC regional directors are in Annex B.

Yours sincerely

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for John Rushforth, and the signature on the right is for Caroline Neville. The signature on the right is written in a cursive style and includes the name 'Caroline Neville' written out in a smaller, less cursive font below the main signature.

John Rushforth
Director, Widening Participation
HEFCE

Caroline Neville
National Director of Learning
LSC

Annex A

The Joint Progression Strategy and Lifelong Learning Networks

Briefing for consultation with potential partners

Introduction

1. HEFCE has undertaken to work jointly with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), on a joint approach to progression, focusing on:
 - a. Advancing vocational/workplace progression, particularly through developing links between higher and further education (HE and FE) and Lifelong Learning Networks.
 - b. Reducing burden on HE and FE providers.
 - c. Furthering partnership working between HEFCE, LSC and DfES in areas related to the Joint Progression Strategy.

2. There are far fewer progression opportunities for learners on vocational programmes than for those on an academic route. About 90 per cent of those on conventional A-level programmes enter higher education, but only 40-50 per cent of those qualifying at Level 3 in vocational subjects do so. Those who do enter HE from vocational learning programmes often find that progression within higher education is also problematic. There are fewer choices open to them, and greater uncertainty attaches to the choices that do exist.

3. Such differences between the experience of those on vocational and academic pathways are of long standing, but the problem may be exacerbated by the introduction of variable fees. Research-intensive universities may be persuaded to withdraw from the limited progression arrangements that they currently operate, while competition intensifies between some higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) in the provision of vocational education. More intense competition might, perversely, operate to restrict opportunity to fewer institutions and programmes, and confine those that do progress to relatively narrow pathways.

4. As part of our Joint Progression Strategy we propose, therefore, to establish Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). These will bring HEIs and FECs together in a new form of collaboration to create new opportunities for vocational learners. LLNs will:
 - combine the strengths of a number of diverse institutions
 - provide support for learners on vocational pathways
 - bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities
 - develop the curriculum as appropriate to facilitate progression
 - value vocational learning outcomes and provide opportunities for vocational learners to build on earlier learning
 - locate the progression strategy within a commitment to lifelong learning, ensuring that learners have access to a range of progression opportunities so that they can move between different kinds of vocational and academic programmes as their interests, needs and abilities develop.

Lifelong Learning Networks

5. Our view of LLNs is that institutions are invited to 'play to their strengths', building on their commitment to research, to teaching, and to involvement with local and regional economies. As a more differentiated sector emerges, it remains important that the whole range of educational

opportunity is available to learners as their lifetime needs, interests and abilities develop. LLNs will reconnect the sector where this meets the needs of learners, making the strengths of a more diverse sector readily accessible to them.

6. Networks will typically link FECs and HEIs across a city, area or region that potential learners can identify with. These need not conform to existing administrative boundaries as long as they have an 'identity'. They will, together, offer a wide-ranging curriculum, combining the strengths of further and higher education. They will include colleges that are centres of vocational excellence and those with significant higher education provision of their own; and HEIs with a research-intensive mission as well as those more focused on teaching and engaged in serving local and regional economies.

7. At the heart of every network will be arrangements to facilitate progression. A network will, for example, offer a guarantee to learners that they will be able to progress from any award offered by one of the partners to any other programme offered within the network that the learner is adequately prepared for, and can benefit from. That does not mean, however, that every network will be the same. They will be designed to meet specific needs of students, employers and the community, and be developed through a process of consultation and business planning.

8. LLNs will maximise opportunities in the local and regional context. They might be broad based, offering a wide range of subjects, or they might be more focused – for example on the skills and associated educational needs of significant employment clusters. We would expect each network to link with the regional arm of the Sector Skills Councils most closely associated with the employment clusters central to the economic life or future of the region, and to link with other regional bodies such as Regional Development Agencies. Networks will also contribute more generally to local economic and labour market planning, to meet the training, economic development and regeneration needs of regions through research and links with business.

9. Similarly, networks will build on the work of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in colleges, and potentially in the future on Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in HEIs, linking also with New Technology Institutes and Knowledge Exchanges as these are established. But lifelong learning for the individual should not be confined to the tracks or pathways indicated by the starting point. Research-intensive institutions must play their part, bringing their own strengths to the partnership.

10. We do not expect every network to develop all these links, nor to accord the same priority to each of the links that are established. The first LLNs will be pilots, 'demonstrators' that test what works, develop models capable of being generalised, and share any learning with others. The initial focus for the network might therefore be any one (or more) of the many focal points and links available to them. It will be important that these networks build on the good practices and established relationships that already exist in many parts of the country.

11. What LLNs will have in common is the aim of improving progression opportunities. In this they will add value to what institutions already do, because they will extend the reach of initiatives developed in one or more institutions to all participants in the area covered by the network. For example, institutions across the network will consider what they can add to the work of CoVEs, by offering progression routes to a wide range of existing programmes, and collaboration on the curriculum development required to provide new opportunities. Flourishing links with the local economy through Knowledge Exchanges can feed back into the curriculum. And the curriculum

offered in Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning might form the core of the network, seeking to overcome differences in learning and teaching styles that too often limit progression.

12. Above all the LLN will 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.

13. Networks will be substantial and ambitious enterprises. We envisage that they would initially be funded for at least three years, with start-up capital and funding for running costs for the most ambitious. More modest development would clearly require a lower level of investment.

14. Funding will be reviewed after three years with an expectation that support will continue where the networks are meeting the aims and objectives of the Joint Progression Strategy. For the most ambitious networks, we would expect HEFCE funding to be supplemented by investment from other partners. Additional student numbers may also be available for LLNs (subject to agreement on funding) to accommodate increased numbers on a range of programmes as learners progress. As the LLNs develop, we would expect to work with our partners to find ways of supporting networks in the long term through our main funding routes rather than by project-based funding.

15. Networks might take a number of organisational forms but will typically establish a central office, appointing staff in each participating institution to manage issues of curriculum development and validation and transfers between programmes, and making a significant investment in advice and guidance for students.

16. LLNs will establish clear criteria for success. For example, they will set targets for the numbers of students accessing the range of programmes at the core of the network, and for the numbers successfully progressing to the opportunities the network makes available. The aim is that students with similar levels of attainment should be equally likely to progress to the programme or HE provider of their choice, whichever pre-HE pathway through education they take, and whatever their social class. The partners will evaluate the success of networks in the context of more wide-ranging research into the patterns of progression to higher education from vocational learners.

17. The remainder of this annex sketches the characteristics we would expect to find in LLNs. However, it should be emphasised that there is no single model applicable everywhere. We expect networks to draw on local strengths, and to test different approaches in different regions. We would expect all LLNs to collaborate with other stakeholders, and to establish guaranteed progression routes for vocational learners, but the ways in which they do this can vary widely.

Collaboration with other stakeholders

18. The network will establish close working relationships with other stakeholders including Aimhigher networks. Many Aimhigher Area Steering Groups will be mapping progression routes for vocational learners, and developing credit transfer arrangements, as well as seeking to raise aspirations and attainment to maximise higher education opportunities. The provision by the LLNs will need to build on this activity rather than replace it.

19. LLNs will have the involvement and commitment of the Learning and Skills Council, and be informed by and supported by the new LSC Business Cycle, with co-ordinated inputs from local employers, Sector Skills Council, and other regional agencies. Networks will be responsive to local

analyses of economic structure and labour market conditions (such as patterns of development, key economic clusters, and developing skill shortages), and they will map vocational provision and existing progression opportunities in their area.

20. Networks will link closely with the skills strategy more generally, identifying strands of vocational education and training of local importance as the focus for progression activity. We would expect each network to establish a close working relationship with at least one Sector Skills Council. Networks will be an important point of contact for employers who want to explore the range of education and training opportunities across the whole area or region covered by the network, by linking explicitly with the Regional Skills Strategy.

21. We expect LLNs to attract substantial funds from other funders. Networks will therefore have to decide how best to integrate funders' priorities into their management arrangements.

Coherent progression routes

22. LLNs will create coherent progression routes onto existing programmes across the network for those moving on from Level 3. Drawing on, and contributing to existing mapping initiatives, the network will establish the pattern of access to higher education for learners in the area or region covered by the network, but extend this to review opportunities for progression within higher education for those moving on from Level 4.

23. Programmes available across the network would be matched to the variety of vocational qualifications at Level 3 and beyond, offering opportunities for those engaged in work-based and work-related programmes to progress, as well as those with more general vocational qualifications (such as Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education and their successors). Similarly, the progression opportunities for those progressing *within* higher education – from HNC/HND, foundation degree or non-prescribed HE, for example – will be clarified, systematised, and promoted. LLNs will do this by tracking and promoting pathways from foundation, through intermediate, to higher level skills by programme and institution, making clear what is required of the learner at each stage, the conditions for entry to any related programme, and the destinations achievable. In this way they will establish pathways that guarantee progression for vocational learners.

24. Networks will have to determine the most appropriate means for ensuring that learners can effectively move between programmes and institutions. One mechanism for progression is the accumulation of credit for learning successfully undertaken, and its transfer to ensure access to, or advanced standing on, other programmes. Networks would be expected to explore local credit frameworks where these exist or are under development, and ultimately contribute to a credit accumulation and transfer system (CAT) that empowers learners and facilitates progression.

25. However, there are continuing problems in agreeing and implementing a CAT system. Credit systems will not work if they have not resolved underlying issues of equivalence, and perceptions of what is required as a pre-requisite for successful further study. Networks will be concerned first and foremost with what works, and will explore the best available means of ensuring progression across the network. That said, the initial LLNs are pilots or 'demonstrators'. In the longer run they will contribute to progression arrangements that are capable of being generalised, since progression opportunities should not be wholly determined by local considerations. In this sense networks will see

the progression mechanisms they adopt as contributing to the development of a more general CAT system.

Individualised learning plans

26. The key to success, and to ensuring that the process is not simply supply-led, is the provision of vocational education and career planning. LLNs will work with learners to create individualised learning plans so that learners can prepare at an early stage to take advantage of opportunities available. Career and education planning will include opportunities to add to the knowledge and skills already acquired at any given level, as well as deepening and extending learning. It will also include opportunities to change direction, engaging with more academic learning, or to mix academic and vocational learning as appropriate. The outcomes for individuals should be that:

- they can clearly see a way through to their chosen goal
- there are programmes accessible to them to take them there
- they have the opportunity to 'double back', take different routes to the same destination, or adapt their learning patterns to changing goals.

27. Learner-centred plans of this kind will take full account of learner needs in terms of mode of delivery – part-time or full time, delivered on campus (including outreach locations) or through distance learning, including e-learning, or some combination of these. The most successful networks will be those that succeed in attracting new learners to higher education because what is being offered, and the way it is being offered, enables learners to participate.

Curriculum development

28. A great deal will be accomplished within the existing curriculum. Networks will bring some coherence to progression by identifying common conditions and requirements for progression between different kinds of existing programmes. However, they may also identify gaps in provision and will, where appropriate, develop new programmes to facilitate progression. These might be 'bridging courses' to enable learners to acquire the skills needed to progress along a chosen pathway, or more substantial programmes that constitute progression opportunities in their own right.

Providing choice

29. LLNs will create progression routes for vocational learners that provide choice. One route will be to an honours degree and, for those with the ability and commitment, progression to postgraduate study at the highest levels. Progression will also include postgraduate opportunities of a new kind for holders of foundation degrees, and opportunities for continuing professional development for those returning to update their learning as well as those continuing with their studies. Lifelong Learning Networks contribute to lifelong learning! They should not operate on the assumption that progression will be a continuous educational experience from school or college to 'completion of study'.

30. Networks will ensure that learners are able to move freely across a range of provision to meet their changing needs as their interests and abilities develop. There should be opportunities to change direction as well as to proceed: to move from more vocational to more academic programmes, from FECs to HEIs, from programmes with limited entry requirements to those with the most challenging entry requirements.

Annex B
Contacts for further information

Region	HEFCE Regional consultant	LSC Regional director
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