

Lifelong Learning Networks

HEFCE has invested £100 million in 28 networks



Kevin Whitston, HEFCE's Head of Widening Participation, gives an overview of the role of Lifelong Learning Networks and highlights the opportunities they offer.

The creation of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) across England offers a wonderful opportunity to establish a further and higher education system that truly supports the full range of learners, throughout a lifetime of work and study.

Opportunity

HEFCE has so far invested £100 million in 28 LLNs which aim to give vocational learners the same equality of educational opportunity as those students taking more 'traditional' academic routes into higher education, such as those entering at 18 after A-levels.

The challenge for LLNs is that vocational learners do not enjoy the

same clear routes of progression into and through higher education as traditional learners. One study compared the typical pattern of progression to 'crazy paving'.

The LLNs will strive to:

- develop curricula to make progression easier by removing barriers, promoting bridging provision and involving employers
- offer learners lifelong learning information, advice and guidance and track their progress
- produce progression agreements that define for learners what they can reasonably expect from their universities and colleges and which these institutions have to commit to.

There is no single model for an LLN; the local economic context and regional skills needs are influencing the specific approaches that are being adopted.

Each LLN's first task is to develop specialist advice and personalised learner support systems to engage, and track, learner progress. This complements the work of the Aimhigher partnerships which are seeking to raise aspirations and attainment to widen access and participation in higher education more generally.

Involving employers

LLNs should also open up detailed curriculum discussions with employers and Sector Skills Councils on developing new courses (such as foundation degrees, e-learning and stand-alone continuing professional development), better curriculum alignment, and innovative approaches to work-based learning. They will also seek to engage the higher education sector with the changing 14-19 curriculum and diplomas.

The ability to develop progression agreements will be key to the long-term sustainability of LLNs. These agreements will need to be underpinned by credit arrangements that set out how learner expectations can be enhanced and met through robust, institutional commitments.

The LLNs face very challenging work but a policy framework has now been put in place to help them succeed and create new opportunities for a wide range of learners.

Kevin Whitston

More information on LLNs is available on the HEFCE web-site at www.hefce.ac.uk under Widening participation



A student on the new extended degree in nursing practises clinical skills with Sarah O'Reilly, Nursing Lecturer in Health Sciences at the University of York. Higher York LLN was involved in developing 19 new extended degree courses for 2006-07. Extended degrees are accessible to learners without qualifications and guarantee progression to a full degree programme after a successful introductory year.

Developing careers with the skills employers need

The Greater Merseyside and West Lancashire LLN, co-ordinated by Edge Hill University, is focusing on developing higher education programmes in sectors that are forecasting growth – to provide new job opportunities and qualified staff for employers.

University Pro Vice-Chancellor Rhiannon Evans said: 'We are developing foundation degrees in integrated children's and young people's practice to help the supply of new jobs addressing the needs of young children. There is a growing demand for managers and senior personnel in units such as children's centres, nurseries and after school clubs.'

These foundation degrees are particularly useful for learners already working with children who may have vocational qualifications and plenty of practical experience but want to upgrade their skills by taking a foundation degree and then go on to study for an honours degree.

Taking advantage

Matthew Spencer, who works with Merseyside Access to Play, is one of 13 new students enrolled on the foundation degree course.

Matthew said that he had lacked confidence in doing academic work. He only found out at the age of 15 that he was dyslexic which had held back his progress.

He said: 'I have noticed for myself that I look at things in a more positive light. I am learning lots of new things, exploring new subjects that I don't think I would have been interested in had I not been introduced to them.'

Further information is available at www.merseyandwestlancslln.ac.uk



Western Vocational LLN links up with local employers such as BMW, which has a car plant in Swindon, to identify specific training needs.

Support is key to learners' progress

Personal support to help vocational learners develop their skills is one of the key strategies identified by the Western Vocational LLN, which covers much of the South West.

Steve Dear, Director of Western Vocational, which is led by the University of Bath, stressed how important it was: 'For instance someone might have gone into the hotel and catering industry at 16 and realised later they want to go into the business or management side. They will need some higher level skills for the development of both their career and the business.'

The LLN is working with 24 universities and colleges to develop progression agreements in key South West employment sectors.

The network is placing a strong emphasis on employer engagement to develop flexible learning modes to suit both learners and employers. The LLN will encourage larger companies to be learning venues where learners from smaller companies can also be

taught. Such an environment can produce cross-fertilisation of ideas which can feed back positively into personal and company development.

A national voice for LLNs

The HEFCE-funded national forum, hosted by the Higher York LLN, supports practitioners in sharing ideas, good practice and policy developments. It also forges links with other organisations in pursuing the wider objectives of LLNs.

For more information on the national forum, please contact Claire Newhouse at c.newhouse@higheryork.org

For further information on LLNs please see www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk

Helping learners get into higher education

Art and design students on vocational programmes are being helped to take their studies further by the National Arts Learning Network (NALN) – a Lifelong Learning Network of 14 higher and further education colleges.

NALN, co-ordinated by the University of the Arts, London, is working with further education colleges. It supports students on vocational programmes when they are putting together portfolios, and helps them improve their presentation skills so they are better able to compete for places in higher education.

Art and design students often choose a shorter, two-year national diploma at a further education college instead of doing two years of A-levels followed up by an extra year studying for a foundation diploma.

NALN is aiming to give national diploma students the same opportunity

as those coming from more traditional routes – to level the playing field and to open more doors to higher education for a wide range of non-traditional students, including mature people.

Enabling progression

NALN Associate Director Mike Bradshaw said: 'Widening participation in the NALN is enabling progression to a range of art and design qualifications; not only degree courses but also to postgraduate level provision.'

The support, formalised through progression agreements between colleges, gives students a smoother route into higher education through a recognised credit accumulation and transfer scheme.

For 2006-07 the network brought 350 additional students through to higher education and is on track to help 450 more for 2007-08.

The complete educational package

The East of England LLN, MOVE – Maximising Opportunities for Vocational Education, wants to improve the region's traditionally low progression rate into higher education by establishing clearly articulated routes between the workplace and further education into higher education.

MOVE Co-ordinator, Professor Robin Smith, said MOVE aims to offer progression and credit agreements across all higher education institutions and further education colleges in the region so that learners have a guaranteed pathway into foundation degree, undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

Guarantee

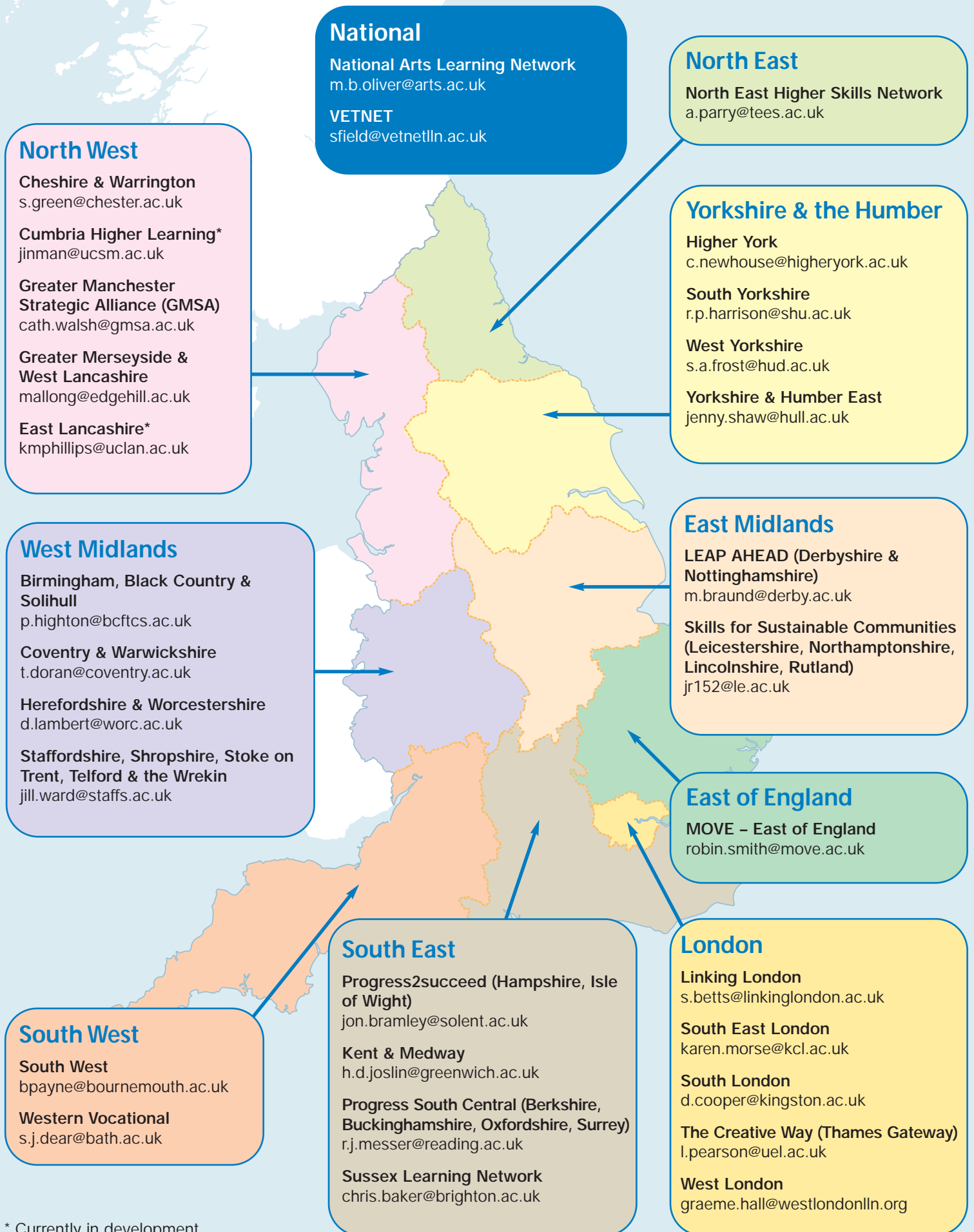
He said: 'The progression agreements will be realistic and meaningful, signed at tutor to tutor level in further education colleges and universities so that they are rooted in reality. We are also working on agreements derived from the workplace. We want to develop movement between work, further education and higher education. The idea is that a student who has completed a further education level experience is guaranteed a place at a partner university.'

MOVE has already allotted 119 additional student places to institutions around the region. It also helped broker the development of a certificate and diploma in community development for health at the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education. The course will take vocational learners directly from primary care trusts.



Fine Art student Katiana Teixeira is now studying at Central Saint Martins, London, after progressing through the National Arts Learning Network agreed route from a BTEC national diploma. Katiana said she loves fine art but that she would not have attempted to apply to university without the support she received through the LLN's progression agreement.

Lifelong Learning Networks



* Currently in development