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Interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks

**Report to HEFCE by:
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Executive summary

1 Background

- 1.1 The overall objective for Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. The initiative is predicated on the notion of higher education institutions and colleges working in partnership to effect coherent, clear and certain vocational progression.
- 1.2 In 2004, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Learning and Skills Council wrote to all publicly funded higher education institutions and further education colleges in England setting out the background to the initiative and proposing ways of exploring the scope for delivering LLNs in individual regions. HEFCE has always emphasised that it does not have a single model for LLNs; rather, it was anticipated that the specific approaches proposed by LLNs to fulfil the overarching objective would vary, as would local economic contexts and regional skills needs.
- 1.3 The first LLNs were established in 2005 and by October 2007 approximately £103 million had been allocated to fund 29 LLNs, spanning 120 higher education institutions and more than 300 further education colleges — representing almost national coverage.
- 1.4 LLNs are groups of institutions covering a city, area or region of England to create new opportunities for vocational learners¹. LLNs have a number of common characteristics: they are expected to create and develop links with other stakeholders such as sector skills councils (SSCs), regional development agencies and the Learning and Skills Council; the LLN focus might be wide-ranging and cover a number of subject/employment areas or it may be more limited — but the foci will have been agreed among the partner institutions and key stakeholders; they are expected to work closely with Aimhigher networks²; each LLN has identified a defined 'learner constituency' i.e. those learners that are targeted to benefit from progression opportunities. In operational terms, LLNs are staffed by a 'core' team to take forward the three core businesses that HEFCE sees as fundamental to each LLN, viz. curriculum development; information, advice and guidance (IAG); and progression agreements. In terms of governance, all have a strategic level group to oversee the work of the LLN and most have a management group responsible for day-to-day operations.
- 1.5 The Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information was commissioned in June 2007 to undertake the formative evaluation. Research to inform the interim evaluation has been two-fold: i) desk research of LLN documentation and ii) visits to and interviews with personnel involved in eight LLNs, viz:
 - Cheshire and Warrington LLN
 - Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance
 - Hereford and Worcestershire LLN
 - MOVE — East of England
 - North East Higher Skills Network
 - South West LLN
 - Sussex Learning Network
 - The Creative Way

¹ In the context of LLNs, vocational learners are broadly conceived as i) those whose post-16 educational pathway leads to qualifications other than A levels, ii) work-based learners and iii) adults already in the workplace.

² Aimhigher is a programme run by HEFCE which aims to widen participation in higher education by raising the awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from under-represented groups.

2 Conclusions

- 2.1 LLNs are making progress in terms of encouraging institutions to offer curricula and put in place procedures that, in the fullness of time, could make a significant difference to the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners. However, it is too soon to be able to make substantive and well-evidenced statements about LLNs' overall progress on meeting this overarching objective of the LLN initiative. It is clear that much time and effort has already been expended on the important tasks of establishing LLNs as new, independent organisations (i.e. independent of any single institution), and developing relationships between various institutional partners and other stakeholders. Such ongoing relationships, together with more concrete activities (be it improving the accessibility and coherence of relevant IAG; offering new curricula and improving the alignment between curricula offered at different levels and in more accessible ways; improving the transition between different episodes of learning experienced by individuals) should, in time, make a difference.
- 2.2 From this interim evaluation we can say, in relation to the three core LLN businesses, that:
- most LLNs have undertaken mapping and scoping work of existing provision. Much curriculum development (thus far) has focused on activities relating to foundation degrees (Fds) (and young, full-time learners in college, rather than work-based and adult learners), but the balance of effort between new and existing provision is unclear. Further, the focus on Fd developments does pose questions as to how far LLNs are meeting the purpose of developing progression into and *through* higher education for a range of learner constituencies with differing needs in terms of educational provision;
 - approaches to establishing appropriate IAG for vocational learners (and employers) range from mapping and scoping what currently exists, identifying gaps, building capacity (both amongst institutional partners, and specialist IAG agencies), adding value to existing services, and developing web-based products. Though there is some evidence of staff in partner institutions and specialist agencies making good use of the information and resultant maps that have been produced, there is much less about potential learner and employer use. Further, in terms of web-based services and products, well-founded questions about the cost effectiveness of these have been raised, given initial investment costs and anticipated costs of sustainability;
 - LLNs have taken rather different approaches to progression agreements (with some being primarily bi-lateral between a sending and a receiving institution while others are much broader in scope in terms of institutional spread within a locality). This aspect of LLN business has probably been the most divisive among partner institutions (particularly in relation to what an agreement means in practice), but for many, the process of developing the agreements has been as important as the outcome itself. Arguably the continuing processes and dialogues between partner institutions are important outcomes in terms of increasing familiarisation among staff about vocational learners' potential to access and progress through higher education, establishing good working relationships at an operational level, and embedding practices into institutional processes (e.g. admissions policies, quality assurance procedures).
- 2.3 Given the differing origins of the LLNs, varying levels of institutional commitment amongst the partners are to be expected, and will be partly dependent on whether the LLN partnership is a pre-existing one or has been developed from scratch. Currently there are 'hot' and 'cold' spots within most LLNs, but the establishment of institution-based 'champions' supported by well constructed and implemented communication strategies as

well as the forging of relationships with institutional staff in key strategic positions (e.g. registries, admissions) seem to be effective ways of creating and maintaining commitment. 'Hard cash' (e.g. in the form of additional student numbers (ASNs), funds for development activities) is also a powerful tool for gaining buy-in and building relationships between partners, but arguably LLNs need to be more proactive in developing and sustaining institutional commitment.

- 2.4 Engagement with other relevant stakeholders is rather patchy (especially in relation to SSCs), though improving. Much discussion took place in the early stages of LLN operations about the need to work together where priorities overlap, but LLNs now need to move from discussions towards more focused activities.
- 2.5 Despite employer engagement running throughout much LLN activity, some activities to engage with employers have, up until now, not been a priority area for all LLNs. But this aspect of the LLN agenda has become more important latterly (and is an example of the shifting policy landscape within which LLNs are having to operate) and is one that all LLNs need to address.
- 2.6 Attempts are being made to embed LLN activities into institutional practices and procedures, but it is clear that such embedding will take time. LLNs will need to monitor and log such practices to demonstrate impact and success. Linked to the notion of embeddedness is the question of sustainability. Those LLNs that have been operating the longest are now giving attention to this issue. Some are looking to secure HEFCE monies for new activities (e.g. employer engagement) which would build on LLN work, though the drawing-down of yet another tranche of short-term funding is likely to bring its own long-term sustainability issues. Approaches more dependent on institutions themselves building-in certain activities to their day-to-day operations and procedures are more likely to have longevity.
- 2.7 Whilst LLN operations can be seen, to some extent, to be operating within a reference frame of equality and diversity, few LLNs make specific reference to these issues in their monitoring reports.
- 2.8 Issues of value for money are difficult to address, not least because each LLN has developed its own costed plan to provide solutions to perceived needs, reflecting the local economic context and regional (sub-regional) skills needs. Further, financial information is not reported in a consistent format (nor, in some cases, a competent manner) which means that there is little comparative financial data from which to start discussions about value for money.
- 2.9 The question of additionality — what have LLNs added that would not have happened if they had never existed — is a difficult and complex issue that cannot be answered with any degree of certainty yet. There are many potential aspects to additionality: strengthened partnership working; providing resources to make things happen; providing new courses and new IAG resources to fill gaps; new progression opportunities; more vocational learners accessing and progressing through higher education; economies of scale offered to smaller institutions through partnership working; improved communications and understanding between partners; new understandings about learner and employer behaviours. However, providing tangible measures of some of these may be rather difficult, though clearly the regular monitoring being undertaken by LLNs should go some way to providing some of the information. Whilst LLNs are producing regular monitoring reports (for themselves and HEFCE), some lack good baseline data. As outcomes from processes start to emerge, these will also need monitoring and logging so that some sense of the extent to which LLNs may be adding value can be gained.

2.10 In reaching this point (some two years into the LLN initiative) LLNs have been faced with a number of challenges:

- delays in staff recruitment (often exacerbated by due processes within large institutions and availability of appropriate staff) and under estimations of the resources needed for ground clearing work (both in terms of establishing relationships, and baseline information) has meant that not all activities planned for the first year have been effectively undertaken;
- establishing relationships between a range of providers (with their own histories, and missions, which themselves may be shifting) and with other stakeholders is one aspect; establishing shared understandings of the nature and activities of LLNs is another. Progress towards reaching such shared understandings has been hampered by shifting government priorities, uncertainties at policy level, and perceptions of initiative overload, overlap and duplication;
- in terms of IAG, those LLNs seeking to add value to existing IAG providers' activities have faced some difficulties in terms of the disjointedness between different agencies' work (sometimes limited to particular levels of educational provision), which does not sit well with notions of lifelong learning from the individual learner's perspective. Further, ongoing uncertainties at the policy level about an overarching adult guidance service may be hampering efforts to develop a more joined-up and seamless service;
- moving towards shared understandings of progression agreements has been particularly difficult for a number of LLNs, since such devices can be seen as undermining institutions' own autonomy in terms of admissions. Moreover, changed processes (emanating from funded projects) may be only a part of the equation; changing hearts and minds, and individuals' behaviours are arguably much greater challenges. Shared visions may be less easy to establish across a region or sub-region, than in a particular locality;
- pressure on LLNs (from HEFCE) to show tangible outcomes within the first year of operation has led to a focus on 'easy wins' and expedient actions in most LLNs, with an emphasis on young, full-time learners (in college) rather than work-based and adult learners. But as LLNs themselves gain more experience, they are evidently making some progress with a broader range of (potential) learners and providers, while also starting to develop the right tools to do this more effectively. But engaging work-based and adult learners is a much more difficult and time consuming task.

2.11 We also note that HEFCE's encouragement for LLNs to develop their own solutions to meet the overarching LLN objective as well as regional/sub-regional and sectoral needs (in terms of progression opportunities for vocational learners) may have led, inadvertently, to LLNs failing to maximise opportunities for developing shared solutions — certainly in the early days of the LLN initiative. However, since the establishment of the national forum and practitioner groups in 2006, it is evident that LLNs have taken opportunities to share practices at these and other fora.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 By its very nature, HEFCE's LLN initiative is time- and funding-limited, but has an underlying aim of trying to make a sustained difference for vocational learners. This has implications for the continuing work of LLNs, in terms of both assessing if they are making a difference and also whether any such differences will be sustained beyond the lifetime of the initiative.

Lessons for LLNs

- 3.2 Given the above, we make the following recommendations in respect of LLNs:
- a) LLNs need to be monitoring their own activities (i.e. curriculum developments; information, advice and guidance; progression agreements) and outcomes on a regular basis using appropriate measurable data (including learner and employer usage) to gain a sense of the extent to which they may be adding value. More attention needs to be given to what are meaningful measures for LLNs to develop and use, and to use these well (**section 4.29 of the full report refers**);
 - b) LLNs need to improve the standard of their financial reporting in conjunction with advice from HEFCE (see also 3.8c below) (**section 4.5 refers**);
 - c) LLNs now need to move (quickly) beyond the 'easy wins' and make concerted efforts to tackle more challenging aspects of vocational progression (e.g. work-based and adult learners, apprentices), and across the full range of HE qualifications. Even if not all such efforts succeed, the lessons learned need to be captured, logged and disseminated to other LLNs and wider constituencies (**section 4.13 refers**);
 - d) IAG work should be directed towards supporting and building on existing provision rather than duplicating it, and links with other emerging IAG web-based developments should be investigated where appropriate (**section 4.17 refers**);
 - e) web-based services and outputs should be closely monitored and evaluated to demonstrate value for money and additionality, with the outcomes disseminated widely (**sections 4.15 and 4.16 refer**);
 - f) LLNs, through HEFCE and the national forum, should explore the extent to which web-based developments might be rationalised across the initiative and with other relevant stakeholder bodies' developments (e.g. SSCs and LSC) (**sections 4.15 and 4.17 refer**);
 - g) LLNs need to develop methods of monitoring the success or otherwise of progression agreements, including how they are working in practice, issues arising from such usage, and the extent to which they are becoming embedded into the routine practices and processes of providers (**section 4.25 refers**);
 - h) levels of institutional commitment and equality across partnerships need to be kept under review, and issues of lack of, or barriers to, engagement addressed with relevant senior institutional managers (**sections 4.30 - 4.33 refer**);
 - i) levels of commitment of those stakeholders formally involved in LLNs need to be kept under review, and appropriate actions taken where necessary (**section 4.31 refers**);
 - j) LLNs and partner institutions need to be committed to and develop ways of embedding practices to ensure coherence, clarity and certainty of progression

opportunities into institutional processes (i.e. admissions policies, quality assurance procedures) (**section 4.41 refers**);

- k) LLNs, with HEFCE, should explore ways of sharing LLN practice and activities among the wider academic community. One means might be through increased use of the Higher Education Academy's subject centres and other networks, as well as the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) initiative (**sections 4.33, 4.40 and 4.41 refer**);
- l) issues of sustainability need to be addressed by LLNs as early as possible (e.g. what needs to be sustained; what levels of commitment exist in the network; what type and level of resource would be required; where might funding be sourced) (**sections 4.42 – 4.44 refer**);
- m) given that the employer engagement arena is an increasingly crowded one, LLNs should play to their strengths by bringing together academics and employers, developing niche markets (i.e. in curriculum development and progression opportunities) and being aware of (and exploring opportunities to link with) other initiatives (**sections 4.37 – 4.39 refer**).

Lessons for HEFCE

- 3.3 In the desk research and fieldwork undertaken for this interim evaluation, we have identified a number of issues that HEFCE should take on board, especially as it continues to develop and launch various (short-term) funded initiatives. We acknowledge that the LLN initiative has been innovative in terms of policy development in that it was a move away from the normal 'top-down' HEFCE bidding process (involving institutional bids being assessed against prescribed criteria) to one that was 'bottom-up' based on a negotiated process with proposers. However, we would suggest that many of the potential proposals were 'talked-up' in terms of plans and anticipated achievements and outputs. Moreover, once funded, activities may have been biased towards 'easy wins' (at least in the early stages, and especially where there have been delays in operation) such that measures of tangible outcomes and easily quantifiable indicators of performance could be reported to the funder in the required time-frames. But such ways of working may not, in fact, capitalise on the opportunity provided by pump-priming initiatives involving the disbursement of one-off funds to experiment and tackle the more difficult aspects of the endeavour for fear of falling short of targets. HEFCE may need to put greater effort into encouraging those making proposals to focus on the more challenging aspects and propose realistic plans. Further, in seeking indicators of performance (to measure against initial plans), HEFCE should seek to place an appropriate emphasis on gaining an understanding of factors underlying failures as well as successes, and to disseminate such findings appropriately. HEFCE might wish to review the level of resource it devotes to monitoring, challenging and supporting initiatives of this nature.
- 3.4 At the outset, HEFCE emphasised it did not have a single model for LLNs, although the three core businesses were seen as fundamental. Such an approach allows for flexibility and diversity. However, we have noted above that this approach may have inadvertently led to LLNs failing to maximise opportunities for developing shared solutions, especially in the early stages. Further, such diversity can create some difficulties when trying to make comparative judgements on progress across the LLNs. We suggest that additional guidance relating to reporting (as recommended in 3.2b) could well assist HEFCE to gain a better understanding of progress being made across the range of LLNs.
- 3.5 As noted in this report, LLN-funded development work relates to a range of activities, including small-scale studies of particular 'players' (e.g. potential learners' decisions about HE; employers' decisions about engaging with HE). The findings from such studies may be valuable to other LLNs, and to much wider constituencies as well as to HEFCE, and

could add to existing knowledge bases, but it is unclear how such findings are being captured for such wider dissemination at present.

- 3.6 We have also noted that LLNs have been allocating ASNs in different ways; we recognise that at this point in LLNs' operations there is little detailed data on actual student numbers and progression. We suggest that HEFCE should examine the data in due course to get a better sense of how ASNs have been used in practice (in this and other initiatives).
- 3.7 We have noted that web-based IAG services and products are being developed by a number of LLNs (sometimes aligned to other JISC-funded development work). Again it is too early to assess the value of these activities (both one-off and linked), but clearly HEFCE should be trying to gain a better understanding of such developments to inform future work.
- 3.8 Given the foregoing, we recommend that HEFCE should:
- a) continue to discuss with other agencies and government departments the desirability of creating conditions whereby policies can be developed in a coherent and interlocking fashion, against which particular activities can then be delivered in a planned and sustained manner to meet the agreed agenda. The current situation (of actual and perceived duplication and initiative overload, as well as ongoing uncertainties) does not necessarily engender conditions wherein all parties are working towards a common goal (**sections 4.3, 4.17, 4.28 and 4.44 of the full report refer**);
 - b) provide more specific guidance to LLNs on establishing baseline data and monitoring procedures for measuring progress, as well as for reporting successes and failures (if any) such that some comparable measures of additionality can be captured (**section 4.29 refers**);
 - c) provide more specific guidance to LLNs on financial reporting (say through producing a simple standard format for reporting expenditure on basic salaries, premises costs and identifiable expenditure in respect of development funds, web-based developments etc) (**section 4.5 refers**);
 - d) consider a review of the level of resource it devotes to monitoring, challenging and supporting initiatives of this nature (**sections 4.4 – 4.6 and 4.29 refer**);
 - e) scope out and commission a study on the use of ASNs (**sections 4.11 – 4.13 refer**);
 - f) scope out and commission a study on the costs and benefits of web-based developments linked to information, advice and guidance (including those aligned to other JISC-funded developments), and the extent to which these might be rationalised across the initiative and with other relevant stakeholder bodies' IAG developments (e.g. SSCs and LSC) (**sections 4.15 and 4.17 refer**);
 - g) actively capture the findings from LLN-funded one-off studies, and messages (positive and negative) about LLN operations and practices to inform both the LLN and wider constituencies with an interest in vocational progression and employer engagement (**sections 4.40, 5.14 and 5.16 refer**).
- 3.9 Finally, we note that the evaluation of the earlier HEFCE-funded widening participation programme (involving 25 regional partnerships) concluded that collaboration between institutions was an effective way to widen participation in higher education; and that there was a danger that initiatives to widen participation are short-term, with the benefits not sustained beyond the funding period. That evaluation concluded with a series of

recommendations (HEFCE, 2003, pp. 52-53)³. It is evident that a number of these have been taken into account in developing this LLN initiative. Nevertheless, we note that the earlier evaluation made a number of specific recommendations in relation to monitoring, evaluation and tracking — some of which are replicated above (in particular, the need for more specific guidance on establishing baseline data and monitoring activities such that some comparable measures of additionality might emerge). We recognise that the LLN initiative marks an innovative experiment in bottom-up policy development based on a process of negotiation, rather than bidding against prescribed criteria set by HEFCE. Given this approach, HEFCE took a decision not to prescribe in detail the nature of monitoring activities that LLNs were expected to undertake since such prescription could undermine the diversity and variety of approaches that LLNs might adopt to meet the overarching objective of the initiative. However, we would suggest that any new HEFCE initiative based on this approach should provide more guidance, particularly on appropriate monitoring processes, from the outset to enable judgements to be made about value for money and additionality.

³ HEFCE (2003) Evaluation of collaboration between HEIs and FECs to increase participation in higher education. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The overall objective for Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. The initiative is predicated on the notion of higher education institutions and colleges working in partnership to effect coherent, clear and certain vocational progression. In June 2004, a joint letter from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to heads of all publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) in England set out the background to the initiative and proposed ways of exploring the scope for delivering LLNs in individual regions (HEFCE, 2004). HEFCE has always emphasised that it does not have a single model for a LLN; rather, it was anticipated that the specific approaches proposed and adopted by LLNs to fulfil the overarching objective would vary. Further, it was expected that the local economic context and regional skills needs would also influence these approaches. However, three broad characteristics were seen as fundamental to each LLN, namely curriculum developments that facilitate progression; establishment of appropriate information, advice and guidance systems; and establishment of robust progression agreements. All proposals for LLNs have been developed through dialogue and negotiation between HEFCE officers (led by the widening participation policy section and regional teams), the core LLN project team and LLN partners — rather than through a bidding process. Proposals for LLNs have then been presented to the HEFCE LLN Advisory Group and ultimately approved by HEFCE’s Strategic Development Fund panel or HEFCE Board.
- 1.2 The first LLNs were established in 2005. By October 2007 HEFCE was reporting that approximately £103 million had been allocated to fund 29 LLNs (including two national ones), spanning 120 HEIs and more than 300 FECs (HEFCE, 2007a). HEFCE noted that such coverage represented almost national (England) coverage. The majority of LLNs have been in operation for at least six months, with a third in their second or third year of operation (while one, Cheshire and Warrington, had come to the end of its funding period in September 2007).
- 1.3 As noted above, LLNs are groups of HEIs and FECs covering a city, area or region of England that create new opportunities for vocational learners⁴. LLNs have a number of common characteristics: for example, networks are either based on existing partnerships or set up from scratch to meet the LLN objective; and they are expected to create and develop links with other stakeholders such as sector skills councils (SSCs), Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), other local/regional economic partnerships and the LSC to maximise opportunities for learners, employers and the communities within their purview. In doing so, an LLN might be wide-ranging and cover a number of subject or curriculum areas, or it may be more limited; whatever the foci are, these will have been agreed among the partner institutions and key stakeholders. LLNs are expected to work closely with Aimhigher networks⁵ to ensure synergy between the strategies and operations of each initiative. LLNs have identified a defined ‘learner constituency’ i.e. those learners that are targeted to benefit from progression opportunities (e.g. work-based learners, adult learners).
- 1.4 In operational terms, LLNs are staffed by a ‘core’ team to take forward the three core businesses: curriculum development; information, advice and guidance (IAG); and progression agreements. Most LLN core teams are based in one location and comprise

⁴ In the context of LLNs, vocational learners are broadly conceived as i) those whose post-16 educational pathway leads to qualifications other than A levels; ii) work-based learners; iii) adults already in the workplace.

⁵ Aimhigher is a programme run by HEFCE that aims to widen participation in higher education by raising the awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from under-represented groups.

both full- and part-time staff. In addition, LLNs often have staff (on fractional appointments and/or secondments) in the partner institutions whose role is to take forward a specific task and/or to act as 'champions' for the work of the LLN. In terms of governance, all have a strategic level group to oversee the work of the LLN comprising (some or all) of the partner institutions and key stakeholder bodies. Most LLNs have a management group responsible for day-to-day operations, which reports to the strategic level group; membership will vary depending on the LLN and the remit of the group. All LLNs have specialist groups concerned with the three core businesses as well as other areas (e.g. marketing, planning, admissions); these will comprise relevant LLN staff, staff of partner institutions and key stakeholders.

- 1.5 In December 2006 HEFCE set out a strategy for evaluating LLNs in three stages, viz. a formative evaluation combining information that LLNs submit through existing annual monitoring processes with a small number of qualitative case studies; peer evaluation; and a form of summative evaluation to be undertaken at the end of the funding period (a minimum of four years from the establishment of the first networks). The LLN evaluation strategy does not deal with the evaluation of the Strategic Development Fund or additional student number (ASN) processes as these would be covered by separate evaluations.
- 1.6 The Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information was commissioned in June 2007 to undertake the formative evaluation. This 'first stage formative evaluation' is intended to give a 'progress check' that will help HEFCE:
 - to reflect and build on the iterative developmental process taken as part of the LLN approvals process and found to be robust by a HEFCE internal audit;
 - to develop an evidence base from which to report to key stakeholders and/or recommend further developments as the current funding period ends;
 - to develop policy, manage risk, link with other key agendas (e.g. employer engagement) and support good practice as it develops (HEFCE, 2006, p. 1).
- 1.7 The report that follows first looks at the national and regional/sub-regional policy agendas, then the method used for the interim evaluation. The main body of the report — section 4 — comprises the findings from the research (the desk research and interviews with eight case-study LLNs). These findings are elaborated through examples from the desk research and the case studies, while a number of 'exemplars' are presented in the appendices (which have been produced by some of the case study LLNs). The findings are followed by our conclusions and recommendations to both LLNs and HEFCE.

2 Shifting scenarios

National policy agendas

- 2.1 As has been noted on many occasions in the past few years, despite government drives towards improving the vocational pathway to higher levels of knowledge and skills over several decades, the complex and continually shifting landscape of post-compulsory education and training has resulted in academic qualifications remaining the dominant route for entry to higher education, particularly for young people (see for example, Connor and Little, 2007). The impetus underlying the LLN initiative was clearly identified by the (then) Chief Executive of HEFCE (Howard Newby) as the lack of clarity of post-16 educational pathways for those not wishing to follow the academic route of A levels and direct university entrance. Newby also stated that 'higher education sits within the context of lifelong learning and yet we still do not have the progression routes, the pathways or even the credit transfer systems which would allow a genuine system of lifelong learning to be developed and marketed to those who might need it most' (Newby, 2004, p.14).

- 2.2 Thus the LLN initiative was firmly set within government's broader policy of widening participation in higher education, with an expectation that LLNs would work closely with Aimhigher to ensure that schools, colleges, employers and others were aware of opportunities for progression (HEFCE, 2005a). The concept of widening participation in higher education as distinct from increasing or expanding participation is a relatively recent addition to the policy discourse (Maringe and Fuller, undated). Distinct, but overlapping rationales for widening participation policies can be discerned, viz. political, economic, equity and social justice, lifelong learning, and social capital. But Maringe and Fuller's review of the policies also points to the ongoing dominance of deficit explanations for the continuing under-representation of certain groups in higher education and the 'underlying assumption in the approach remains one which privileges the higher education (HE) route implying, therefore, that it should be experienced by a more diverse population than hitherto' (Maringe and Fuller, p.18).
- 2.3 Alongside policies for widening participation in higher education, one immediate reason for creating such networks was to protect vocational progression opportunities 'ahead of increased turbulence in the market for students and their fees' (Parry, 2006, p.15) such that configurations of institutions within the networks might help counter or ameliorate the potentially distorting effects of increased competition between institutions.
- 2.4 In addition to working closely with Aimhigher, individual LLNs were expected to take into account local economic contexts and regional/sub-regional skills needs in developing specific approaches to 'improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners'. However, only a minority of the 25 SSCs had at this time finalised their own sector skills agreements — which were intended to map out employer skills needs for the relevant occupational sector workforce and set out action plans for how these skills would be supplied. As such, though each LLN proposal was submitted with the approval of relevant regional (sub-regional) agencies or networks (and hence reflected to an extent regional/sub-regional priorities), some of the more specific detail of employment sector needs for higher level skills in particular localities may not have been available as the work of each LLN began. It was also likely that different SSCs would place differing levels of priority on developing higher level skills within their sector's workforce (and hence would be looking for differing levels of engagement with higher education providers).
- 2.5 By January 2006 (effectively just one year after the inception of the LLN initiative) it was clear that government priorities, whilst still embracing widening participation into and through higher education, were being extended towards a separate issue of effecting greater employer engagement in various stages of education, including higher education. For example, HEFCE's 2006 grant letter from the (then) Secretary of State for Education (Ruth Kelly) identified two major strategic priorities for higher education (DfES, 2006). First, government was seeking radical changes in the provision of higher education by incentivising and funding provision partly or wholly designed, funded or provided by employers. Second, government identified the continuing need to support widening participation in higher education for people from low income backgrounds.
- 2.6 A year later, in the HEFCE 2007 grant letter from Alan Johnson (and following the publication of the Leitch Review of Skills) government was stressing the importance of developing radical approaches leading to much higher levels of access to higher education by older people already in the workplace (DfES, 2007). The government envisaged such an approach implying models of higher education that are available, relevant, flexible and responsive and that meet the high level skill needs of employers and their staff. As such, three 'Higher Level Skills Pathfinders' were established (in the North West, the North East, and the South West regions) with the aim of linking with and building networks (including with LLNs as appropriate) to 'improve the journey to higher-level learning for employers and employees' (HEFCE, 2007b). In addition, the government was still emphasising the role of work-focused higher education provision (in the form of

foundation degrees) as a core part of their strategy; saw a need for students to be able to progress seamlessly between further education (FE) and higher education; and were seeking to introduce the principle of employer demand-led funding of higher education.

- 2.7 Alongside the above priorities for higher education, another government-led development, which was likely to have an impact (in the fullness of time) on the 'coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners', was also coming on-stream. As part of the reform of the 14–19 curriculum, new diplomas were being developed (by diploma development partnerships relating to broad occupational areas) as an alternative to more traditional education and qualifications. The diplomas are aimed at combining theoretical and practical learning, to equip young people with the skills, knowledge and understanding for further or higher education and employability. A small number of LLNs were commissioned by HEFCE to act as pathfinders for the higher education sector in their engagement with the new diplomas.

Regional and sub-regional policy agendas

- 2.8 In addition to changing priorities in national agendas and in responses to local economic contexts and regional (and sub-regional) skills needs, the extent to which individual LLNs have been able to engage with all higher education institutions and further education colleges within their purview may well depend on pre-existing and/or ongoing strategic institutional developments taking place in particular localities and/or sub-regions (see later discussion at section 4.30 for exemplification).
- 2.9 Partnerships between institutions in a region, or sub-region, may well have been established prior to the emergence of the LLN initiative. HEFCE itself had funded a large programme of regional institutional partnerships (as part of its widening participation special funding programme). A HEFCE-commissioned evaluation of such partnerships, undertaken in 2001, noted a number of issues relating to such regional collaborations, including: there is tension between collaboration and competition within partnerships; a sense of geographical identity was seen to be important; and further education was rarely a full partner in such collaborations, nor experienced equal status (with the HEI) within the partnership (HEFCE, 2003). Hence, depending on the precise configuration of an LLN, it was likely that some at least would be building on such prior collaborations (and their attendant 'histories'). Nevertheless, the same HEFCE evaluation also noted that the overwhelming response from such partnerships was that collaboration was an effective way to widen participation. (It also noted there was a danger that initiatives to widen participation were short-term, with benefits not lasting beyond the funding period, so genuine change was not achieved.)

3 Method

- 3.1 Research to inform the interim evaluation has been two-fold: i) desk research of LLN documentation and ii) visits to and interviews with personnel involved in eight LLNs. The evaluation has been conducted over three phases, which are described below.
- 3.2 **Phase One (June – July 2007).** Desk research in this initial phase focused on those LLNs that had produced their first annual reviews. It was undertaken using available materials including LLN business cases, monitoring reports and other key documents and data (provided by HEFCE or drawn from LLNs' own web-sites). HEFCE had already identified five 'indicators of success', namely the core processes for LLNs; progress made in relation to specific targets and milestones; evidence of institutional commitment, partnership working and stakeholder engagement; responsiveness to key regional and sector developments; and methods for determining and disseminating good practice. Taking each of these indicators, the information available was analysed in terms of: the LLN's

intentions; progress/outcomes achieved; and challenges experienced as well as plans being put into action to address these. The outcomes of this research informed our interview schedules and visits to the LLN case studies. They are also reflected in the findings in section 4.

3.3 **Phase Two (July – October 2007)**. On the basis of the first tranche of desk research and in discussion with HEFCE's LLN evaluation steering group, the first five 'cases' were identified from those LLNs that had submitted an annual monitoring report. They were:

- Cheshire and Warrington LLN
- Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance
- MOVE — East of England
- North East Higher Skills Network
- Sussex Learning Network

Two of the five (MOVE and North East Higher Skills Network) had full regional coverage and the other three covered parts of a region.

3.4 It was anticipated that the remaining three cases would be selected from those LLNs due to submit annual monitoring reports in July/August 2007. The three remaining cases selected were:

- Herefordshire and Worcestershire LLN
- The Creative Way
- South West LLN

3.5 Between August and December 2007, the CHERI evaluation team undertook visits to the eight LLNs and interviews with core staff and others involved in the LLNs (i.e. staff on fractional appointments, heads of institutions and other staff involved in the partnership, and representatives of stakeholder organisations — LSCs, RDAs, employer groups, SSCs). In total, 135 interviews were undertaken with staff from the following organisations:

- LLNs (52)
- HEIs (35)
- FECs, including one college association (19)
- work-based learning providers (2)
- learning and skills councils (5)
- sector skills councils (5)
- Aimhigher (5)
- higher level skills pathfinders (2)
- regional employer associations/groupings (10)

Interviews used a mix of face-to-face and telephone methods. Interviewees were identified through discussion with each LLN, which included identification of 'hot' and 'cold' spots in relation to institutional partner commitment.

3.6 **Phase Three (October 2007 – January 2008)**. The final phase comprised following up interviews; developing the case studies from some of the eight LLNs for the final report; and producing a series of reports, which included an interim report for the steering group, a summary report for LLN directors and the steering group and this final report.

4 Findings from the research

Desk research

- 4.1 In all, 29 LLNs have been funded by HEFCE, of which one has reached the end of its funding period and is now sustaining activity through other means. Desk research was undertaken on documentation (business cases, six-month reports, annual reports and, where available, second year reports) relating to 23 of these LLNs. Of these, 16 have been in existence for over one year and have produced their first annual review. These are included in this summary below (see Appendix 1).
- 4.2 It is very evident that LLNs vary considerably in their scope and ambitions. For many LLNs, it has been difficult to precisely match-up objectives set out in business cases with activities subsequently undertaken and described in annual reviews. The emphasis of LLN work seems to have changed over time (partly as a result of HEFCE's own guidance evolving over time and, arguably, partly as a result of LLNs' own revisions to plans reflecting progress on-the-ground).
- 4.3 From the analysis of LLNs' own reports, it is evident that they have encountered a number of challenges, as follows:
- for the majority of LLNs, planned work during the first year of operation was hampered by delays in recruitment (exacerbated in part by the limited time-frame for the LLN initiative, but also by institutions' own time-frames for dealing with issues) and in setting up management structures and securing appropriate accommodation;
 - lack of clarity about government strategy; perceptions of initiative overload, overlap and duplication (for example, the Higher Level Skills Pathfinder); and uncertainties at policy level (for example, the government's delayed response to the Leitch Review of Skills and the subsequent implementation plan) had repercussions for the work of LLNs and led to lack of understanding amongst various partners and stakeholders;
 - most LLNs underestimated the time-consuming nature of partnership working with much resource devoted, in the initial stages, to networking activities with an array of partners and stakeholders;
 - many LLNs mention the difficulties arising from different institutional and other stakeholder cultures and languages as one of the challenges in establishing a shared understanding of the nature and activities of LLNs;
 - the short-term nature of LLN funding has made the development of new foundation degrees (Fds), where progression of work-based learners and employer engagement are key, particularly challenging.
- 4.4 In addition to identifying these challenges, a number of general points can be made from the desk research. First, though the overarching objective for LLNs sits, in a sense, within an overall reference frame of equality and diversity⁶, the majority of LLN business cases make no specific reference to issues of equality and diversity, nor do the majority of annual reviews. Where mentioned, such issues are referred to in the context of the underlying socio-economic profile of regional and sub-regional populations. A very few

⁶ HEFCE's Equality Scheme (2007c) outlines the Council's statutory duties to promote equality in three areas – race, disability and gender – and is 'also intended as guidance for the higher education sector in developing their respective schemes'. LLNs, through their monitoring processes, need to ensure that their partner institutions consider these issues.

mention equality and diversity issues in relation to access to certain areas of study and access to particular professions.

- 4.5 Second, financial information is not reported in a consistent format and thus it is difficult to compare statements even of networks that are operating in similar ways. There seems to be some lack of expertise in financial reporting given the terminology used and the style of presentation in a number of cases. Very few financial reports show expenditure by LLN activities/themes and hence it is not possible to estimate total expenditure on (say) curriculum developments or on information, advice and guidance. It is recognised that in practice such activities may be inter-related and separate accounting would be difficult; nevertheless a more standardised and disaggregated form of financial reporting might at least provide some indicative data showing the balance of LLN 'spend' on the range of activities and hence provide a starting point for discussions about value for money.
- 4.6 Third, many of the annual reviews seem to be rather descriptive in nature and lack a self-critical edge such that challenges faced have not necessarily been highlighted nor have solutions been proposed. There is some sense in which those LLNs that have been developed from pre-existing partnerships and networks have taken a more critical approach to reviewing their own activities. In general, it appears that arrangements and processes to support LLN strategies and operations have been progressed more speedily where prior collaborations have existed.

Fieldwork and the case study LLNs

- 4.7 As noted above, each LLN is different, for example in terms of extent of geographical coverage, number of partner institutions, stakeholder involvement, focus and range of curriculum areas, the vocational learner constituency, funds received from HEFCE and funding period — and in respect of the approach to and focus on the three core businesses: curriculum development to facilitate progression; information, advice and guidance (IAG); and progression agreements. What we report below are general observations (informed by examples taken from the eight case-study LLNs) about the approaches taken by individual LLNs, the implications of certain issues (such as geographical coverage, partnership working, relationships with other initiatives), and what has been achieved to date. First we discuss the three core businesses; we look at each separately, although we are aware that, in operational terms, they are inter-related and mutually dependent strands. We then look at other indicators of success, followed by some conclusions and recommendations for LLNs and HEFCE.

The core businesses

Curriculum developments

- 4.8 All LLNs in our study claim that the curriculum areas that are their focus of activity have been identified through local economic and labour market needs analyses. HEFCE's own analysis of LLN business plans indicates that the most common curriculum areas being covered are health and social care; creative and cultural industries; finance, business, enterprise and management; and engineering and technology. The range of areas that LLNs are focusing on varies from LLN to LLN (from two to eight in our study). In this context, we have been made aware of some feelings of partner institution disengagement or disappointment, which is to be expected where LLN activity profiles do not match those of a partner's provision and mission. However, in one LLN, the curriculum areas have been chosen where the partner institutions have strengths and/or few progression routes to higher education/level 4 and this was a major factor in gaining commitment from the partners.
- 4.9 Most LLNs have undertaken mapping and scoping work of existing provision to i) articulate and make visible progression routes, ii) identify potential gaps in curriculum that are

inhibiting potential learner progression, and iii) provide baseline data. Much activity is focusing on progression to Fds and/or from Fds to honours top-ups through the development of new Fds or supporting/redesigning existing programmes. In some of our interviews with institutional partners, criticisms and questions were raised about whether some curriculum development, rather than being classed as new, was in fact rebranding of existing provision. Some LLNs are looking at redesigning existing provision to seek better fit with employer/employee needs and as such are working closely with employers. One LLN is working from the employer perspective to develop a 'competency lexicon' as a way of identifying employees' existing knowledge and skills and hence inform potential associated curricula (see Appendix 2). A number of LLNs have established criteria against which partner institutions (or consortia of partners) can bid to gain funding to support curriculum developments (although in one case, there was no need for further differentiation and all the bids that met the criteria have been funded due to sufficient monies being available). One LLN's criteria require that proposals identify:

- gaps in progression routes that have been identified through learner and/or employer feedback;
- provision that will be formally credit rated, accredited and aligned with the national qualifications framework;
- provision that enables progression to or from other named qualifications through robust progression routes that are clearly agreed, articulated, formalised and sustainable;
- provision that has certainty of funding from sustainable sources beyond the initial pump-priming provided by LLN funding.

4.10 While learners are engaging with curricula offered by LLN partner institutions (as evidenced through most of the additional student numbers (ASNs)⁷ targets being met), in some cases it is unclear to what extent the curricula represent pre-existing provision (modified as a result of LLN activities) or are new curricula developed under the auspices of the LLN. Further, findings from many of our interviews indicate that it is too early to assess the full extent to which learners (and/or employers and their employees) are engaging with curricula and progressing further. However, LLNs' own monitoring and evaluation strategies should provide measures of impact. Measures will include the tracking of ASNs and users of progression agreements (see below) where these have been developed. One LLN has produced a series of measurable data for all its activities against which data are being collected (see Appendix 3); in the case of curriculum development these data include:

- number of ASNs successfully bid for
- number of ASNs recruited
- profile of LLN students
- retention rates of LLN students
- percentage of ASNs allocated to vocational curriculum areas
- number of new courses validated
- number of courses delivered via new flexible modes
- percentage increase in applications for courses in key sectors

⁷ HEFCE's earlier method of allocating funding to support ASNs had been on the basis of institutions bidding for such numbers, with the last allocation made under this method being in 2003 when institutions were invited to bid for additional student numbers for foundation degrees only. Since then a new approach has been adopted by HEFCE such that in 2006-07 and 2007-08 (and some for 2008-09) ASNs have been allocated through two funding routes, viz. strategic growth and managed growth. The former involves an element of competitive bidding and the latter is negotiated and allocated on a regional basis. In setting out this new method, HEFCE expected that around a half the numbers for managed growth would be allocated to Fds, with many integrated into LLNs. Further Fd numbers would be supported from HEFCE's strategic development fund, again within LLN provision. (HEFCE, 2005b)

Some LLNs have also undertaken survey work on the new learner constituency: one has gathered some evidence that learners would not have previously progressed from level 3 to level 4 and therefore many are probably new learners in higher education as a result of the LLN's work.

- 4.11 Although HEFCE did not require a standard approach to LLN operations, it appears that all LLNs are in fact using ASNs; indeed it was brought to our attention that one particular LLN that did not request ASNs in its original business plan was urged to do so. In another LLN, interviews indicated that some institutions would not have joined the network if there had not been the prospect of gaining ASNs. Over the three-year period 2006–07 to 2008–09 around 14,700 full-time equivalents (FTEs) will have been awarded to LLNs as new ASNs - amounting to approximately £60m.
- 4.12 ASNs have been used in a variety of ways, but are essentially a way of helping LLNs deliver their strategic priorities. Use has varied from curriculum development (mainly Fds) including the redesign and rebadging of existing courses to continuing professional development (CPD) where there is a clear demand from employers. Some LLNs have stipulated criteria for ASN allocation, which include increasing student numbers on courses that meet skills needs, focusing on the priority curriculum areas, providing clear progression routes, and offering flexibility of provision. Some have met their targets while others have not; there are many reasons for the latter, including employers not wanting the course accredited and the failure of courses to start because of delays in curriculum development.
- 4.13 While ASNs are allocated under three broad categories (Fds, undergraduate and postgraduate) by full or part-time mode, we found a clear focus on LLNs' use of ASNs for Fds. Such a focus may not be surprising given that HEFCE's own revised method for allocating additional student places and funds included some clear expectations about Fd allocations within LLN provision. As noted above, we did find at least one LLN using the undergraduate category for innovative developments targeted at employee CPD needs identified through employer contacts. But the focus on Fds does pose the question as to how far LLNs are meeting the original purpose of developing progression routes into as well as *through* higher education for a range of vocational learner constituencies (including adult learners; those with professional qualifications) for whom programmes, or parts of programmes (e.g. modules at postgraduate level) might be a more appropriate vehicle for access or progression. However, we have found indications that progress is starting to be made in these areas.

Information, advice and guidance

- 4.14 LLN approaches to establishing appropriate IAG for vocational learners (and providers and employers) range from mapping and scoping what currently exists, identifying gaps, building capacity and adding value to existing services, to web-based product development. LLNs' focus on this aspect of core business has varied widely and in many instances has been co-ordinated with work relating to curriculum development and progression. Activity in this area has meant working closely with partner institutions and stakeholders, such as LSCs, SSCs, Aimhigher, Foundation Degree Forward (FdF), and other specialist IAG providers, to identify where the focus needs to be and to ensure that work is not duplicated. We have found examples of LLNs particularly targeting specialist IAG providers (and others with an interest in the activity) to form 'expert advisory groups' to direct the work of the LLN and to ensure against duplication of effort. Some LLNs have linked work in this area to that of Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded projects; others have focused on advertising campaigns, developing hard and soft information packs for both learners and advisers and undertaking staff development for IAG providers to help develop their information, knowledge and expertise bases. A number of LLNs have run staff development events for institutional staff and in particular those staff associated with level 3 courses that had limited knowledge of level 4 provision in the

- 4.15 A number of LLNs have invested in web-based developments, most of which are primarily learner and adviser focused, although one LLN is planning to develop web-based services specifically for employers and another a multi-client learning portal. These developments are innovative and are clearly filling a gap where little or no IAG existed previously for young people taking vocational level 3 courses and adults seeking IAG about higher education study. And there is no doubt that many IAG providers and others are looking forward to using these new tools; however, some of our interviewees (institutional representatives and other stakeholders) noted a degree of scepticism about these developments, in terms of the level of investment needed to support the development initially, but mostly concerning issues of sustainability — especially in terms of the investment that will be required to keep information up to date. However, one LLN is aiming to address this issue by putting the onus on the partner institutions, the incentive being that each partner can brand their part of the site. There are also issues of potential duplication of effort among LLNs, although because most sites are still at a developmental stage or have just been launched, it is not possible to determine the extent to which one LLN's online services development might meet the needs of another. We have, however, come across at least one example of an LLN formally 'borrowing' a development from another and there seems to be a general sharing of good practice between LLNs, some via their regional link-up. Another area that might need future attention, given the LLNs' close workings with relevant SSCs and the latter's own emerging IAG web-based operations, is establishing links between these various sites (and indeed some LLNs are facilitating work in this area through the development of portals with links to other organisations).
- 4.16 It is too early to assess the impact of IAG efforts. There is some evidence of staff in partner institutions and staff in IAG-specific agencies making good use of the information and resultant maps that have been produced, but much less about (potential) learner (and parental) and employer use. We have come across examples of LLNs that have developed strategies for collecting measurable data to establish the impact of their work in this area, such as the number of leaflets distributed and downloaded from a website, usage of websites and types of queries made, number of staff development events and people attending, feedback on products and events, and partner institution involvement in the groups overseeing IAG activities (see Appendix 3). These data, when put beside other data, such as learner applications and recruitment will, in due course, provide valuable information about the success of LLN activity and the value that has been added by that activity.
- 4.17 Where LLN activities have been geared towards adding value to existing IAG providers' operations, some difficulties have been experienced in terms of the 'disjointedness' of specific agencies' work (sometimes limited to particular levels of educational provision), which does not fit well with notions of lifelong learning from individual learners' perspectives. Further, the lack of a policy decision about an overarching adult guidance service may be hampering efforts to develop a more joined-up and seamless service.

Progression agreements

- 4.18 Our interviews have shown that the progression agreement aspect of LLNs' core business has probably been the most divisive among partner institutions and is also the most diverse between LLNs. Divisiveness among partners seems to stem from fears that initiatives in the area of progression agreements could undermine

institutional/departmental autonomy in terms of admissions policies and practices. However, we have not discerned any overall pattern regarding the *type* of institution (e.g. research intensive university, further education college with little higher education provision) where progression agreements have been controversial.

- 4.19 Given the above, which may be linked to an initial confusion about what progression agreements might mean and what they might mean in a network-wide context, we found that some LLNs have been slow to establish work on progression agreements and to obtain 'sign-up' from all partner institutions involved. Others have been quicker off the mark and this seems due to the well-established networks of institutions and agreements, both formal and informal, that existed prior to the setting up of the LLN. However, even those LLNs that appear to be quicker admit that progression agreements take time to get up and running (due to preliminary mapping work of feeders and receivers and disentangling institutional regulations) and that their impact will not be known until well into the life of the network.
- 4.20 LLNs have taken rather different approaches to progression agreements (e.g. identifying problematic routes and formalising existing ones; establishing models and then fitting agreements underneath; scoping skills sets and mapping out existing — and identifying the need for new — provision). Some are limited to bi-lateral agreements between a sending and a receiving course, while others are broader in scope in terms of institutional spread within a locality (sub-region or region). A common approach taken by the majority of LLNs in our study, however, has been to develop an 'in principle' agreement that all partners sign up to under which individual agreements will then be agreed. A number of LLNs have indicated that obtaining 'sign-up' has been the easy part; getting actual progression agreements up and running is much harder because it forces institutions to make changes to their own institutional processes at all levels. Initially, work seems to have focused on 'easy-wins', but some LLNs are now working to expand progression agreements into other areas, such as work-based learning and employers' in-house education and training provision (and indeed one LLN's approach to progression is entirely focused on work-based learning).
- 4.21 From discussions with interviewees, it seems that for many LLNs and their partner institutions the process of developing these agreements has been as important as the outcome itself — in other words the outcome is more than just a signature. Arguably, such continuing processes (and ongoing dialogues) are important outcomes in terms of increasing familiarisation about vocational learners' potential among both course tutors in sending institutions and admissions tutors and course leaders within receiving institutions, as well as establishing good working relationships at an operational level. It is too early to assess whether different types of progression agreements (e.g. bi-lateral course-to-course agreements; multi-course and multi-partner agreements) are more or less likely to have a sustained impact on institutional processes. Certainly, where progression agreements articulate a range of activities designed to facilitate progression for vocational learners, it is anticipated that such activities will become 'part and parcel' of institutional processes. In one LLN, activities range from provision of jointly planned 'progression opportunity awareness' events and open days for learners, regular dialogue between staff to develop good working relationships and ensure up-to-date knowledge of curriculum changes and opportunities to share curriculum developments and collaborate on specific development so as to enhance progression opportunities, to regular feedback between sending and receiving institutions on the learner higher education application process and subsequent progression through particular programmes and beyond.
- 4.22 As noted above, most progression agreements have related to courses/awards, though one LLN is now starting to make distinctions between progression built around awards and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), while another has put considerable effort into auditing existing institutional practice in relation to CAT policies and has established two separate working groups to progress region-wide discussions. However, it would seem

that, for most of our cases, discussions around CAT schemes have been tentative so far. In the case of one LLN this has been a deliberate strategy: it was felt that it would be better to give priority to the establishment of progression agreements and that credit transfer practices would develop in the context of these agreements. As some LLN activities move into the broader arena of working more with employers (for example, accrediting in-house training provision and developing new progression routes), then issues around credit accumulation and transfer may become highlighted. In this context, one LLN is investigating institutions' use of credit and the usefulness of developing a common framework for Fds, in particular the use of credit to support progression from the workplace into higher education.

- 4.23 There has been much discussion within (and between) LLNs around what an agreement might mean: does it guarantee an offer of a place or an interview, or is it a looser concept that aims to provide equality of treatment and opportunity for the vocational learner? Again, this appears to have been a divisive issue for some partner institutions in some LLNs. Thus, in some cases, for the learner the end result in terms of what is on offer appears to differ between partner institutions within LLNs and between LLNs. And in the context of the latter, some institutional partners expressed concerns about potential tensions between progression agreements developed in neighbouring LLNs and how they should/could link up given the wider catchments for higher education in sectors such as construction. However, the dialogue that has taken place has provided its own benefits in terms of highlighting inconsistencies and providing clarity of routes for potential learners. There is also recognition that LLN progression agreements are 'living documents', which need to be monitored regularly, updated and improved.
- 4.24 A couple of LLNs have developed web-based tools to support the promotion and use of progression agreements. These tools aim to map out the progression routes for learners (and employers) to make it easier to identify where the learner is now and where they want to be. One online development allows the user, after identifying the route they wish to take, to print out a 'progression guarantee certificate' that can be presented to the receiving institution to ensure that an interview or an offer (depending upon the actual agreement) is provided. In another LLN, the online development acts as the point of reference for learners (and partner institutions, specialist IAG agencies and employers) by i) bringing together all provision and entry requirements offered by the partner institutions into a 'one-stop shop', which is confirmed and owned by those institutions and ii) focusing upon and providing progression routes and career management information that are tailored to individual learners by taking account of achievements.
- 4.25 While our interviews indicate that it is too early to assess the impact of progression agreements on vocational learners, there are examples of LLN actions to monitor their operation and success. These include measurable data on the number of learners applying/admitted through the progression agreement route, users of the online progression tool, users printing off certificates, number of staff development events and number of practitioners attending, partner institution involvement in the LLN group overseeing the management of progression agreements, as well as annual reviews of learner support activities undertaken (in sending and receiving institutions) as set out in the agreements (see Appendix 3). One LLN has devised a template to be used by LLN staff in undertaking annual monitoring reports on progression agreements and related activities to be agreed with relevant institutional staff (see Appendix 5). As mentioned above, these data, when put beside other data will help determine the success and value that has been added by LLN activity.
- 4.26 Essential to LLN success in this area of work is that of embedding the notion of progression into academic processes and structures and quality assurance procedures. In at least one LLN, work in this context is being conducted between LLN staff and senior staff in institutional registries and their equivalent. In another LLN, curriculum-specific staff development events are held with admissions and central services staff from all relevant

further and higher education institutions; as an outcome, action plans are developed for taking forward and implementing the progression agreements. Another LLN has worked closely with the Strategic Health Authority (SHA) in developing its Learning and Development Agreement (between the SHA, the trusts and providers), into which has been built a progression agreement. One LLN, targeting new curriculum provision at employee CPD needs (identified through employer contacts and its sector development groups), has ensured that discussion of quality assurance aspects relating to progression (including issues of credit transfer and accumulation) involved quality assurance staff at both partner institutional and national levels (see Appendix 6). In demonstrating the impact of progression agreements (including the extent of embeddedness), it will be important that LLNs ensure that changes to institutional practices and processes (e.g. quality assurance processes, admissions policies) are monitored and logged to demonstrate impact and success. In one LLN, which is part of an ongoing regional partnership, there is a clear intent to ensure that every level 3 course on offer — both vocational and academic — leads to a suitable level 4 course. In this context the LLN is seen as a ‘pilot’ and it is anticipated that eventually this policy will be extended to those curriculum areas not currently covered by the LLN’s work.

Other indicators of success

Progress against milestones

- 4.27 Interviews with LLNs have highlighted that the processes of building up genuinely inclusive relationships with institutions and stakeholders 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 of establishing systems and structures has taken time for most LLNs, even for those with pre-existing partnerships and networks. Interviews at one regional LLN indicated that building relationships with stakeholders had been easier than with institutional partners because of the shared ‘footprint’. Other problems reported by LLNs were the institutional bureaucracies that had to be navigated in order get LLN posts established and filled and/or secondments made (and for progression agreements and overarching accords to be signed up to). At one LLN, it was reported that the further education partners were reluctant to second staff to the LLN because of the difficulties in filling the posts; hence, it appears that some LLNs are finding it difficult to recruit further education staff with the relevant expertise and at the right level of seniority. Delays in filling posts have meant that a number of LLNs have been late starters in operational terms; however, the importance of recruiting appropriate staff was emphasised among a number of partner institutions at one LLN, so the delay was considered worthwhile. Our desk research has also drawn attention to the over-ambitiousness of some LLN plans (exacerbated by delays in appointing staff and partnership working), which has become apparent in LLNs’ first years of operation, resulting in underspent budgets and rescaling of activities. In some cases (and with HEFCE’s agreement) such underspends have been turned to advantage (e.g. creating/enhancing development funds to which all partners are invited to bid).
- 4.28 In those LLNs that share or cover part of the regional Higher Level Skills Pathfinders (HLSP), there is a feeling from some that, initially, progress was not helped by the introduction of a potentially duplicating initiative. In one case it was felt that, internally, resources and focus had been diverted while, externally, employers were confused and LLN/HLSP structures were not fully compatible. In another LLN, whilst initially sharing some of these tensions, it was felt that issues had been ironed out through closer working relationships, at least internally. In a third, good working relationships have been established between the two initiatives, which involve monthly meetings between LLN and HLSP staff. In all cases, cross membership on relevant committees and groups has now been established.

4.29 As mentioned above, LLNs have developed or are developing strategies for collecting measurable data to monitor and evaluate progress (see Appendix 3 for one LLN's list of measurable data to assess likelihood of impact). One LLN has set up mechanisms, supported by standard templates, to monitor and evaluate its activities on a regular basis to inform progress, release monies (where necessary) and form the basis of the monitoring reports to HEFCE. Another is setting up a system that will track the number of students (ASNs and those benefiting from progression agreements or an initiative funded through the development fund) who either live in or have been educated in the region. However, we were made aware in our interviews that some LLNs lack good baseline data and monitoring procedures for measuring progress; also interviewees held different definitions of the learner constituency and were thus collecting different data. Urgent attention will need to be given to this if there are serious intentions to gain some measures of impact and 'additionality' (i.e. what have LLNs added that would not have happened if they had never existed).

Institutional commitment

4.30 Given the different origins of the LLNs we visited, we might expect to find varying levels of institutional commitment amongst the various partners. In fact, LLNs themselves recognised the existence of 'hot' and 'cold' spots within their own locality/region. Such 'hot' and 'cold' spots may well be a legacy of earlier and ongoing institutional strategic developments. For example, within one LLN's purview, partnership working between a cluster of institutions had already benefited from significant and sustained capital and recurrent funding (from various sources). Thus, aspects of partnership between educational providers in this cluster to underpin the work of the LLN might not be a top priority for the LLN. In another LLN, a collaborative project involving universities and further education colleges in a particular locality was ongoing and hence it was unrealistic for the LLN to look to engage fully with the providers involved — at least in the early stages of the LLN's operation.

4.31 As noted above, commitment has been variable and partly dependent upon whether the LLN partnership is a pre-existing one or has been developed from scratch. Variability has also been detected in the levels of stakeholder engagement, especially in attendance at meetings. We found that some stakeholders had never attended strategic level meetings in some LLNs; because of this, one LLN was taking steps to review its stakeholder relationships. It is evident that much effort has been expended during the start-up phase on building relationships and gaining trust and buy-in to the LLN mission. There is now a feeling in those LLNs that have experienced problematic relationships with some institutions and stakeholders that doors that had been firmly shut are now open or are beginning to open. Strategies used by LLNs to develop partnership working that are having a positive impact include institutionally-based 'champions' underpinned by well constructed and implemented communication strategies (see Appendix 6), and forging relationships with institutional staff in key strategic positions (e.g. registries, admissions). '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.

4.32 In terms of the 'further education voice' there is clear evidence that certain colleges are actively engaged with the LLN agenda. We found one example where the chair of the Network Board is principal of a 'mixed economy group' (MEG) college. Often those colleges that are actively engaged have good relationships with their accrediting university and other institutions. MEG colleges are noticeable in their active engagement due to shared agendas and the fact that the LLN initiative (along with other initiatives) has provided an income stream for developmental work that would not otherwise be available. Further, such engagement has been found even where much larger sums of monies are available to the college via other strategic funded developments. As noted above,

development funds have been set up by some LLNs with the aim of increasing engagement with partners by 'getting partners to do things rather than having things done for them' (in at least one instance, we are aware that bids are jointly proposed by higher *and* further education partner institutions). Furthermore, much LLN activity provides opportunities for practitioners as well as senior staff of all partner institutions to share experience and best practice, as well as to discuss developments in fora that would not otherwise exist. As LLN activity moves away from 'easy wins', there are signs of a greater range of further education colleges becoming involved.

- 4.33 We have looked at evidence of institutional commitment through membership and attendance at strategic level meetings, practitioner involvement in working groups and attendance at staff development and other events. This does seem to be variable and perhaps is to be expected in the early stages of LLN activities. However, in those LLNs that have experienced problems of institutional and stakeholder engagement, our interviews lead us to believe that attendance and the quality and sophistication of the dialogue at meetings has improved, which one interviewee stated had moved from the 'what's in it for us' to the 'what do we need to do to get involved'. From many of our discussions, it is clear that partnerships have become stronger and more mature because levels of understanding have increased; hence trust has started to replace (actual and perceived) competition. Nevertheless, the LLN agenda will be of less central interest to some partners (and their academic departments) than others, especially some research intensive and other HEIs with oversubscribed courses, as well as further education colleges with little or no higher education provision and limited resource to spare. Even so, it seems that these institutions remain in membership, if only to keep an eye on developments.

Responsiveness to key regional and sector developments

- 4.34 In all cases, LLNs claim to have aligned their priorities to those identified (in a general way) by the LSC and/or the RDA. Some LLNs are represented on regional/sub-regional groupings focusing on strategic aspects of skills development and on economic regeneration and development. In the three regions with HLSP, cross membership on relevant committees is in evidence and in one region a fractional post has been funded by the LLN to project manage one of the HLSP's pilots. Synergies with other related initiatives such as Aimhigher have been developed through, for example, collaborative working on IAG strategies and 14–19 diplomas.
- 4.35 From a SSC perspective, and as mentioned above, there is some sense that engagement is better facilitated where the LLN shares a regional 'footprint' (and hence can be aligned more easily to the SSC's own regional operations). That said, much activity in the early stages of the LLNs' operations has been discussions about the need to work together where priorities overlap but without necessarily achieving clarity on how this will be achieved in practice. In some cases, creative approaches have been taken to aligning strategies and activities to the benefit of a number of stakeholders: for example, jointly funded posts and shared agendas on specific activities.
- 4.36 HEFCE's own survey of LLN engagement with SSCs (undertaken during summer 2007) found that a third of all LLNs had SSC or Sector Skills Development Agency representation at a strategic level of operation, but noted that this raised a question of where the most appropriate level of operational engagement with SSCs lies. The survey found that SSCs were mainly supporting LLNs to develop curricula and this was seen as positive in that it reflected LLNs' own core business.

Employer engagement

- 4.37 Employer engagement runs throughout much LLN activity, but is most evident in curriculum development where employers or employer groups and SSC representatives

have been invited to join working groups to identify gaps in the curricula to support learner progression opportunities. In some LLNs and some curricular areas this is working well (especially the health area because of the clear demand drivers). Appendix 7 describes one LLN's approach to working with employers to develop new Fd provision for those working in a specific employment sector. In other LLNs and curricular areas, difficulties have been experienced in involving employers and developing links with SSCs due to the latter's lack of local presence (i.e. it has been suggested that engagement with SSCs is more successful at the regional level), some SSCs' own priorities not focusing on higher education and in one case SSC staff turnover.

- 4.38 Other means devised by LLNs of engaging with employers include the establishment of specific LLN-funded posts, which are tasked to explore employers' needs and develop relationships with employer groups, supporting learning champions in county councils to re-engage with adult learners and sending learning champions out to employers. One LLN has mainstreamed employer engagement as one of its core businesses and has recruited to posts that will be located in employer organisations related to its main curricular areas to maximise the input from and engagement with employers. However, where there is activity, there is an awareness that many institutions have built up good relationships with business and industry over a number of years and care and sensitivity are required to ensure that these existing relationships and activities are not derailed by LLN activities and priorities. Other tensions were noted in one LLN where the further education partners were working directly with employers on Train to Gain, which focuses priorities on lower level qualifications and could therefore impact on efforts to engage with employers at level 4 (i.e. higher education) and above.
- 4.39 Despite activity to engage with employers, we get the impression that this has not up until now been a priority area of activity in the majority of LLNs. This is understandable, given the well-documented difficulties of engaging employers (especially small to medium-sized enterprises) — and the need for LLNs to balance this work in relation to other strands of LLN activities. However, employer engagement is an example of the shifting policy landscape within which LLNs are operating. This aspect of the LLN agenda has become more important latterly and reflects government's priority for further and higher education links. But, in terms of progression to higher education, much of the focus remains with the young full-time learner in further education and less on re-engaging adults and progression of work-based learners. As one LLN director pointed out, there is a need for more sophisticated tools to work better with employers. To develop these tools, this LLN is funding development projects to find out what works best and why.

Dissemination of practice

- 4.40 There appears to be much LLN activity to disseminate experiences of what does and does not work in practice and to communicate progress through LLN websites and newsletters. A number of LLNs have had 'launch' events, which have attracted a great deal of attention and high attendance. Others have chosen to hold a conference after the first year, aimed at engaging a wide range of people across the network, where the LLN could demonstrate what had already been achieved and highlight future plans. Within the partnerships, LLNs have established specialist working groups where staff can discuss developments and implications relating to aspects of LLN activity (e.g. marketing, planning, admissions), and fora for specific areas of work (e.g. HE in FE, Fds, curricular areas). Staff development events have been organised for practitioners and LLN staff have been able to keep up to date with developments through attendance at conferences. A number of LLNs have highlighted their meetings with neighbouring LLNs, their involvement with the national forum and practitioner groups, as well as links with national bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and Learndirect. We also found examples of sub-regional LLNs coming together at the regional level to share and disseminate practice through regular monthly meetings and organising collaborative events for staff development purposes. Furthermore, in order to minimise duplication of effort among

LLNs, some regional groupings of LLNs agree an LLN co-ordinator to take forward specific LLN tasks and liaison with regional stakeholders (e.g. SSCs, FdF). Clearly, much knowledge arising from LLNs' practices and findings from LLN-funded one-off studies is being shared amongst LLN practitioners. However, it is unclear whether, and how, such knowledge is being shared with wider communities interested in vocational progression and employer engagement.

Embeddedness

- 4.41 A number of points have been noted above in relation to LLNs' efforts to embed their activities (i.e. institutional and stakeholder membership of network groups and specialist working groups, funded posts in institutions and employer organisations to take forward LLN activities, forging links with key institutional staff). On progression agreements, one LLN anticipates that their use might lead to the requirement that course developments indicate progression routes into *and* out of programmes while offering transparency with respect to learner support activities; they could also encourage sending and receiving partners to continually self-evaluate their impact and effectiveness. Another LLN monitors use of its online tools by following up willing users to determine their levels of satisfaction with the responses received from partner institutions and through mystery shopping exercises; the results are then shared with the institutions involved to improve on existing practice (see Appendix 8 for a description of this process). It is evident from our interviews that attempts are being made to embed LLN activities into institutional practices and procedures, but a clear message is that this takes time — 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. One LLN's approach to embeddedness is described in Appendix 6.

Sustainability

- 4.42 From our interviews, and especially those in LLNs that have been operating the longest, attention is now being drawn to issues of sustainability. A number of LLNs have set up working groups to explore this issue and are addressing questions such as: what is it that needs to be sustainable, where might the resource come from, what staffing levels are required and what commitment is there from partners. One LLN is exploring the possibility of partner institutions paying a membership subscription to continue the LLN in some form after the HEFCE funding period. An LLN whose funding from HEFCE has come to an end has since secured HEFCE funding for an employer engagement network, which is intended to build on LLN work and bring more funding via ASNs and revenue to further expand LLN activity (some LLN staff may transfer to this network). While this can be seen as a way of developing and sustaining some LLN activity, and so be beneficial to the area, it was seen by others as yet another short-term limited funding 'fix' with similar long-term sustainability issues to be faced.
- 4.43 At the operational level, a number of LLNs have sustainability built into the criteria used to determine the distribution of development funds; others feel that they are already demonstrating levels of sustainability by raising funds from additional sources. One LLN's business plan builds in sustainability from the beginning. It is reflected in a number of aspects of the LLN's work to ensure they continue once LLN funding ceases, for example:
- ASNs will be subsumed into the lead institution's core numbers;
 - some development projects have been set up to pump-prime new areas, but to successfully bid for these partner institutions have to show that they will take them on;
 - the lead institution has guaranteed that some LLN posts will be made permanent;
 - the web-based development has received pump-priming but the lead institution has agreed to run it on its own server after the HEFCE funding period.

Another LLN anticipates that the very nature of their progression agreements, which set out a range of institutional activities to be undertaken to support student progression, will over time bring about change in behaviour that will become 'part and parcel' of the sending and receiving institutions' practices. There is an expectation that the relevant partners will undertake regular evaluations of the progression agreements (supported by annual monitoring processes currently being undertaken by LLN staff).

- 4.44 However, some concerns have been expressed (by LLN staff, partner institutions and other stakeholders) about emerging government policies and the lack of integration between initiatives established in response to policy shifts (for example, the Higher Level Skills Pathfinders seems to have given rise to some confusion; the possible introduction of Fd awarding powers for further education colleges has caused some tensions in further/higher education partnership working; the use of HEFCE strategic development funds by institutions for employer engagement that overlaps with LLN activities; and the continuing uncertainties about IAG for adults and an adult careers service). On the other hand, there is a sense in some LLNs, especially those that have been established the longest and/or are based on pre-existing strategic partnerships, that there is a future after the HEFCE-funded period, but probably not at the current funding levels. It has also been suggested that to ensure sustainability, some LLNs, especially those at sub-regional level, might need to link up.

Additionality

- 4.45 In terms of additionality — what have LLNs added that would not have happened if they had never existed — this is a difficult and complex concept to address. Many LLNs have said that it is too soon to say because activities and outputs are still ongoing or under development. Furthermore, it is impossible to produce hard evidence to show that developments would or would not have taken place anyway. This seems particularly relevant in the area of developing new Fds to help progression, where arguably an LLN's ASNs could have been secured directly by institutions via an existing network.
- 4.46 LLNs have drawn our attention to the following areas of additionality: strengthened partnership working (and indeed one LLN has had requests from employers and providers outside its geographical area to join the network); providing resources to make things happen (i.e. acting as a catalyst), especially in the further education partners; providing new IAG resources that clearly fill a gap at local level, especially for adults looking at possibilities to progress to higher education (as nothing existed before); the economies of scale offered to smaller institutions as a result of partnership working; and improved communications and understanding between partners, which have led to better services for learners and greater trust and openness between partners. For employers, where LLNs have achieved successful engagement, the benefits are very much about the LLN as a 'portal' to the partner institutions, making the universities and colleges more accessible and responsive.
- 4.47 Additionality is an important element of the evaluation of the LLN initiative, but it is not one that we can answer with any degree of certainty in an interim evaluation. Additionality is something for the LLNs themselves to demonstrate — with support from HEFCE — through robust monitoring processes and the collection and use of measurable data. It is also for the summative evaluation to address.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- 5.1 LLNs are making progress in terms of encouraging institutions to offer curricula and put in place procedures that, in the fullness of time, could make a significant difference to the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners. However, it is too soon to be able to make substantive and well-evidenced statements about LLNs' overall progress on meeting this overarching objective of the LLN initiative. It is clear that much time and effort has already been expended on the important tasks of establishing LLNs as new, independent organisations (i.e. independent of any single institution) and developing relationships between various institutional partners and other stakeholders. Such ongoing relationships, together with more concrete activities (be it improving the accessibility and coherence of relevant information, advice and guidance; offering new curricula and improving the alignment between curricula offered at different levels and in more accessible ways; improving the transition between different episodes of learning experienced by individuals) should, in time, make a difference.
- 5.2 From this interim evaluation we can say, in relation to the three core LLN businesses, that:
- most LLNs have undertaken mapping and scoping work of existing provision. Much curriculum development (thus far) has focused on activities relating to Fds (and young, full-time learners in college, rather than work-based and adult learners), but the balance of effort between new and existing provision is unclear. Further, the focus on Fd developments does pose questions as to how far LLNs are meeting the purpose of developing progression into and *through* higher education for a range of learner constituencies with differing needs in terms of educational provision;
 - approaches to establishing appropriate IAG for vocational learners (and employers) range from mapping and scoping what currently exists, identifying gaps, building capacity (both amongst institutional partners, and specialist IAG agencies) and adding value to existing services to developing web-based products. Though there is some evidence of staff in partner institutions and specialist agencies making good use of the information and resultant maps that have been produced, there is much less about potential learner and employer use. Further, in terms of web-based services and products, well-founded questions about the cost effectiveness of these have been raised, given initial investment costs and anticipated costs of sustainability;
 - LLNs have taken rather different approaches to progression agreements (with some being primarily bi-lateral between a sending and a receiving institution while others are much broader in scope in terms of institutional spread within a locality). This aspect of LLN business has probably been the most divisive among partner institutions (particularly in relation to what an agreement means in practice), but for many, the process of developing the agreements has been as important as the outcome itself. Arguably the continuing processes and dialogues between partner institutions are important outcomes in terms of increasing familiarisation among staff about vocational learners' potential to access and progress through higher education, establishing good working relationships at an operational level and embedding practices into institutional processes (e.g. admissions policies, quality assurance procedures).
- 5.3 Given the differing origins of the LLNs, varying levels of institutional commitment amongst the partners are to be expected, and will be partly dependent on whether the LLN partnership is a pre-existing one or has been developed from scratch. Currently there are

'hot' and 'cold' spots within most LLNs, but the establishment of institution-based 'champions' supported by well constructed and implemented communication strategies as well as the forging of relationships with institutional staff in key strategic positions (e.g. registries, admissions) seem to be effective ways of creating and maintaining commitment. 'Hard cash' (e.g. in the form of ASNs, funds for development activities) is also a powerful tool for gaining buy-in and building relationships between partners, but arguably LLNs need to be more proactive in developing and sustaining institutional commitment.

- 5.4 Engagement with other relevant stakeholders is rather patchy (especially in relation to SSCs), though improving. Much discussion took place in the early stages of LLN operations about the need to work together where priorities overlap, but LLNs now need to move from discussions towards more focused activities.
- 5.5 Despite employer engagement running throughout much LLN activity, some activities to engage with employers have, up until now, not been a priority area for all LLNs. But this aspect of the LLN agenda has become more important latterly (and is an example of the shifting policy landscape within which LLNs are having to operate) and is one that all LLNs need to address.
- 5.6 Attempts are being made to embed LLN activities into institutional practices and procedures, but it is clear that such embedding will take time. LLNs will need to monitor and log such practices to demonstrate impact and success. Linked to the notion of embeddedness is the question of sustainability. Those LLNs that have been operating the longest are now giving attention to this issue. Some are looking to secure HEFCE monies for new activities (e.g. employer engagement) that would build on LLN work, though the drawing-down of yet another tranche of short-term funding is likely to bring its own long-term sustainability issues. Approaches more dependent on institutions themselves building-in certain activities to their day-to-day operations and procedures are more likely to have longevity.
- 5.7 Whilst LLN operations can be seen, to some extent, to be operating within a reference frame of equality and diversity, few LLNs make specific reference to these issues in their monitoring reports.
- 5.8 Issues of value for money are difficult to address, not least because each LLN has developed its own costed plan to provide solutions to perceived needs, reflecting the local economic context and regional (sub-regional) skills needs. Further, financial information is not reported in a consistent format (nor, in some cases, a competent manner), which means that there is little comparative financial data from which to start discussions about value for money.
- 5.9 The question of additionality — what have LLNs added that would not have happened if they had never existed — is a difficult and complex issue that cannot be answered with any degree of certainty yet. There are many potential aspects to additionality: strengthened partnership working; providing resources to make things happen; providing new courses and new IAG resources to fill gaps; new progression opportunities; more vocational learners accessing and progressing through higher education; economies of scale offered to smaller institutions through partnership working; improved communications and understanding between partners; new understandings about learner and employer behaviours. However, providing tangible measures of some of these may be rather difficult, though clearly the regular monitoring being undertaken by LLNs should go some way to providing some of the information. Whilst LLNs are producing regular monitoring reports (for themselves and HEFCE), some lack good baseline data. As outcomes from processes start to emerge, these will also need monitoring and logging so that some sense of the extent to which LLNs may be adding value can be gained.

5.10 In reaching this point (some two years into the LLN initiative) LLNs have been faced with a number of challenges:

- delays in staff recruitment (often exacerbated by due processes within large institutions and availability of appropriate staff) and under-estimations of the resources needed for ground clearing work (both in terms of establishing relationships, and baseline information) has meant that not all activities planned for the first year have been effectively undertaken;
- establishing relationships between a range of providers (with their own histories, and missions, which themselves may be shifting) and with other stakeholders is one aspect; establishing shared understandings of the nature and activities of LLNs is another. Progress towards reaching such shared understandings has been hampered by shifting government priorities, uncertainties at policy level, and perceptions of initiative overload, overlap and duplication;
- in terms of IAG, those LLNs seeking to add value to existing IAG providers' activities have faced some difficulties in terms of the disjointedness between different agencies' work (sometimes limited to particular levels of educational provision), which does not sit well with notions of lifelong learning from the individual learner's perspective. Further, ongoing uncertainties at the policy level about an overarching adult guidance service may be hampering efforts to develop a more joined-up and seamless service;
- moving towards shared understandings of progression agreements has been particularly difficult for a number of LLNs, since such devices can be seen as undermining institutions' own autonomy in terms of admissions. Moreover, changed processes (emanating from funded projects) may be only a part of the equation; changing hearts and minds, and individuals' behaviours are arguably much greater challenges. Shared visions may be less easy to establish across a region or sub-region, than in a particular locality;
- pressure on LLNs (from HEFCE) to show tangible outcomes within the first year of operation has led to a focus on 'easy wins' and expedient actions in most LLNs, with an emphasis on young, full-time learners (in college) rather than work-based and adult learners. But as LLNs themselves gain more experience, they are evidently making some progress with a broader range of (potential) learners and providers, while also starting to develop the right tools to do this more effectively. But engaging work-based and adult learners is a much more difficult and time consuming task.

5.11 We also note that HEFCE's encouragement for LLNs to develop their own solutions to meet the overarching LLN objective as well as regional/sub-regional and sectoral needs (in terms of progression opportunities for vocational learners) may have led, inadvertently, to LLNs failing to maximise opportunities for developing shared solutions — certainly in the early days of the LLN initiative. However, since the establishment of the national forum and practitioner groups in 2006, it is evident that LLNs have taken opportunities to share practices at these and other fora.

Recommendations

5.12 By its very nature, HEFCE's LLN initiative is time- and funding-limited, but has an underlying aim of trying to make a sustained difference for vocational learners. This has implications for the continuing work of LLNs, in terms of both assessing if they are making a difference and also whether any such differences will be sustained beyond the lifetime of the initiative.

Lessons for LLNs

5.13 Given the above, we make the following recommendations in respect of LLNs:

- a) LLNs need to be monitoring their own activities (i.e. curriculum developments; information, advice and guidance; progression agreements) and outcomes on a regular basis using appropriate measurable data (including learner and employer usage) to gain a sense of the extent to which they may be adding value. More attention needs to be given to what are meaningful measures for LLNs to develop and use, and to use these well (**section 4.29 refers**);
- b) LLNs need to improve the standard of their financial reporting in conjunction with advice from HEFCE (see also 5.19c below) (**section 4.5 refers**);
- c) LLNs now need to move (quickly) beyond the 'easy wins' and make concerted efforts to tackle more challenging aspects of vocational progression (e.g. work-based and adult learners, apprentices) and to encompass the full range of HE qualifications. Even if not all such efforts succeed, the lessons learned need to be captured, logged and disseminated to other LLNs and wider constituencies (**section 4.13 refers**);
- d) IAG work should be directed towards supporting and building on existing provision, rather than duplicating it, and links with other emerging IAG web-based developments should be investigated where appropriate (**section 4.17 refers**);
- e) web-based services and outputs should be closely monitored and evaluated to demonstrate value for money and additionality, with the outcomes disseminated widely (**sections 4.15 and 4.16 refer**);
- f) LLNs, through HEFCE and the national forum, should explore the extent to which web-based developments might be rationalised across the initiative and with other relevant stakeholder bodies' developments (e.g. SSCs and LSC) (**sections 4.15 and 4.17 refer**);
- g) LLNs need to develop methods of monitoring the success or otherwise of progression agreements, including how they are working in practice, issues arising from such usage and the extent to which they are becoming embedded into the routine practices and processes of providers (**section 4.25 refers**);
- h) levels of institutional commitment and equality across partnerships need to be kept under review and issues of lack of, or barriers to, engagement addressed with relevant senior institutional managers (**sections 4.30 – 4.33 refer**);
- i) levels of commitment of those stakeholders formally involved in LLNs need to be kept under review and appropriate actions taken where necessary (**section 4.31 refers**);
- j) LLNs and partner institutions need to be committed to and develop ways of embedding practices to ensure coherence, clarity and certainty of progression

opportunities into institutional processes (i.e. admissions policies, quality assurance procedures) (**section 4.41 refers**);

- k) LLNs, with HEFCE, should explore ways of sharing LLN practice and activities among the wider academic community. One means might be through increased use of the Higher Education Academy's subject centres and other networks, as well as the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) initiative (**sections 4.33, 4.40 and 4.41 refer**);
- l) issues of sustainability need to be addressed by LLNs as early as possible (e.g. what needs to be sustained; what levels of commitment exist in the network; what type and level of resource would be required; where might funding be sourced) (**sections 4.42 – 4.44 refer**);
- m) given that the employer engagement arena is an increasingly crowded one, LLNs should play to their strengths by bringing together academics and employers, developing niche markets (i.e. in curriculum development and progression opportunities) and being aware of (and exploring opportunities to link with) other initiatives (**sections 4.37 – 4.39 refer**).

Lessons for HEFCE

- 5.14 In the desk research and fieldwork undertaken for this interim evaluation, we have identified a number of issues that HEFCE should take on board, especially as it continues to develop and launch various (short-term) funded initiatives. We acknowledge that the LLN initiative has been innovative in terms of policy development in that it was a move away from the normal 'top-down' HEFCE bidding process (involving institutional bids being assessed against prescribed criteria) to one that was 'bottom-up' based on a negotiated process with proposers. However, we would suggest that many of the potential proposals were 'talked-up' in terms of plans and anticipated achievements and outputs. Moreover, once funded, activities may have been biased towards 'easy wins' (at least in the early stages, and especially where there have been delays in operation) such that measures of tangible outcomes and easily quantifiable indicators of performance could be reported to the funder in the required time-frames. But such ways of working may not, in fact, capitalise on the opportunity provided by pump-priming initiatives involving the disbursement of one-off funds to experiment and tackle the more difficult aspects of the endeavour for fear of falling short of targets. HEFCE may need to put greater effort into encouraging those making proposals to focus on the more challenging aspects and propose realistic plans. Further, in seeking indicators of performance (to measure against initial plans), HEFCE should seek to place an appropriate emphasis on gaining an understanding of factors underlying failures as well as successes and to disseminate such findings appropriately. HEFCE might wish to review the level of resource it devotes to monitoring, challenging and supporting initiatives of this nature.
- 5.15 At the outset, HEFCE emphasised it did not have a single model for LLNs, although the three core businesses were seen as fundamental. Such an approach allows for flexibility and diversity. However, we have noted above that this approach may have inadvertently led to LLNs failing to maximise opportunities for developing shared solutions, especially in the early stages. Further, such diversity can create some difficulties when trying to make comparative judgements on progress across the LLNs. We suggest that additional guidance relating to reporting (as recommended in 5.19b) could well assist HEFCE to gain a better understanding of progress being made across the range of LLNs.
- 5.16 As noted in this report, LLN-funded development work relates to a range of activities, including small-scale studies of particular 'players' (e.g. potential learners' decisions about HE; employers' decisions about engaging with HE). The findings from such studies may be valuable to other LLNs and to much wider constituencies, as well as to HEFCE, and

could add to existing knowledge bases, but it is unclear how such findings are being captured for such wider dissemination at present.

- 5.17 We have also noted that LLNs have been allocating ASNs in different ways; we recognise that at this point in LLNs' operations there is little detailed data on actual student numbers and progression. We suggest that HEFCE should examine the data in due course to get a better sense of how ASNs have been used in practice (in this and other initiatives).
- 5.18 We have noted that web-based IAG services and products are being developed by a number of LLNs (sometimes aligned to other JISC-funded development work). Again it is too early to assess the value of these activities (both one-off and linked), but clearly HEFCE should be trying to gain a better understanding of such developments to inform future work.
- 5.19 Given the foregoing, we recommend that HEFCE should:
- a) continue to discuss with other agencies and government departments the desirability of creating conditions whereby policies can be developed in a coherent and interlocking fashion, against which particular activities can then be delivered in a planned and sustained manner to meet the agreed agenda. The current situation (of actual and perceived duplication and initiative overload, as well as ongoing uncertainties) does not necessarily engender conditions wherein all parties are working towards a common goal (**sections 4.3, 4.17, 4.28 and 4.44 refer**);
 - b) provide more specific guidance to LLNs on establishing baseline data and monitoring procedures for measuring progress, as well as for reporting successes and failures (if any) such that some comparable measures of additionality can be captured (**section 4.29 refers**);
 - c) provide more specific guidance to LLNs on financial reporting (say through producing a simple standard format for reporting expenditure on basic salaries, premises costs and identifiable expenditure in respect of development funds, web-based developments, etc.) (**section 4.5 refers**);
 - d) consider a review of the level of resource it devotes to monitoring, challenging and supporting initiatives of this nature (**sections 4.4 – 4.6 and 4.29 refer**);
 - e) scope out and commission a study on the use of ASNs (**sections 4.11 – 4.13 refer**);
 - f) scope out and commission a study on the costs and benefits of web-based developments linked to information, advice and guidance (including those aligned to other JISC-funded developments) and the extent to which these might be rationalised across the initiative and with other relevant stakeholder bodies' IAG developments (e.g. SSCs and LSC) (**sections 4.15 and 4.17 refer**);
 - g) actively capture the findings from LLN-funded one-off studies and messages (positive and negative) about LLN operations and practices to inform both the LLN and wider constituencies with an interest in vocational progression and employer engagement (**sections 4.40, 5.14 and 5.16 refer**).
- 5.20 Finally, we note that the evaluation of the earlier HEFCE-funded widening participation programme (involving 25 regional partnerships) concluded that collaboration between institutions was an effective way to widen participation in higher education and that there was a danger that initiatives to widen participation are short-term, with the benefits not sustained beyond the funding period. That evaluation concluded with a series of

recommendations (HEFCE, 2003, pp. 52-53). It is evident that a number of these have been taken into account in developing this LLN initiative. Nevertheless, we note that the earlier evaluation made a number of specific recommendations in relation to monitoring, evaluation and tracking — some of which are replicated above (in particular, the need for more specific guidance on establishing baseline data and monitoring activities such that some comparable measures of additionality might emerge). We recognise that the LLN initiative marks an innovative experiment in bottom-up policy development based on a process of negotiation, rather than bidding against prescribed criteria set by HEFCE. Given this approach, HEFCE took a decision not to prescribe in detail the nature of monitoring activities that LLNs were expected to undertake since such prescription could undermine the diversity and variety of approaches that LLNs might adopt to meet the overarching objective of the initiative. However, we would suggest that any new HEFCE initiative based on this approach should provide more guidance, particularly on appropriate monitoring processes, from the outset to enable judgements to be made about value for money and additionality.

Appendix 1: Desk research and the LLNs involved

Cheshire and Warrington LLN

The Creative Way

Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance

Greater Merseyside and West Lancashire LLN

Herefordshire and Worcestershire LLN

Higher Futures (South Yorkshire LLN)

Higher York LLN

Kent and Medway LLN

Linking London

MOVE — East of England

National Arts Learning Network

North East Higher Skills Network

Skills for Sustainable Communities

South West LLN

Sussex Learning Network

West London LLN

Appendix 2: Exemplar A

South West Lifelong Learning Network (SWLLN) — Employer engagement and competency lexicon/APEL development

Introduction

The network's main focus is on the continuing personal and professional development of employees working in key sectors in the South West, such as public services, heritage, tourism and hospitality. The network is developing a 'competency lexicon' tool designed to:

- represent the anticipated capabilities of the workforce required in the public, tourism and heritage sectors;
- inform the curriculum associated with the identified skills and competencies; and as such,
- become a mechanism that enables consistent Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in the academic institutions that the SWLLN encompasses.

The competency lexicon is a compendium of broad-ranging organisational and individual competencies covering a spectrum of organisational levels ranging from the senior executive level through to operational and implementation scales. The competencies are aligned to a hierarchical framework for attributes, skills and competencies (not dissimilar to National Occupational Standards).

SWLLN uses a rigorous and comprehensive method to develop the lexicon involving a number of procedural steps, viz. identification, validation, expansion and conversion.

1. Identification

In assessing viability with supplier and user groups *the relevant* levels of competency needed to be identified. This process included a needs analysis of the user groups and the subsequent adaptation of the competency lexicon to a constituent part known as the Competency Lexicon Prompt. A précised version of the lexicon was developed into a workable document that has been trialled with the primary employer groups. Initial consultations carried out with the primary groups (including the Association of Devon Parishes and the South Somerset Voluntary Sector) comprised focus group sessions and individual in-depth interviews.

2. Validation

The Competency Lexicon Prompt was then presented to supplier and user groups in order to ascertain relevance and applicability of the various competencies and behaviours that had already been identified through the consultation process. Groups were asked to comment on the various sections and suggest how applicable the various components of the lexicon were to their own working environments. What was overwhelmingly clear was that the lexicon provided users with a mechanism for identifying existing skills and knowledge that had previously been unrecognised by the practitioner. This step of the lexicon APEL transition is ongoing.

3. Expansion

Following their validation, the competency elements and associated behaviours have been examined for ambiguous behavioural elements. The research has identified the relevant *active* words and phrases that need to be expanded into learning outcomes so that equivalence with higher education programme specifications can be facilitated. These phrases/words have been presented to the relevant learner/supplier groups. Beginning in early 2007 and continuing throughout the year, an analysis of these results has been conducted and the Competency/APEL conversion process begun.

4. Conversion

The conversion process will involve the use of a Competency/APEL conversion matrix. The matrix disaggregates the various competency components so that experiential learning can be converted into learning outcomes ultimately leading to accreditation. This accreditation (depending upon the level of experience) may provide exemption from either specific modules or from an entire HE/FE course. Using the outcomes from the active words/phrases in the competency matrix the knowledge, skills and attributes will be identified for a particular competency. These elements can then be converted into actual work-based experiential attainment.

Continuing work

Once the above stages have been completed, the next step is to stratify the level to which experiential learning relates. This will ultimately depend upon the institutional requirements and the course description. These elements will form part of a progression process. For modular courses, APEL will depend either upon the Definitive Module Records (DMR) and the relevant learning outcomes required for that module, or the overall programme learning outcomes.

Appendix 3: Exemplar B

Sussex Learning Network — Measurable data to assess LLN impact

The following list of measurable data has been developed by the Sussex Learning Network. The data follow the network's seven objectives and are used to show evidence of impact. The data are collected and reported regularly to the network's board. At present, data are mainly baseline and as such the evidence being collected will measure 'likelihood of impact' rather evidence of impact.

SLN Objective:	What we will measure
1,000 extra higher education places for vocational learners	Number of ASNs successfully bid for
	Number of ASNs recruited to
	Profile of SLN students
	Retention rates of SLN students
	% of ASNs allocated to vocational curriculum areas
	Number of unique users of Foundation Degree (FD) in Sussex website
	% of users of FD in Sussex website reporting satisfaction with the site
	Involvement of partners in joint marketing group
Improved provision in 7 key sectors	Involvement of partners in joint planning group
	Involvement of partners in HE in FE co-ordinators group
	Number of new courses validated
	Number of courses delivered via new flexible modes
	% increase in applications for courses in key sectors
Guaranteed progression from further to higher education	Number of staff development events on progression agreements held for practitioners
	Number of users of online progression tool
	Number of learners printing off progression guarantee 'certificates'
	Involvement of partners in SVPA ⁸ management group.
	Number of learners applying via progression agreements
	Number of learners admitted via progression agreements
Better information, advice and guidance for all	Number of leaflets distributed
	% of students and practitioners reporting satisfaction with leaflets
	Number of action packs downloaded
	Number of unique users of FD in Sussex website site per month
	% of users of FD in Sussex website reporting satisfaction with the site
	Number of people using Learning Opportunities question resource
	% of students and practitioners reporting satisfaction with Learning Opportunities
	Levels of positive feedback on Learning Opportunities
	Participation in IAG group

⁸ Sussex Vocational Progression Accord.

Professional development for teachers and trainers	Number of events for IAG staff run
	Number attending SLN conference
	Number of events run
	Number attending SLN events
	Usage of practitioner network section of website
Further and higher education partnerships that meet employers' needs	Usage of employer zone section of website
	% of employers reporting satisfaction with employer zone
	Levels of positive feedback on Learning Opportunities
Opportunities for learners to have their say	Involvement of students in developing student network
	Number of case studies on web site
	Number of articles on site written by students
	Number of newsletters to be produced
	Frequency of updating of website content
	Number of attendees at event

Appendix 4: Exemplar C

North East Higher Skills Network (NEHSN) — Supporting apprentice progression to higher level learning

Background

Recognising the potential to increase apprentice participation in higher-level learning by developing information, advice and guidance (IAG), which has traditionally focused on progression into employment, the NEHSN has contracted with two key partners that have established infrastructures and networks with work-based learning providers (WBLP) offering apprenticeships. Both organisations will focus upon the NEHSN's key themes but will develop sustainable IAG practice to support apprentices' progression to higher-level learning. The two key partners are:

- The North East Chamber of Commerce, which has its own apprenticeship programme and access to an extensive employer membership.
- Tees Valley Work Based Learning Network comprising 50 independent training providers offering apprenticeships and who have their own employer networks.

The North East Chamber of Commerce (NECC)

An IAG co-ordinator located with the NECC began work in July 2007 to develop IAG in WBLPs. Four WBLPs located across the region have been identified to develop and disseminate good IAG practice to other similar providers in the North East. They will also identify the barriers to progression encountered by apprentices.

The network commenced operations in October 2007 and the four providers are currently reviewing Individual Learning Planning processes. They have introduced IAG for higher-level learning during pre-entry interviews and this will continue throughout the apprentice's programme. A standardised format has been developed to record IAG interventions to ensure continuity, consistency and support evaluation.

As the knowledge and skills required to deliver effective IAG for progression to higher-level learning vary, topics for staff development have been identified and networks of existing specialist staff within HE providers are being compiled and shared to act as points of referral.

An existing programme to support progression to HE — Passport — which was designed for full-time learners in schools and colleges and delivered by the University of Teesside, is being developed in consultation with the IAG co-ordinator and the four partners to meet the needs of work-based learners in the south of the region. Once development is complete, work-based learners will be offered flexible tasters and IAG one-to-ones in groups on WBLP's premises or at the university. Access to subject specialists, open days and subject-specific visits to the university will be arranged at times to accommodate the apprentice.

Each provider and the IAG co-ordinator will be working with NEHSN to produce progression agreements from apprenticeships to higher-level learning.

Tees Valley Work Based Learning Network (TVWBLN)

TVWBLN leads a vibrant network of apprenticeship providers and has effective links with 70 schools, their pupils and parents.

IAG for progression to higher skills is promoted by TVWBLN staff to their contacts in schools, WBLPs, learners and their parents.

Apprentices are offered IAG by two TVWBLN staff and, if they are interested in higher-level learning, advisers make referrals to existing provision. They also negotiate new learning options; for example, when an apprentice wishes to remain in employment at the end of their training, TVWBLN liaises with the university or college on behalf of the learner and their employer initially to discuss progression. As one of the main higher-level learning providers in Tees Valley, the University of Teesside has been available for visits outside office hours for apprentices where they have been advised about their options by subject specialists. Modules that take approximately eight weeks to complete and that are relevant to the learner's workplace have been developed by the university. Progression from the initial modules is under development.

Employers are providing a financial contribution to each module.

Twenty-three apprentices have already progressed to higher-level learning and there is a further group of learners due to commence a leadership and management module.

Appendix 5: Exemplar D

MOVE — Progression accord monitoring template

MOVE has developed a template for use by institutional partners and MOVE progression magnet co-ordinators (PMCs) to monitor the use of Progression Accords (PAs) (see extract below).

The PMCs are responsible for conducting monitoring meetings between further education (FE) tutors and HE admission officers (the 'senders' and 'receivers'), for completing the individual PA reports, and analysing, collating and reporting findings to wider MOVE constituencies (both LLN operational staff and institutional and other partners in the LLN).

The monitoring process is as follows:

1. PMCs arrange monitoring meetings with senders and receivers and email them a part-completed report that includes the details of each respective PA and the specified agreed progression support activities listed.
2. In advance of monitoring meetings, senders and receivers complete the section of the template that is designed to monitor the extent to which progression support activities have been scheduled, implemented and reviewed.
3. This part-completed template is used as the basis for discussion in the monitoring meeting. The target for the meeting is to identify any barriers to implementation, including agreed solutions or amendments with agreed timescales, to identify good practice and to drive the process of embedding this within the practice of progression.
4. PMCs then record the outcomes of these meetings and report to the relevant MOVE director.
5. PMCs also analyse and collate the findings and report to progression magnet partners (HEIs, FECs and other sector representative organisations within a sub-regional area). These findings are also reported to MOVE sector and cross-sector teams to identify common issues and opportunities for sharing best practice across the region.
6. The overall findings are then collated within a regional report which is disseminated to all network partners.

EXTRACT FROM MOVE PROGRESSION ACCORD MONITORING REPORT

PMC completing the report

Employment sector

Sending institution/organisation

Sending course/programme

Sending tutor/manager/mentor

Date of monitoring report

Number of guaranteed places

Receiving institution/organisation

Receiving course/programme

Receiving tutor/manager/mentor

Section 1 *To be completed by MOVE PMC*

Monitoring overview	Yes/No	Comments/Actions	Responsibility	Date
1. Has the Accord been signed by appropriate senior institutional representatives?				
2. Has the Accord been signed by appropriate course level staff?				
3. Has the Annual Activity Programme been agreed by appropriate course level staff?				
4. Has the Annual Activity Programme been implemented fully?				
5. Has the Annual Activity Programme been reviewed by appropriate course level staff?				
6. Has the Annual Activity Programme been agreed for the following year by appropriate course level staff?				
7. Have the guaranteed places been fully recruited?				
8. Have the number of guaranteed places been agreed for the following year and if so at what number?				
9. Has the Accord encouraged staff collaboration and development and if so how?				
10. Has the Accord been publicised to potential learners and if so how?				

Section 2 Annual Activity Programme monitoring. This section should be jointly completed by sending and receiving tutors/managers/mentors

Month	Activities identified in Annual Activity Programme to support progression. Insert the specific activities agreed in each Progression Accord. The activities included here are indicative only.	Activity Implemented Yes/No	Comments/Actions Identify good practice, any reasons for not implementing activities and actions to improve the Annual Activity Programme	Responsibility	Date
	FE and HE Programme Managers/Tutors meet to confirm the annual plan and agree success criteria and number of learners to be offered a guaranteed place				
	<p>FE Programme will be advised of professional, academic or other changes to the provision of HE programme.</p> <p>Where appropriate the HE staff and learners will contribute to the FE induction programme.</p> <p>The HE and FE programmes will exchange academic calendars.</p> <p>Relevant [FE Programme] staff inducted in relation to [HE Institution]'s virtual learning environment (VLE) as appropriate</p>				
	<p>FE tutors to conduct progression tutorials raising awareness of opportunities to progress to [name of HE Institution] HE programmes.</p> <p>[FE Programme] learners inducted in relation to [HE Institution] VLE as appropriate</p> <p>All [FE programme] learners register on MOVE ePortfolio</p>				

Appendix 6: Exemplar E

Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) — Embeddedness

The GMSA existed as a membership organisation prior to the Lifelong Learning initiative, but has fully integrated LLN objectives within it as its major, substantial project. As such, it is committed to a strategic long-term approach to lifelong learning and employer engagement. It has focused on value-added activity and projects that are self-sustaining as far as possible beyond initial LLN development funding. In practical terms, the GMSA approach is to ensure that whatever processes or systems are developed, they should 'fit' as far as possible with existing institutional processes and systems. Where change is needed (and this need for change is recognised by institutions), the GMSA seeks to put additional resources into institutions to instigate and support such change. This may mean facilitating staff development or developing new ways of managing data, of presenting course information, of developing curricula, of quality assuring awards and of handling applications that include progression agreements. There are many specific examples of this approach.

The GMSA engages with a very considerable number of institutions and stakeholders — over 300 on a regular, formal basis — and there is widespread and enthusiastic support for the network. There is clear evidence from stakeholders and employers that the GMSA has made an impact in terms of being part of the Greater Manchester (GM) landscape and is consequently making active contributions to regional and national initiatives such as BBC North People Development group, pro.manchester⁹ skills group, the Manchester Managing Information across Partnerships Project (MIAP)¹⁰, the GMSA /Aimhigher 14–19 Diploma Progression Forum¹¹, the NW FdF Employer Based Training and Accreditation (EBTA) project, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, the Joint Forum for Higher Levels and the Credit Issues Development Group.

A key component of the strategy to sustain commitment from partner institutions has been the creation of 24 'Champions' in each member college, university and work-based learner provider as well as in key stakeholder organisations, such as Aimhigher. Typically, Champions in the FE colleges are staff with senior responsibilities for HE within their institutions and in the HEIs they are often staff with a significant cross-institutional widening participation remit. These institutions receive modest funding for the release and contribution of the Champions and the Champion network is particularly active and dynamic. There is a well-developed communications strategy with the Champions playing a key role in dissemination and advocacy. Among the mechanisms employed to ensure that Champions are well informed and competent in the role is an induction programme, an annual two-day residential event, a six weekly forum, termly visits by GMSA managers, regular email updates and an informative website. Complementing the work of the Champions are the eight sector-focused development groups, led by a member of staff from a partner institution. This network of groups also provides the mechanism by which a wide range of employers and employer intermediary bodies — such as the sector skills councils — engage with the GMSA.

Much of the communications strategy for the Champions, as outlined above, also embraces the Sector Development Group leads, enabling GMSA activities to be embedded at both strategic and operational (subject) levels as well as providing a platform for shared practice and collaborative solutions.

⁹ A network of private sector employers comprising 80% of the Finance and Professional Services sector in GM.

¹⁰ The GMSA is one of the first organisations within the higher education sector with the ability to assign students a Unique Learner Number. This will support learner tracking, PDPs and development of a range of learner facing support services through the GMSA portal.

¹¹ Developing IAG resources to support advisors.

As well as embedding the work of the GMSA through individual institutional roles, one of the most significant examples of sustainable impact has been the work on quality assurance (QA) processes. A 'Heads of Quality Group' has met since the GMSA was founded with the remit to act as an expert advisory panel for QA matters relating to the partnership working between FE and HE, and more latterly the GMSA's developments such as credit transfer, collaborative provision and APEL with a view to developing as far as possible, cross-institutional QA procedures and mechanisms. This group has been central to the development of the credit transfer and module catalogue scheme through which collaborative CPD and employer-led HE will be developed. This group is now instrumental in the development of the underpinning QA framework to ensure that these new short awards are sustainable within the funding and QA processes and regulations of the participating universities. This complex and innovative work is currently led by Manchester Metropolitan University supported by the universities of Bolton, Salford, and Manchester as well as by a GMSA officer and a GMSA-funded consultant. This work also affords the opportunity for the GMSA to engage more widely within the region by involving the University of Huddersfield through the University Centre, Oldham as well as seeking QAA advice to ensure the work is aligned with national and European frameworks, and particularly the work of the Burgess Group¹².

A particular challenge for such a large and diverse partnership was the strategic development of new provision to maximise 'fit' with GM higher level skills needs¹³ and ensure institutions had equal and open access to ASNs and development funding. For GM institutions to collaborate in the area of new programme development and to provide a strategic and collective response to employer needs was a challenge for the partnership and it has taken time to develop the trust and understanding to move forward an employer-led model of new programme development. Significant progress has been made through the establishment of a GMSA Strategic Planning Advisory group to oversee the process and ensure openness and transparency. This group included a representative from the GM Strategic Development Agency. This approach has been successful in that members have shared their development plans and enabled the GMSA to strategically steer developments and manage the collaborative pool of funding (HEFCE model 2¹⁴). The adoption of a consortium approach to ASNs has maximised recruitment, since the GMSA has been able to move numbers to support buoyant recruitment (thus supporting institutions) as well as enabling a more strategic response from the GM HE sector to the higher skills needs of employers in GM. Collaborative working has resulted in the GMSA creating and recruiting almost 1,000 additional vocational learners to HE programmes that are relevant to higher skills needs in GM. It is recognised that this system is still in its infancy and will need time and resource to become embedded into the GM HE sector.

There is a strong belief that without time and resource from an 'honest broker', institutions will inevitably revert to a more competitive learner-led model. There is evidence that a growing body of external stakeholders are coming to rely upon the GMSA to provide a conduit to the HE sector (FECs and HEIs) on skills matters. This role is evolving steadily but the infrastructure required to carry it out would be much more difficult to sustain without additional resources.

¹² The 'Burgess Group' (formally called the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group chaired by Professor Robert Burgess, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester) was established to examine national credit arrangements for higher education in England.

¹³ Identified through the regional and sub-regional strategies.

¹⁴ Model 2 – ASNs are ring fenced to the GMSA and can be re-distributed across members by the consortium.

Appendix 7: Exemplar F

MOVE — East of England: Development of Foundation Degree in Cultural Services in the region

MOVE has undertaken work with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) East of England to develop new vocational pathways to higher-level skills. This key sector project was based on former work-based research with employers on higher-level skill needs and led towards establishing a new demand-led regional Foundation Degree in Cultural Services to commence in September 2008. Integral to the project is the embedding of progression accords to formalise progression through work-based and vocational routes.

The context

The cultural sector has a growing requirement for a skilled and diverse workforce that reflects the communities served. Developing the talents of existing museum, library and archive workers and attracting skilled people to work within the sector continues to be a major priority, with a huge challenge in finding, retaining and developing the right people. Unless our regional museums, libraries and archives can attract and develop highly multi-skilled flexible staff, then continuous service improvement, ever-closer community engagement and a real impact on wider social and economic agendas will be held back. The skill-sets needed in the cultural sector get ever more complex with an increasing requirement for staff to work within a range of disciplines, take frontline roles with the public and possess a high level of customer service skills including interpretation, education and learning, entertainment, marketing and integration of collections with media and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) . And that is on top of the need for workers within museums, libraries and archives to manage their activity within and alongside the areas of arts, health, social services, heritage, environment and tourism and to develop a wider understanding of the cultural and community landscape.

The project and outcomes

Having secured resources from MOVE in the spring of 2007 to develop a new Foundation Degree in Cultural Services, MLA East of England has been able to progress the project rapidly, also helped by additional support from Foundation Degree Forward, East of England. The key focus is identifying direct employer support, exploring all issues related to effective work-based learning, crystallizing a suitable curriculum framework and undertaking a final business case analysis. Parallel to this is developmental consultation with a number of HE organisations that are interested in taking this programme forward in partnership with MLA East of England and employers for validation, delivery and assessment. Extensive consultation through a number of regional events and individual discussions with employers, professional bodies and SSCs confirms the following requirements, which employers will support:

- A two- to three-year undergraduate qualification, having optional progression accords, not only to an honours degree, but potentially direct to a masters or professional level qualification for the sector as well.
- Targeting those currently working within the sector at levels 2 and 3 and those outside the sector with relevant progressive entry qualifications.
- Featuring a cross-domain relevant curriculum providing opportunity to gain knowledge and competence in a core of generic transferable skills with options for a variety of pick-and-mix specialist modules relevant to each domain.
- Becoming a flexible work-related and relevant practical alternative to provider-led traditional academic, full-time, domain-specific graduate/postgraduate qualifications and integrating with and, where possible, accrediting employers' training schemes.

- Having the potential to be accessed on a modular basis for people interested in developing their skills in flexible bite-sized chunks with optional blended learning opportunities and sector-supported group learning at times which minimize job disruption but maximize cross-cultural sector understanding for learners.

The project is bringing forward its decision to identify a lead regional HE provider to maximise the opportunities for sector employers to contribute to the detailed design, delivery and development of the foundation degree and build on the momentum of interest being generated, not only across museums, libraries and archives in the region, but also from the wider cultural sector including tourism, heritage and arts management. This will maximize the time available for sector and employer partnership working on innovative curriculum structures, delivery, assessment and progression accord models.

An unexpected and welcome spin-off, generated through the combined information sharing channels of the English regional MLA and Foundation Degree Forward Partnerships, is the national cultural sector interest in this work. Already steps are being taken to share good practice with other regionally based work-based foundation degrees linked to the cultural sector and to investigate the benefits of a national Cultural Foundation Degree network of providers and employers.

Appendix 8: Exemplar G

Sussex Learning Network (SLN) — Mystery shopping exercises and follow-up of users of online tools

The Sussex Learning Network worked with partners to develop a website that provides dedicated information on foundation degrees available from all providers in Sussex (www.foundation-degrees-in-sussex.com). To assess its impact on potential learners and employers, as well as the providers of foundation degrees, SLN conducts mystery shopping exercises on a bi-monthly basis and follow-up of site enquiries (where permission has been given) approximately two months after the enquiry was made. The results of these exercises are then fed back to the relevant providers with recommendations for improvements in services where necessary. These exercises are described below in more detail.

Mystery shopping

The approach taken focuses on a mystery shopper calling the contact number for each provider given on the provider details section of the site — in other words calling the telephone number that a prospective student/employer would call if they were looking at the website and wanted to take their enquiry further by telephone.

The mystery shopper (posing as a prospective student or employer) asks a series of questions of all providers targeted in the exercise. Provider responses are recorded on an Excel spreadsheet. After the mystery shopper call has taken place, the shopper answers a series of questions on their impressions of the call from a prospective student's/employer's point of view, which are also recorded on the spreadsheet. The questions posed are outlined below.

Mystery prospective student shopper's questions:

- I'm interested in foundation degrees, how do they work?
- Can I do a foundation degree while I'm working (as I want to carry on earning money)?
- How qualified would I be if I got a foundation degree — is it like getting any other sort of degree?
- Where would I have to go to do the degree?
- Is there anywhere that I can find out more information? (Do they mention the FDIS website?)
- What about the website mentioned in the ad, is that any good?

The shopper's perspective:

- How much do they try and get hold of my perspective?
- What is the general service like?
- Was it easy to get the information needed?
- Who did I speak to? (was it a contact on the site?)
- What was the general attitude of the person/people dealing with the call?
- If I were a prospective student then how would I describe the experience?

Mystery employer shopper's questions:

- I'm interested in foundation degrees. How could they benefit my business?
- What is the difference between a foundation degree and a traditional degree?
- Is there a cost?
- Where would an employee have to go to do the degree?
- Can you find me a student/employee or is this only for staff that I have employed?
- How can I find out more information?
- I have a card here that mentions www.foundation-degrees-in-sussex.com website. Is that any good?

The shopper's perspective:

- How much did they try to understand my perspective and needs?
- What was the general standard of service?
- Was it easy to get the information needed?
- Who did I speak to? (Was it a contact on the site?)
- What was the general attitude of the person/people dealing with the call?
- If I were a prospective employer, then how would I describe the experience?

Enquiry follow-up

The Foundation Degrees in Sussex site allows prospective students and employers to send enquiries directly to providers by email. Users of this facility are invited to give their permission for follow-up by SLN to evaluate the effectiveness of the provider response to the electronic enquiry. Where users of the site have given permission, they are contacted by telephone (and if no response by e-mail) approximately two months after they made their enquiry. Responses are recorded on an Excel spreadsheet. The questions posed are as follows:

- What response did you receive from your e-mail enquiry?
- Are you happy with the response?
- Did you make contact with any other providers/sources of advice?
- What are you intending to do now?.
- Any further action (by the person following up the enquiry; for example, to achieve a more satisfactory resolution for the enquirer).

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Glossary

APEL	Accreditation of prior experiential learning
ASNs	Additional student numbers
CHERI	Centre for Higher Education Research and Information
CPD	Continuing professional development
CAT	Credit accumulation and transfer
DMR	Definitive module records
EBTA	Employer based training and accreditation
Fd	Foundation degrees
FdF	Foundation Degree Forward
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
FTE	Full-time equivalent
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
HLSP	Higher level skills pathfinder
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
LLN	Lifelong learning network
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
MEG	Mixed economy group
MIAP	Manchester Managing Information across Partnerships Project
MLA	Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
NECC	North East Chamber of Commerce
PA	Progression accord/agreement
PMC	Progression magnet co-ordinator
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RDA	Regional development agency
SHA	Strategic health authority
SSC	Sector skills council
VLE	Virtual learning environment
WBLP	Work-based learning provider