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**Higher education policy initiatives and their implementation - the case of Lifelong Learning Networks in England
Brenda Little and Ruth Williams**

Centre for Higher Education Research and Information
The Open University
44 Bedford Row
London
WC1R 4LL

(Contact for correspondence: r.k.williams@open.ac.uk; postal address as above.)

Abstract

This article is about Lifelong Learning Networks in England that are groups of higher education institutions and further education colleges covering a city, area or region. These networks have been established through funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and their policy objective is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. In this article we consider the likelihood of LLNs delivering this policy objective. In doing so, we focus our discussion on the clarity of LLN policy and the wider policy landscape, and the compatibility and relevance of LLN policy with the values, interests and core activities of the institutions that make up the networks.

Introduction

This article is about Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) in England – groups of higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) covering a city, area or region (HEFCE, 2005b). The policy objective of these networks is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners (see Note 1) into and through higher education (HE). The first LLNs were established in 2005 and by April 2008 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – as the funder of the LLN initiative - was reporting that approximately £105 million had been allocated to fund 30 LLNs (including two national ones), spanning 120 HEIs and more than 300 FECs (HEFCE, 2008a). Such institutional numbers represent almost national (England) coverage. However, LLNs are a time-limited funded initiative and, as such, long-term survival could well depend on the extent to which specific LLN activities become embedded in the core business of institutions and are able to promote a wider cultural change in HE's attitude to and relationships with learners possessing vocational qualifications and experiences.

In this article we consider the likelihood of LLNs delivering the underlying policy objective. We will structure our discussion by using a conceptual framework derived from the work of Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie and Henkel (2000), which itself is based on the work of Clark (1983), to analyse the influences of various stakeholders on the internal workings of HEIs. This will focus on the clarity of LLN policy and the wider policy landscape, and the compatibility and relevance of LLN policy with the target groups' values, interests and core activities. The evidence base for our discussion is

the interim evaluation of the LLN initiative that the authors undertook for HEFCE (HEFCE, 2008b). We first begin by outlining the policy landscape within which the LLNs have been established and are operating. This is followed by the conceptual framework and a discussion of the findings of the interim evaluation. The final section is of a more speculative nature and looks at issues that might impact on the LLN initiative: its success in delivering the policy objective and the sustainability of the networks.

Policy context

In England education is compulsory until the age of 16 and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) has been the main qualification taken by 14 to 16 year olds. Post-16 educational provision becomes more complex: other than HE, 'further education' (FE) is the term used to describe the educational opportunities offered by a range of institutions. Some of these institutions (school and sixth form colleges) cater for 16-19 year olds offering a mainly academic curriculum for entry to HE, while others (general FE and tertiary colleges) cater for adult and work-based learners by offering mainly vocational courses alongside academic qualifications.

For progression to HE, most universities and colleges require GCSE qualifications, as well as advanced academic qualifications (i.e. A levels or equivalent). Thus, for those 16 year olds who do not succeed at GCSE level, immediate opportunity to progress to HE has been closed to them. Prospects for these young people are therefore to seek employment or enroll in FE. For those who enroll in FE, however, while FE might provide a range of academic and vocational courses, they are perceived as being of a lower status compared with the more prestigious institutions offering 16-19 education, such as school and sixth form colleges (see for example, Stanton, 2008 and Thompson, 2009). Furthermore, studies have found a strong link between performance at GCSE level and young people's subsequent choice of academic or vocational pathways, with only a minority of high achievers opting for vocational qualifications and the FE route, and that socio-economic status influences such choices (see for example Payne, 2003 quoted in, Connor and Little, 2007).

Academic qualifications have remained the dominant route for entry to UK HE, particularly for young people despite UK government drives towards improving the vocational pathway to higher levels of knowledge and skills over several decades. This weakness of the vocational route to HE lay behind the launch of the LLN initiative in 2004 by the (then) Chief Executive of HEFCE, Howard Newby in his Colin Bell Memorial Lecture. The context of Newby's speech was the government's commitment to a 50% target of 18-30 years old experiencing HE by 2010 and why widening participation in HE matters. He spoke about 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:

...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).

While putting an emphasis on systems (that is, the need for clarity of pathways and progression routes), Newby acknowledged that efforts to widen participation would mean more than just persuading a greater proportion of non-traditional students to apply to university: it would also mean 'adapting the content and delivery of higher education to make it more relevant to their needs' (ibid, p 12). He also believed that, though increasingly outdated, distinctions between academic and vocational types of

education 'continue to bedevil post-compulsory education (...) lurking beneath the surface there is a typically English concern for status, expressed in a binary distinction which does not withstand critical scrutiny' (ibid, p 13). Further, it has more recently been argued that because projections show that the school-leaving population will decline from 2010 and will be 'sharpest among those socio-economic groups that have the lowest participation in higher education (but which are comparatively well-represented in further education) (...) strategies for improving progression from further education to higher education (...) are key to sustained growth of further and higher education and to widening participation' (Stanton et al, 2008, p 68).

The LLN initiative was firmly set within the government's broader policy of widening participation in HE, with an expectation that LLNs would focus on improving progression opportunities (into and through HE) and would work closely with other related policy initiatives to ensure that schools, colleges, employers and others were aware of such opportunities (HEFCE, 2005a). An earlier HEFCE programme geared to widening participation in HE had already funded a number of regional partnerships between HEIs and FECs (HEFCE, 1998). This new LLN initiative was founded on the notion that HEIs covering the full range of institutional 'types' and missions, would work in partnership with FECs, along with other relevant stakeholder organisations such as employer-led organisations (e.g. sector skills councils – see below), regional development agencies (RDAs), other local/regional economic partnerships and local/regional funders of vocational qualifications.

In June 2004, a joint letter from HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (who, at the time of the evaluation, was responsible for funding and planning education and training for over 16-year-olds 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 emphasised that it did not have a single model for a network; 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 'core businesses' were seen as fundamental to each LLN: curriculum developments that facilitate progression; the establishment of appropriate information, advice and guidance systems; and the establishment of robust progression agreements.

While policy statements proposed no single model for a network, LLNs do share a number of common characteristics: for example, networks are either based on existing partnerships or set up as new ones to meet the LLN objective; and they are expected to create and develop links with other stakeholder organisations such as those mentioned above to maximise opportunities for learners, employers and the communities within their purview. In doing so, the LLN focus might be wide-ranging and cover a number of employment sectors 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 have also been strongly encouraged to identify a defined 'learner constituency', i.e. those learners that are targeted to benefit from progression opportunities (e.g. work-based learners, adult learners). In terms of governance, all LLNs have a strategic level group to oversee their work, and that group submits regular monitoring reports to HEFCE.

As a piece of policy development, the LLN initiative was innovative in that it was a departure from the standard 'top-down' HEFCE approach whereby institutional bids for funding would be assessed against criteria prescribed by HEFCE. Rather, plans for LLNs were developed through dialogue and negotiation between the proposers

and HEFCE officers. Beyond an expectation that all LLNs would address aspects of curriculum development to facilitate progression; would establish appropriate information, advice and guidance systems; and would establish robust progression agreements, HEFCE looked to individual LLNs to determine their own models and mechanisms for improving progression opportunities for vocational learners.

Thus, LLN policy was developed through an iterative approach, which was shaped by dialogue and negotiation, and subsequently through practice. In a HEFCE internal critical review of bottom up approaches to policy-making, undertaken by HEFCE officers, it was noted that this iterative approach was meant to sharpen and refine the aim and objectives of LLN policy (HEFCE, 2007a). HEFCE recognised that there were high and low risks to this approach: on the one hand, 'evolution of policy through practice, minimises the risks of poor take-up from the sector and unsustainability'; on the other, it 'increases the risks that expenditure is not planned and controlled, and that the activity and performance is so variable that it cannot be managed or evaluated within established frameworks' (ibid). Furthermore, it was also recognised that the iterative approach might actually act as a barrier to innovative proposals. Underpinning this approach to the development of LLN policy, and the consequent implications of policy shifts and changes, was the recognition that a clear and effective communications plan should be established as early as possible 'to ensure that there is a consistency of message and implementation' (ibid). While it was not the intention of the interim evaluation to assess this particular approach to policy development, some comments are made later in our discussion about its perceived impact.

LLNs are a time-limited funded initiative and each LLN has been funded for an average of three years. The first ones were established in 2005 and the last one in March 2008; funding will therefore be curtailed for the last LLNs in 2011. Some LLNs have already reached the end of their HEFCE funding period, although the majority are still less than two years old (HEFCE, 2008a). While continuation funding from HEFCE is not available for LLNs, HEFCE expects LLNs to take account of and consider the sustainability of their networks into the medium and longer-term.

The interim evaluation

The evaluation was 'interim' in that it took place in the middle of the initiative: some LLNs had been established for over a year, many had been newly established and others were in the process of being established. It was therefore an initial progress check and aimed to serve two purposes: as 'a formative opportunity for LLNs to learn from practice to date, and a critical assessment that enables HEFCE to consider how it will shape and steer future LLN policy and practice' (HEFCE, 2007b). It was not the intention of the interim evaluation to make firm conclusions about the outputs and outcomes of the initiative given the stage at which most LLNs were at; this will be the task of the summative evaluation that is planned to take place in 2009/10.

The interim evaluation comprised desk research of LLN policy documents and LLN business plans and monitoring reports (see Note 2). In addition eight LLNs were visited and interviews were undertaken with members of the core teams, the staff and senior managers of the partner institutions and the stakeholder organisations involved in the networks. Our aim was to obtain the full range of views from those that were supportive of the initiative to those that were more sceptical. In total 135 interviews (mostly face to face, but some by telephone) were undertaken between August and December 2007. In addition to discussing progress being made in relation to the three main aspects of LLN business - curriculum development, information, advice and guidance, and progression agreements - the semi-structured

interview schedule sought to explore a wide variety of issues, including levels of institutional commitment; responsiveness to key regional and sector developments; determination and dissemination of good practice; progress in ensuring sustainability.

The conceptual framework - structuring the discussion

In considering the impact of any single policy initiative on HE, it is worthwhile recalling that government and wider society expects HE to fulfil a number of purposes (and meet the needs of a variety of stakeholders). HE is expected to be a major contributor to economic success, to produce (and exchange/transfer) cutting edge knowledge from research, and to produce graduates with appropriate skills and knowledge. At the same time, HE is also expected to contribute to the creation of a more socially inclusive society. Thus, there is great pressure on HE to meet these competing expectations and the extent to which they are successfully being met is no doubt open to debate. Moreover, HE providers have been encouraged to develop their own distinctive missions and priorities, and the increasing diversity of educational provision is seen as a strength of the system within England because it provides opportunities for a wider range of learner 'types' and helps to meet the needs of specific regional and local economic and social contexts.

The conceptual basis for our discussion is derived from the work of Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie and Henkel (2000) that explored reform policies and changes that have affected the HE system in recent years, and the impact of these changes at the levels of the state, the HEIs, the discipline and the individual academic. The basis for their argument is that 'social behaviours and social relationships are far too complex and ambiguous to be fruitfully analysed in terms of a mechanistic model that assumes simple causation as the engine of social change' (ibid, p 27-28). Further, there is often an assumption that the target groups of reform policies and change 'will act as if they are subject to no other influences than the policy itself' (ibid, p 29). Here the authors point to Burton Clark's (Clark, 1983) model of a triangle of coordination forces, namely the state, the market, and the academic oligarchy as an analytic device to explore the coordination of HE systems. As summarised by Kogan et al (op cit, p 25), these coordinating forces 'represent sufficient power and authority to pull higher education systems together in the face of a complex and disparate array of tasks, beliefs and forms of authority that pull in different directions'. In Clark's view, HEIs are located within this triangle and the three forces determine – through their interaction – the way in which a HE system is coordinated.

While the existence of such forces may not be in question, the extent to which they exert an influence on institutions' internal workings may well be. For example, in their study, Kogan et al concluded that HE systems may be affected by events outside the realms of government policies at least as much as by the policies themselves. Further, though the process of change through policy formulation is usually understood at the different levels of analysis – national, institutional and individual – usually top-down, but sometimes bottom-up, Kogan et al argue that the use of separate levels gives rise to the conceptual problem of how the levels are related to one another. In fact, they suggest that in practice 'decisions in the context of higher education are highly interwoven in a number of ways that make a separate levels model unsuitable' (ibid, p 20). Thus, in defining and explaining policy changes, the authors focus on a number of aspects of change – 'the values that characterise the policies and processes of change, the actors that formulate the policies, the policy content and the outcomes and implications of the policies that are adopted and how they interact with other ongoing processes of change' (ibid, p 25).

In elaborating their argument further, Kogan et al suggest that the way in which reform policies affect behaviour depend on a number of factors, namely

‘the extent to which a policy is clearly identifiable in terms of operational goals and tangible policy instruments; the extent to which a policy is welcome in terms of compatibility with the values and interests of target groups; the extent to which a policy is relevant in terms of how likely it is to affect the core activities of target groups’ (ibid, p 29).

Thus, to address the question of how far one particular reform policy in England, the LLN initiative, is affecting institutional behaviours we will consider the above factors – policy clarity, compatibility and relevance - in the light of our findings from the interim evaluation of LLNs as a way of answering the question ‘can LLNs make a difference for vocational learners?’.

Clarity of policy

LLN policy development and other policy agendas

From our interim evaluation, it emerged that a number of LLNs perceived a lack of clarity about broader government policy and strategy and the fit with LLN policy. One area where this lack of clarity is exemplified is in the expectation of LLNs to take account of their local economic contexts and regional/sub-regional skill needs in developing their specific approaches, which can be seen as an element of the external market forces affecting institutional (and partnership) behaviours.

Steps had already been taken by the government to improve the skills base within specific employment sectors, and to meet regional needs, through sector skills councils (SSCs). SSCs have been tasked with creating Sector Skills Agreements which map-out the skills need in particular sectors and how such skills will be supplied (now and in the future). However, at the time that LLNs were developing their plans, only a minority of SSCs had finalised their own sector skills agreements, and most SSCs’ priorities were focused on skills development below the level of HE. Further, skills needs within any one sector of employment were likely to vary by region and locality.

Alongside SSCs, Regional Skills Partnerships had been established to ensure that in each region of England (nine in all) there was a strong link between the skills needed to raise productivity and the allocation of funds to training providers to support the region’s economic strategy. Although only two LLNs covered the same geographic area as a region in England, each LLN (whether regional, sub-regional or focusing on a particular locality) was expected to take such (sub-) regional skills needs into account.

Though each LLN proposal was submitted to HEFCE 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 to LLNs as their initial plans were being put into action.

At the time of our evaluation, this lack of clarity was further fed by the government’s delayed response to the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and the subsequent implementation plan. The Leitch Review had laid out some stark warnings about the current low skills base within the UK and the need for urgent action if the UK was to maximise economic prosperity and productivity and improve social justice, which the

government accepted. However, delays in the publication of implementation plans, for example about decisions at a national level regarding 'who' would be taking the lead on the proposed national adult careers service, hindered LLNs' own plans for discussing developments at a (sub-) regional level for putting in place appropriate and co-ordinated information, advice and guidance systems.

We also found perceptions of initiative overload, overlap and duplication – especially relating to employer engagement. About a year after the inception of the LLN initiative, the government was extending its priorities towards greater employer engagement in various stages of education, including HE. This position was outlined in the 2006 HEFCE grant letter, which called for radical changes in the provision of HE by incentivising and funding provision partly or wholly designed, funded or provided by employers (DfES, 2006). The 2007 HEFCE grant letter, which followed the publication of the Leitch Review, stressed the importance of developing new approaches to encourage higher levels of access to HE by *older people already in the workplace* (emphasis added) (DfES, 2007, p 2). Thus, three regionally-based 'higher levels skills pathfinder pilots' were established (in the North West, the North East, and the South West regions of England) to 'improve the journey to higher-level learning for employers and employees' and to test how HE level programmes could be developed, packaged and marketed to create funding partnerships between employers, learners and providers (HEFCE, 2007c). There was little synergy between the pathfinder and LLN policies, given that none of the pathfinder pilots was to be located within an existing LLN; rather they were being led by the HE regional associations. However, the pathfinder pilots were expected to work with existing LLNs as appropriate.

Thus, perceptions of initiative overload were exemplified by those LLNs that shared or covered part of the regional pathfinder pilots, where there were feelings among some of our interviewees that initial progress of LLN activities had not been helped by the introduction of a potentially duplicating initiative. It was felt that resources and focus had been (unhelpfully) diverted away from LLN activities, employers had become confused, and LLN/pathfinder structures were not fully compatible. However, during the course of our study, it seemed that some of these initial difficulties had been or were being overcome.

Furthermore, at the time of our evaluation, the possible introduction of Foundation Degree (Fd) awarding powers for FECs (see Note 3) was also being considered by government. From our interviews, it seemed that this policy change was the cause of some tensions within LLNs given that HEIs and FECs were being actively encouraged to work in partnership. Often such partnerships were aligned to existing validating arrangements whereby FECs were delivering HE programmes leading to Fds awarded by 'their' validating university. Some of our interviewees considered that any moves towards granting FECs powers to award Fds themselves would have a potentially detrimental effect on the nature of such partnerships.

In summary we can see that, although there may well have been a clear policy underpinning the LLN initiative, as LLNs were granted funds and set about the task of putting their proposals into action, other impacting policies were also being developed. While it was not the intention for these other policies to necessarily weaken the central rationale for LLNs, they were nevertheless perceived as shifting and/or broadening (and in some instances duplicating) the work of LLNs. Such developments led to some uncertainties both within LLNs and with their relationships to their 'markets', in particular employers.

LLN funding as a policy instrument

Clarity of policy can be considered in terms of operational goals and also tangible policy instruments. Funding is one such tangible policy instrument. In addition to funding the establishment and operation of the LLNs, each LLN was encouraged by HEFCE to request funding for additional student numbers (ASNs) within their business plans (see Note 4). In our interim evaluation we found that some institutions would not have joined an LLN if there had been no prospect of gaining such ASNs, and in at least one LLN, the allocation of ASNs to specific institutions within the network had been tied in to progression agreements (and as such had proved a powerful lever to ensure institutional commitment to that LLN's processes).

We also found a clear focus on LLNs' use of ASNs for one particular form of HE provision, namely Foundation Degrees (Fds). Given HEFCE's own method for the allocation of additional student places and funds included some clear expectations about Fd allocations within LLN provision, such a focus may not have been surprising. But that focus did raise some questions about how far LLNs were meeting the original purpose of developing progression routes into as well as through HE for a range of vocational learner constituencies (including adult learners and those with professional qualifications) for whom programmes other than Fds, or parts of programmes (for example, modules at postgraduate level) might have been a more appropriate vehicle for access or progression.

In some ways, while such funding levers may have been beneficial in gaining institutions' (and departments') commitment to the LLN initiative, they may also have caused some (unintended) bias in LLNs' own plans for curriculum development (and related progression agreements). And we might speculate that the ASNs focus on Fds could have inhibited innovative proposals coming forward from LLNs, as pointed to in HEFCE's own critical internal review of bottom-up approaches to policy-making and the iterative approach adopted for LLN policy.

Compatibility and relevance of LLN policy with target groups' values, interests and core activities

To consider these factors we first need to look at 'who' are the target groups? At the heart of the LLN initiative is the notion of the 'vocational' learner. It might be inferred from Newby's speech (Newby, 2004) that a vocational learner is someone who did not follow the academic route of A levels and direct university entrance post-16 (i.e. a young person without A level qualifications). Rather, such learners were likely to have acquired a range of vocational qualifications at level 3 (see Note 5), including BTEC National Diplomas and National Vocational Qualifications. But his references to 'higher education sitting within the context of lifelong learning', and subsequent government pronouncements about HE's engagement with adults already in the workforce would suggest some rather broader categories of (potential) learners. In fact as we have already stated, each LLN is required to identify its own learner constituency. While many identified work-based learners and adults already in the workplace - in addition to those young learners without A levels, it was evident from our interim evaluation that, at that stage, much of the LLNs' curriculum development activity had been geared towards young, full-time learners in colleges (rather than work-based or adult learners). There were, however, indications that the needs of a wider range of learner constituencies were starting to be addressed.

But are such target groups interested in pursuing formal learning opportunities through the HE provision being offered by the LLNs? This is a difficult question to answer with any certainty, especially as at the time of the interim evaluation only a

few LLNs had experience of substantial numbers of (new) learners engaging with the HE provision on offer. Further, it is not the direct remit of LLNs to raise aspirations (and levels of attainment) of their own (potential) learner constituencies. For example, in the case of young learners, LLNs are expected to work closely with existing Aimhigher partnerships whose prime function is to do just that (see Note 6). However, we should acknowledge that LLN learner constituencies are (expected to be) much broader than this.

Away from the learners themselves, another main target group for the LLN initiative is the institutions making up the network partnerships (both HEIs and FECs) already providing - or planning to provide - HE opportunities identified in LLNs' business plans. These institutions are the gate-keepers of the LLN endeavours – in the sense that it is individual institutions who determine their own admissions criteria and offer 'places' to potential learners; who design and deliver particular curricula; and who, along with other agencies, provide information, advice and guidance to potential learners about progression opportunities and relevant educational pathways. The intention of the LLN initiative is that while each of these separate functions is undertaken by different groups of staff in the partner institutions, they would become 'joined up' in a clear, concise and consistent way to provide opportunities for progression to vocational learners. It is clear from the interim evaluation that one of the main challenges of the LLN initiative – and of the people committed to making it a success – has been how to shape the values and interests of staff within the partner institutions to those of the LLN objective. The extent to which these values and interests have become shaped is considered below in the context of one of the key LLN processes: the development of progression agreements.

Progression agreements are one of the core businesses of LLNs. LLNs have taken rather different approaches to progression agreements: for example identifying problematic routes into HE and formalising existing ones; establishing overarching models and then fitting agreements underneath; scoping skills sets and mapping out existing - and identifying the need for new – HE provision. Some agreements are limited to bi-lateral agreements between a sending course in one institution and a receiving course in another institution, while others are broader in scope in terms of institutional spread within a locality (or sub-region or region). While there was diversity of approach between LLNs, we also found that progression agreements had proved to be the most divisive of the three core businesses among partner institutions, though we did not discern any overall pattern regarding the 'type' of institution for whom agreements had proved controversial. The divisiveness seemed to stem from fears that such agreements could undermine institutional/departmental autonomy within partner institutions in terms of admissions policies and practices and, as such, were not necessarily compatible with the values and interests of certain staff groups. As one senior manager in a pre-1992 university expressed it: 'the university is only a bit player. It's not possible to engage the staff in relation to progression; the vocational agenda is peripheral. The university is trying to engage, but the LLN is not central to our mission'.

Whilst there is diversity of practice, a common approach taken by the majority of LLNs in our study, however, has been to develop an 'in principle' agreement that all institutional partners could sign up to, and under which individual agreements would then be agreed. A number of LLNs indicated that obtaining the initial 'sign-up' had not proved too difficult; but getting actual progression agreements up and running was much harder because it forced institutions to make changes to their own institutional processes at all levels.

Thus, it seemed that for many LLNs, the process of developing progression agreements has been as important as achieving the outcome itself - namely a signed agreement. These continuing processes and ongoing dialogues could well be rather important outcomes. Familiarisation about vocational learners' potential among both course tutors in sending institutions and admissions tutors and course leaders in receiving institutions was being increased through such dialogue, and could well be key to changing the values and interests of particular staff groups in ways that improve the compatibility of LLN objectives with the values and interests of certain staff in institutions.

Alongside issues of compatibility of target groups' values and interests is that of 'relevance', and here again progression agreements can be used to consider this factor. In our interim evaluation we did find some evidence that LLNs were expecting progression agreements to alter institutional activities. For example, one LLN anticipated that the very nature of its progression agreements (which set-out a range of institutional activities to be undertaken to support student progression) would, over time, bring about change in behaviour that would become 'part and parcel' of both the sending and receiving institutions' practices. Another considered that the use of progression agreements might lead to requirements that in future course developments would need to indicate progression routes into *and* out of programmes. In fact, in one LLN (which was part of an ongoing regional partnership of educational providers) there was a clear intent to ensure that every level 3 course on offer in the partnership - both vocational and academic - would lead to a suitable level 4 (i.e. HE) course. Further, it was anticipated that this policy would be extended to curriculum areas not currently covered by the LLN's work.

More generally, our interim evaluation concluded that for progression agreements to be successful, the notion of progression would need to be embedded into academic processes and structures and quality assurance procedures. In a number of networks, we found that work was already being conducted between LLN staff and senior staff in key institutional positions to bring about such changes. In one LLN, discussions about progression agreements relating to employees' continuing professional development needs had involved quality assurance staff from the partner institutions as well as staff from the national quality assurance agency. In another LLN, staff development events were being held with admissions and central services staff from all relevant further and higher education institutions focusing on curriculum-specific issues so that academic advice on progression opportunities would in future be drawing on a more informed and widespread knowledge base.

Thus, in relation to one particular aspect of LLN activity – progression agreements – there was some evidence of actions being taken to enhance the compatibility and relevance of LLN business with institutions' existing values, interests and activities. And in terms of LLNs' overall range of activities, at least one LLN had ensured that a relevant senior member of staff in each of the partner institutions had been identified at the outset who would have overall responsibility for driving forward developments in their 'home' institution as a way of enhancing institutional 'buy-in' at different levels within the institution.

That said, we did also find some examples where partner institutions felt disengaged from the focus of the LLN's activities: as one senior university manager stated: 'the choice of curriculum areas has dictated – to an extent – the lack of engagement from the university'. Such feelings might also be expected where LLN activity profiles do not match those of a partner's provision and its validating university's stance on such provision - as a senior member staff of a college which had yet to put much emphasis on Fd development wryly noted: 'how will we get on the train when it's already left the

station?’ But we also found examples where curriculum areas had been chosen specifically to match partner institutions’ strengths and/or where few progression routes to HE existed (for example, in the creative and cultural industries and in the health sector), and this was a major factor in gaining commitment from the institutional partners.

Discussion of the findings and the future of the LLN initiative

In this article we have drawn on some of the evidence from the interim evaluation of LLNs to try and answer the question ‘can LLNs make a difference for vocational learners?’, that is, can LLNs improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through HE? The interim evaluation was just that - ‘interim’ - and we acknowledged at the time that it was too soon to make ‘substantive and well-evidenced statements’ about LLNs’ overall progress on meeting the LLN initiative’s overarching goal (HEFCE, 2008b). From our investigation, we concluded that the LLN process is not a quick fix – it takes time to secure commitments from a wide ranging set of institutional partners with different missions and traditions, and to gain shared understanding about the LLN objective and how it will be achieved. As one LLN observed in its monitoring report:

It has taken time to understand the politics of the network. Partnership working is notoriously difficult and each partner (...) has a slightly different interest in the proposition of the LLN. Additionally we underestimate the complexities of the partner organisations and their strategic imperatives at our peril. Organisational change supported by institutional buy-in can be challenging.

And another reported the following:

Building a joint approach to curriculum planning across (the LLN) in this first year has had to recognise the different interests, relationships and expertise of the partner institutions in HE and FE (...) Gaining an understanding of how institutional priorities can be aligned with the (LLN) model of curriculum development and planning has been a major focus of activity.

However, while it has taken time, we also confirmed that the foundations had been established and LLNs were making progress and should, in time, make a difference.

We also noted that though attempts were being made to embed LLN activities into institutional practices and procedures, such embedding will also take time. Further, and in line with earlier studies on vocational progression (see for example, Connor and Little, 2005), we acknowledged that though changed processes may be a part of the equation around sustainability and making a real difference for vocational learners, changing hearts and minds, and individuals’ behaviours were arguably much greater challenges. In this context it should be borne in mind that the LLN initiative is but a small ripple in a big pond: institutional managers and academics have concerns and priorities that cover a plethora of issues, many to do with the day to day business of institutions and including those to do with increasing external pressures (from funding bodies, quality assurance agencies, professional associations and the like). In some institutions, concerns and priorities will be focused on maintaining and enhancing reputational position in the market place as interpreted through standings in the various national and international league tables, which might mean, for example, prioritising research activity and outputs over other activities. Such prioritisations will impact on how the LLN process is viewed by some academics - as one LLN noted in its monitoring report in relation to progression agreements:

...the critical role of teaching staff in developing progression pathways is becoming ever more apparent. In general teaching staff are responding positively to the principles of the progression agreement scheme, but are often beleaguered by competing commitments and find it difficult to make the time to meet with academic colleagues in partner institutions (...) On occasions we have been aware of the less than benign influence of staff.

Thus, returning to one of Kogan et al's (op cit) arguments: 'Social practices at the organisational and individual levels (may well) have changed less than formal structural changes may indicate' (p 29).

Through our analysis (above) of the three factors (policy clarity, compatibility and relevance) we have shown how and to what extent HEFCE's LLN policy has impacted on institutional and individuals' behaviours. Shifts of emphasis around the general policy landscape and its direction and focus created uncertainties within LLNs; the values and interests of institutional staff groups were not necessarily fully in-tune with LLNs' overarching aims, though much work was being done by LLNs to address this; further, there were some signs that LLN efforts to embed specific LLN activities and practices within existing institutional processes would, in the fullness of time, lead to increased relevance of LLN activities to institutions' core businesses.

We have seen that some of the actions being initiated and developed through LLNs involved both senior institutional staff being engaged in overall direction of policy and process within their own institution and also those more closely engaged at ground level, where LLN policy was being put into practice on a day-to-day basis. These approaches are reminiscent of Trowler's description of a 'change sandwich', wherein 'successful change is more likely to come about when there is consensus above and pressure below (...) rather than simply flow from above' (Trowler, 1998, p 154). Approaches such as these point to some possible longer-term successes in changing institutional behaviours that may well be sustained beyond the lifetime of HEFCE-funded LLNs. However, is it enough to have commitment from senior managers and enthusiasm and support from those staff that make an initiative operable? Or does it require a broader consensus from the academic community (and will the initiative's success be undermined if this consensus is not forthcoming)? As we have said above, LLNs are a time-limited funded initiative whose futures depend on the extent to which LLN activities become embedded in the core business of institutions and wider cultural change is embraced with respect to learners with vocational qualifications and experiences.

The HEFCE approach to LLN policy development has been a success – it has minimised the risk of poor take-up from the sector. At the time of our evaluation, 120 HEIs and over 300 FECs were involved in the LLN initiative. Indeed, only eight publicly-funded HEIs were not members of any network. However, it has yet to be seen whether current levels of institutional commitment will continue once the HEFCE funding period comes to an end. HEFCE funding has provided both a 'carrot' - in the form of additional resources/funding, which have helped to make things happen - and a 'stick' - in terms of accountability of progress to individual LLN strategic boards and to HEFCE, and commitment by institutional senior managers to their respective networks and the initiative. Thus, there have been incentives and other measures to ensure that the LLN process is a success (perhaps to varying degrees?) during the HEFCE funding period. What, however, will occur once this funding ceases; what incentives and measures will replace the HEFCE ones? This issue has been raised by the LLNs themselves as this statement demonstrates from one LLN's monitoring report:

High-level commitment has been crucial to the success of (the LLN) to this point (...) Much has been achieved in getting partner 'buy in' at other levels. Both they, and their institutions, will wish to see the tangible benefits resulting from the Network if the activity is to become fully mainstreamed at a future point.

Other related questions one might ask is will institutions 'revert to type' once HEFCE funding ceases? Notions of shared understandings raise questions about what effect do institutional/subject values and core activities have on the success of an initiative? Does it depend on the 'match' between belief in the objective of the initiative and the mission group to which an institution belongs? For example, it had been suggested that alongside policies for widening participation, one immediate reason for the LLN initiative and the creation of LLNs was to protect vocational progression opportunities 'ahead of increased turbulence in the market for students and their fees' (Parry, 2006, p 15), whereby institutional configurations within networks would help counter (or ameliorate) potentially distorting effects of increased competition between institutions. However, for some institutions – especially many of those that are research intensive universities - national and global competition, and sensitivity to reputational status and position, will continue to dominate priorities. Thus, will these universities - currently members of LLNs - feel compelled to maintain and enhance their focus on the 'traditional' student market (and the pull of the lucrative international student market) at the expense of the 'non-traditional' learner with vocational qualifications? Will other policies (for example the continuing government pressure to grow the market for HE co-funded by learners' employers) help or hinder efforts to improve the clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners? And, will reforms of the 14-19 curriculum, currently being rolled out (in the form of new Diplomas linked to broad occupational areas – see Note 7), succeed in improving the coherence of pathways to HE or to employment in ways that make LLN efforts in this area less significant or even redundant?

The main issues for the 'legacy' of the initiative are the extent to which processes developed and put in place within LLNs to support the policy objective have become embedded in institutional practices in a sustainable way. These are issues that the interim evaluation was not able to answer in any substantive way. More particularly the interim evaluation was able to say very little about the experiences of learners accessing and progressing through higher education via the LLNs. Though LLNs were beginning to capture data on learners, and put in place mechanisms for 'tracking' them, it was too early to assess whether in fact such learners had experienced coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities. We can only speculate on the answers as we have done so above.

Some of the answers will be provided by the summative evaluation that HEFCE has committed itself to undertaking at the end of the funding period in 2009/10 and which will consider the issues of long-term sustainability and LLNs' 'responsiveness and ability to contribute to other developments such as 14-19 curriculum development and employer engagement' (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/lln/monitoring/eval.htm>, accessed on 6 October 2008). By this time, a number of LLNs will have reached or will be reaching the end of their funding periods and should have strategies in place to secure the sustainability of their activities and processes into the future and beyond, and younger LLNs will have learned the lessons from the first ones to be established. More in-depth research into the impact of LLNs in providing improved opportunities for the progression of vocational learners into and through HE should be able to supply the answers that the interim evaluation could only start to highlight.

End Notes

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. LLN business plans outline how networks intend to meet the LLN objective and their own specific aims and targets, and the monitoring reports detail progress in meeting them six months after being established and then annually.
3. Foundation degrees are degree level qualifications that combine academic study with workplace learning. They were launched by government in 2000 with the aim of meeting labour market needs and increasing and widening participation in HE. They are validated and awarded by institutions with degree awarding powers (primarily universities). But in 2007 the Further Education and Training Act empowered the Privy Council to specify institutions in England within the further education sector as competent to grant foundation degrees.
4. As a way of supporting growth in student numbers across HE in England, HEFCE has operated a system whereby institutions are invited to bid for additional funds. The competitive bidding process for such additional student numbers funded through a single route has recently changed such that allocations are now made via two routes, one which retains an element of competitive bidding (strategic growth) and the other which is negotiated and allocated on a regional basis (managed growth).
5. In the national qualifications framework, level 3 courses are seen as delivering intermediate level skills and knowledge below HE level (levels 4-8).
6. Aimhigher is another HEFCE initiative, which aims to widen participation in HE by raising the awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from under-represented groups.
7. Alongside GCSEs, a new qualification for 14 to 19 year-olds was introduced in 2008 - the Diploma – which offers a more practical way of gaining skills for employment and higher education. It is aimed at increasing the choices available to young people (it can be combined with GCSEs and A levels) and encouraging them to stay in education. Diplomas are being introduced on a rolling programme; the first ones are in: IT; society, health and development; engineering; creative and media; and construction and the built environment.

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