



Interim Network Review

April 2008

The Interim Network Review was commissioned by Higher Futures and carried out by education consultant Madeleine King between January and March 2008.

Executive summary

The purpose of this document is to review the progress of the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) since its inception in August 2006. The Interim Review will help to steer the direction and the sectoral priorities of the network during the second half of its initial funding period, and at a time when many changes are taking place within Higher Education (HE) and when employer engagement in higher level skills is of increasing interest to Government.

Higher Futures is a relative newcomer to the family of LLNs and is operating in a rapidly-changing environment. This is described in more detail in Section 2 but essentially revolves around the impact of the Leitch Review of Skills: globalisation, an ageing UK population, and an ongoing drive to widen participation in HE.

Section 3 sets out the methodology used to carry out this review. This combined questionnaires to key stakeholders and interviews, both telephone and face-to-face, with selected organisations and individuals. The questionnaire component of the evaluation represents at best a snapshot, given the relatively low (20 per cent) response rate, and probably conveys only the views of those with the strongest feelings about the current and future direction of the LLN. However, this data was augmented through the interviews and it was possible to identify a number of consistent themes, which included:

- *The LLN currently benefits from a great deal of good will within the local HE/FE community.*
- *Mission drift needs to be avoided.*
- *A perceived lack of involvement in more strategic economic issues needs to be countered by positive involvement of employers and regional planning organisations.*
- *Curriculum development, credit schemes and the Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) are under-developed but are a tangible component of attitudinal and systemic change in HE.*
- *The legacy of the LLN should be a culture change in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) over the status of applications from those with vocational qualifications.*
- *The embedding of additional activities funded by the LLN must be brought forward if these are to become something more than bolt-on arrangements which will fall away once funding is withdrawn.*

Further details of the responses are given in Sections 5 – 9. The broad conclusions emerging from the review are set out in Section 10, but in general terms **IAG and progression agreements (PAs) are on target and seen to be yielding benefits**. However, whilst all respondents were able to cite examples of step changes in delivery arrangements concerning information, advice and guidance (IAG), none were able to say how these would be maintained once the funding ended. With regards to PAs, the original starting point, as set out in the Colin Bell memorial lecture, was that they would be acceptable by all institutions within the Network, thereby breaking down traditional Russell Group/Modern University divides or the distinction given to HE delivered in Further Education Colleges (FECs) as opposed to HEIs. Care should be taken not to formalise these distinctions inadvertently.

Curricular change and employer engagement both need further and more focused work. A number of respondents were anxious to see more progress in these two areas, which are often regarded as the two things which would make the most difference to vocational learners. They were also the “simple but hard” aspects of LLN work, in that few organisations or government administrations had been particularly successful in resolving them over a number of decades.

Though in its early stages, curricular change within the network should be instrumental in driving employer engagement and demonstrating the value of vocational HE. This approach will encourage vocational HE routes to be valued in their own right and provide a role for employers in supporting both the design and delivery of new provision, which could be vital to the future sustainability of the LLN. Ways are needed to extend their engagement in this process and a range of ideas are presented for future consideration.

A key element in promoting change is the development of a regional, if not national, system of Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) and APEL. The progression agreements are clearly helpful here, but there is no evidence that the LLN has yet pursued a more systematic approach to the idea of a framework within which HE provision could be developed and accredited. This could yield real benefits, especially where modules of training and bespoke courses are often more relevant to both employers and employees than full-time whole courses.

In addition to these two broad areas of comment, the report makes observations on a number of issues pertinent to the future direction and focus on the network.

As Higher Futures enters the second half of its initial funding period, the issue of **sustainability** will feature increasingly in discussions between the partners. The report suggests the need to gear up to a higher level of collaborative activity and focus on tackling some of the more difficult issues, the "simple but hard" activities, which will have greater legacy and impact.

Apart from the current five **priority sectors**, creative and media industries has emerged as a further sector the network could explore to expand its work.

The report recognises the positive impact of IAG on large numbers of full-time college-based vocational learners but argues that Higher Futures should now stretch its reach into the workplace to target a different and more challenging **client group**. Such an approach would start to meet the needs of adults in the workplace and part-time vocational learners.

The network needs to increase engagement with **regional partners** to develop and influence their strategic response to higher level skills. This would not only benefit the network's profile, it would also assist Higher Futures in leading partnership activity across relevant areas of the HE and skills agenda in the region.

The review concludes that Higher Futures may wish to consider how it can focus on some of the more intractable aspects of vocational HE. By tackling difficult issues it is more likely to achieve longer-term sustainability as an entity and see its principles embedded in local structures. "Doing a few things well" as a niche agency will be important in the more fractured landscape of the future.

Finally, Higher Futures is well-managed and well-regarded. It must now take a courageous look at some of the more intractable issues surrounding vocational routes to HE. It has proved itself capable of driving forward change and must now sustain this momentum by working in a focused way on a number of challenging issues. Evidence suggests that it has the staff and the self-belief to do this.



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