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How to cite:

Williams, Ruth (2008). Evaluating lifelong learning networks. In: Duffy, R. L. ed. Bringing Higher Education Within Reach. Falmer, Brighton, UK: Sussex Learning Network, pp. 194–197.

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Version: [not recorded]

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Evaluating Lifelong Learning Networks

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1. Introduction

The focus of this short article is on the interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) that the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information of the Open University was commissioned to undertake by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) during 2007 (HEFCE, 2008¹). It is not the intention to go into the detail of that evaluation, but instead to do two main things: i) to discuss the main challenges that the project team experienced in undertaking the evaluation and ii) to explore some of the challenges that LLNs are likely to experience as they reach the end of their HEFCE funding periods.

2. The interim evaluation

Among its terms of reference, the interim evaluation was required to identify the emerging processes and trends to inform future policy and practice on LLNs. It was intended as an initial progress check, which would assess the current impact and outcomes of the Networks. In assessing impact and outcomes, the project team was asked to look at LLNs' progress against five 'indicators of success'. These indicators were defined as:

- The three key processes for LLNs: curriculum developments that facilitate progression; establishing appropriate information, advice and guidance (IAG) systems; and establishing robust progression agreements;
- Progress made against milestones/targets as set out in LLNs' original business cases;
- Evidence of institutional commitment, partnership working and stakeholder engagement;

¹ B. Little and R. Williams (2008), Interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2008/rd05_08/

- Responsiveness to key regional and sector developments;
- Methods for determining and disseminating good practice.

The evaluation involved desk research of all LLN business plans and their monitoring reports where they existed. Visits were made to a selection of eight case study LLNs that agreed to take part in the study, and interviews were undertaken with the core staff of the Networks, heads of institutions and other staff, and representatives of the stakeholder organisations involved in the partnerships.

3. The challenges of the interim evaluation

There were a number of challenges that were experienced by the project team in conducting the evaluation. Two are discussed here: the nature of HEFCE's LLN policy making and implementation process, and the identification of impact and outcomes of LLN processes and activities.

Firstly, in terms of the policy making and implementation process, the LLN initiative was innovative. It was a departure from the standard 'top-down' HEFCE approach involving institutional bids for funding, which would then be assessed against criteria prescribed by HEFCE. As an exception to this standard process, plans for LLNs were developed through dialogue and negotiation between the proposers and HEFCE officers. Apart from the expectation that all LLNs would address the three 'key processes' (i.e. curriculum developments to facilitate progression; establishing appropriate IAG systems; and establishing robust progression agreements), individual LLNs were able to determine their own models and mechanisms for improving progression opportunities for vocational learners. LLN policy was therefore developed through an iterative approach, which was shaped by dialogue and negotiation, and subsequently by practice – one which has been called a 'bottom-up' approach.

In a HEFCE internal critical review of bottom up approaches to policy making that was undertaken by HEFCE officers concerned with the LLN initiative, it was noted that the approach taken had been designed to sharpen and refine the aim and objectives of LLN policy (HEFCE internal report, November 2007). The paper acknowledged that there were high and low risks to this approach. On the one hand, it was low risk because 'evolution of policy through practice, minimises the risks of

poor take-up from the sector and unsustainability' (ibid). On the other hand, the approach could be high risk in that 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). It was also recognised that the iterative approach might actually act as a barrier to innovative proposals coming forward. It was not the explicit intention of the interim evaluation to explore the extent to which these risks have materialised or to assess the effectiveness of the policy making and implementation process. No doubt these are issues that HEFCE and/or the summative evaluation of LLNs (due in 2009/10) will wish to explore further.

However, there were (anticipated) implications that the project team needed to grapple with, the main one being that the iterative nature of the policy approach had led to quite distinct differences between LLNs. Networks varied greatly in terms of their scope, focus and ambitions. All were at different stages of development (given that bids could be received at any time). They differed from one another in that they had unique local/regional contexts and, in responding to these contexts, the focus on the type and range of curricula areas and employment sectors varied from one LLN to another. Furthermore, in addressing their local/regional contexts, each Network had developed its own approach to and interpretation of the three key processes.

Thus, the iterative nature of LLN policy making meant that the project team needed to be sensitive to the approach taken in order to understand the context within which individual LLNs had developed. Furthermore, in some of our interviews, it emerged that the fluid nature of the policy making and implementation process was a challenge for some LLNs in keeping pace with developments. Additionally, LLN policy was evolving alongside other policy considerations (e.g. Higher Level Skills Pathfinders, the employer engagement agenda, 14-19 diplomas, foundation degree awarding powers), which led to a perception among some LLNs (as expressed by some LLN core team, partner institution and stakeholder interviewees) that the policy landscape within which they were trying to establish themselves and operate effectively was complex, confusing and lacked a certain amount of clarity and consistency.

In terms of the second challenge – the identification of LLN impact and outcomes - it became very clear to the project team that the LLN process (as defined by the ways in which individual LLNs were approaching the three 'key processes') is not 'a quick

fix'. LLNs comprise diverse sets of institutional partners and stakeholder organisations. Institutions, whether they are post-1992 (or post-2004) universities, further education colleges or research intensive universities, will have different missions and traditions and will therefore have different interests in and expectations of the LLN objective and process. Thus, LLNs have had to grapple with the complexities and the 'politics' of their networks, and that takes time. For example, mapping and scoping activities of existing provision are required to identify potential gaps in curricula that are inhibiting progression opportunities, to articulate and make visible progression routes, and to provide baseline data. Relationships and understandings need to be cemented among the partner institutions and stakeholder organisations that are part of the Networks to ensure that the LLN process is an effective one. As the interim evaluation report points out:

..... the processes of building-up relationships with institutions and stakeholders, that are genuinely inclusive, 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 for most LLNs of establishing systems and structures, even for those LLNs with pre-existing partnerships and networks, has taken time (p 25).

It was evident to the project team that there had been much activity in identifying need and gaps, and developing relationships and shared understandings. However, in terms of 'impact', especially on vocational learners, it was too soon to make an assessment of the LLN process. Instead, the focus of the project team shifted to explore what plans LLNs were implementing regarding the collection and use of measurable data to identify impact that would provide information, in due course, about the success of LLN activity. Not surprisingly, we found examples of a variety of approaches and a number of these were highlighted in the interim evaluation report.

4. The interim evaluation's conclusion

The main conclusion of the evaluation was that it is too soon to make substantive and well-evidenced statements about progress. The LLN process has taken time to become embedded but the foundations have been established for improving progression opportunities for vocational learners. LLNs are making progress and much has been achieved in a relatively short period of time. This is evident in terms

of the three key processes whereby new and more accessible curricula have been developed and there is improved alignment between existing curricula; IAG provision has become more accessible and coherent; and there are improved progression pathways between different episodes of learning.

The formation of LLNs has enabled enhanced partnership working and understanding between their partner institutions and stakeholder organisations, and in many cases, new opportunities have been established where none existed before. The resources that have flowed from the initiative have made things happen. As the interim evaluation report states “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’ (p 26). Furthermore a cadre of dedicated and enthusiastic staff have emerged – in the core teams of LLNs, in the partner institutions, and in the stakeholder organisations - that are contributing to the success of the LLN process.

5. The longer term challenges of the LLN process

In terms of the longer term, there are a number of challenges that LLNs are likely to face as they reach the end of their HEFCE funding periods. Here, just three related challenges are briefly discussed, which the interim evaluation was only able to highlight rather than assess. How far these emerge as actual challenges and are challenges that LLNs are successfully overcoming (and have overcome) will be tested out by the summative evaluation that is due to take place in 2009/10.

The first one is the extent to which LLN activities become **embedded** into the every day practices and processes of the partner institutions of the Networks. As mentioned above the LLN process takes time and much resource has been invested by LLNs to win support for the LLN objective and the key processes from staff at *all* levels in institutions and to modify institutional practices and procedures. It was clear from the interim evaluation that there was much support from institutional leaders and the staff that were making the LLN objective operable. However, the LLN process is a small part of an institution’s overall business and is one of a number of issues seeking the attention and priority of individual staff. Staff have other concerns and pressures relating their day to day business, as well as the additional requirements of responding to external bodies (such as the funding councils, professional

bodies/associations and the quality assurance agency) on a wide variety of matters. But this will always be a challenge whatever new initiative comes along.

The second challenge is **sustainability**. What happens once the HEFCE funding period comes to an end? What is it that LLNs do that will be valued by their partner institutions; what is it that these partners will want to sustain; how will LLN practices and processes continue to be embedded; will replacement funding be provided by the partner institutions or will it be sought from other sources? These are all questions that LLNs are addressing (or have addressed), and they are also closely related to the third challenge - **institutional commitment**. How will levels of commitment be sustained once HEFCE funding is removed? HEFCE funding has provided the means to make things happen – as mentioned above, ‘hard cash’ is a powerful tool. If no replacement funding is found (from within partnerships or from other sources), will some institutions wish to continue and be able to continue with their commitment to the LLN process? The evaluation found that some institutions were more committed than others, although it did not find any pattern that matched levels of commitment to ‘type’ of institution.

The key to sustainability and institutional commitment is the extent to which the LLN objective is shared among the partners in a Network, the extent to which practices and processes have become embedded and have helped create those shared understandings, and the extent to which the LLN process has prompted a cultural shift within the partner institutions. Can all of this be done within a three-year funding period (the limit put on HEFCE funding)? As the interim evaluation report puts it: ‘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’ (p 29).

It will be evident to readers of this short article that much of the discussion about the challenges mentioned above is speculative. It will be for the LLNs to demonstrate how well they meet and are able to overcome them. It may be that for some LLNs these are not challenges at all and for others there are concerns of a different order. These are issues and questions that will become clearer as the LLN process matures and that the summative evaluation will be able to address.

Word length: 2,208