

Interim evaluation of Leap Ahead:

Information, advice and guidance

Services to businesses and employers

Progression agreements

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LEAP  AHEAD

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1. Executive Summary

What Leap Ahead set out to do & the interim evaluation

Learners, Employers and Providers Advancing Higher Education Accessibility and Delivery (Leap Ahead) is a Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) made up of the four universities and eight FE colleges in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The objective of HEFCE funding for LLNs was *'to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education.'* Leap Ahead sought to address the counties' below average proportion of graduate adults, and low demand for higher level skills, by putting progression pathways in place and assisting business to utilise skills, principally in 4 priority occupational areas; construction, engineering, tourism and hospitality and retail. Initially funded for three years from January 2007 to December 2009, this is extended to June 2010. Three areas of activity were selected for attention in this interim evaluation:

- § Information, advice and guidance services developed for the LLN in co-operation with Connexions Derbyshire, Guideline Careers Nottinghamshire and Nottingham Trent University Careers Service.
- § Progression Agreements and particularly the operation of the Progression Champion's Network.
- § Employer facing activities undertaken by High Level Skills Advisers.

There have been significant changes in the landscape since the Business Plan was approved: recession; changes in national, regional and local responsibilities for skills, employment and economic development; and limits placed on planned expansion of HE opportunities in colleges and universities.

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

- § Connexions Derbyshire, Guideline Careers Nottinghamshire and Nottingham Trent University Careers Service have conducted 1263 interviews and are likely to surpass their target of 1500.
- § Without Leap Ahead these interviews could not have taken place as statutory support for individuals already holding an NVQ level 2+ was removed in 2004/5. Managers of the statutory services are unanimous that participation has provided their staff with the opportunity to refresh their adult guidance skills and gain confidence advising at higher levels. Together with information resources and local labour market information (LMI) produced with Leap Ahead colleagues, Higher Level Skills Advisers and Sector Managers, this experience is leaving them better equipped and prepared for the challenge of the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service.
- § 6 x sector careers and vocational routes brochures containing LMI have been produced and widely distributed. The content is being used in online careers resource *Your Future East Midlands*, 14-19 Area Prospectus and emerging Next Step websites.
- § Career development and outplacement services provided in a range of larger local companies.
- § Significant contribution to IAG website, *Your Future East Midlands*, informing content, and developing use of Xcri to enable exchange and re-use of course-related information.
- § With increasing volume targets and the emerging new adult careers service, the statutory services cite good reasons for continuing relationships with people and institutions Leap Ahead has brought them into contact with.

Services to businesses and employers

- § The interim evaluation considered activities Higher Level Skills Advisers (HLSA) undertake **directly** with businesses, a partial view of their role, which also involves informing curriculum development activities and working in partnership with business support. Targets for employer engagement are shared with others and indications are that substantive targets will be met.
- § Engagement has proved more complex than originally envisaged in the Business Plan which outlined a role to '*broker flexible solutions from providers to ensure specific employer requests for training and employment are met.*' The HLSA have found low levels of knowledge and appreciation of the value or potential benefits of higher level skills, in line with current research.
- § The focus of their awareness raising activities moved towards greater participation in business networks and this has brought multiplier effects generating publicity to reach greater numbers.
- § Strong relationships have formed with business support services evidenced by mutual referrals.
- § Research is reinforcing HLSAs' approach to placing high level skills in the context of business concerns, and their emphasis on the importance of building relationships for the longer term.
- § Records of their conversations with businesses might provide a starting point for shaping supply.

Progression agreements and the Progression Champions' Network

- § Ten Progression Agreements have been signed off and the target of 24 is expected to be met.
- § Little progress was evident until the Champions' Network was resourced from June 08. This provided for a part-time post in each partner institution and in the two counties' training provider networks. This brought about rapid progress and a high level of engagement from partners, which could have been even better if all appointments had been made at the same time.
- § The Leap Ahead co-ordinator has played a central role, arranging meetings, monitoring progress, providing advice and reassurance, overseeing all activity and making useful connections.
- § The Network has improved communication between different providers and developed better understanding of each others' provision, course content, services and needs of staff and students. The insights this has provided and the camaraderie between the Champions, '*a group of like-minded individuals*' is likely to continue to inform guidance practice and pursuit of shared interests.
- § Up to half the partners are committed to continuing to work on progression, and participation in the Network has been instrumental in demonstrating it is in their interest to do so.

Overall review

There are clear indicators that the reviewed activities will contribute to achievement of the overall objective, and will continue to do so following completion of Leap Ahead. It is also clear that the particularly lasting impact may arise from the opportunities Leap Ahead has provided for people, from different positions of influence in a progression continuum, to work together. Success is likely to be brought about by the conversations Leap Ahead has initiated and nurtured as much as by the visible products or formal processes put in place.

'She (the careers adviser) gave me such a boost. I would have done it anyway eventually but I just needed someone to tell me I wasn't aiming out of my league. I'm determined to show my kids you can do anything, you don't have to just go along with what everybody else has done.'

Learners, Employers and Providers Advancing Higher Education Accessibility and Delivery

2. Introduction:

The brief

This report was commissioned in July 2009 by the Director of Leap Ahead, the lifelong learning network (LLN) for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The purpose was to examine and provide interim evaluation focussing upon three specific areas of activity:

- § Information, advice and guidance services developed in co-operation with Connexions Derbyshire Adult IAG Services, Guideline Careers Nottinghamshire and Nottingham Trent University.
- § Progression agreements and particularly the operation of the progression champion's network.
- § Employer facing activities to raise levels of engagement with high level skills through the High Level Skills Advisers

Whilst it was hoped that the evaluation would '*highlight the tangible impacts and benefits realised by all stakeholders*', it cannot, at this interim stage, capture the full extent of these. Furthermore working within the defined parameters of the three chosen strands does not reflect the impact and benefits arising from their interaction with other constituent parts of Leap Ahead such as curriculum development and the activities of the Sector Managers. Subject to these limitations, this report outlines for the three strands:

- § Aims and objectives
- § Background issues
- § Achievements
- § Lessons from experience
- § Reflections on impact, benefits and sustainability

The research was conducted during July and August 2009 and the methodology has included:

- § Meetings with the Director and team members.
- § Review of documentation including the original Business Plan, HEFCE monitoring reports, peer evaluations, Director's reports, Strategic Management Board and Operational Group minutes, client and employer enquiry records, other documents relating to each thread and promotional materials.
- § Electronic questionnaires, face to face and telephone interviews with LLN staff, partner organisations, Progression Champions, IAG staff and recipients, business clients and employers.

3. What Leap Ahead set out to do

The Leap Ahead Business Plan was submitted to HEFCE in July 2006 and approved to run initially for three years from January 2007 to the end of December 2009. It covered the counties of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire and established a new partnership of:

Nottingham Trent University
The Open University
University of Derby
University of Nottingham
Castle College
Chesterfield College

Derby College
South-East Derbyshire College
New College Nottingham
North Nottinghamshire College
South Nottinghamshire College
West Nottinghamshire College

The key objectives of the LLN are specified in the Memorandum of Agreement as follows:

- § To develop a joint credit and progression framework which will offer learners guaranteed progression opportunities within specific vocational pathways providing that required entry standards are achieved.
- § To deliver an increase in the number and proportions of learners progressing from vocational pathways into and through higher education
- § To develop, in collaboration, complementary, coherent and vocational pathways to meet the needs of key employment sectors
- § To assist employing organisations to develop and utilise higher level skills

The Network was focussed upon developing progression routes in 4 priority occupational areas: Construction, Engineering, Tourism and Hospitality and Retail.

The proposed activities to deliver LLN objectives were categorised into 4 broad themes:

- § Bridges to HE
- § IAG & Staff Development
- § Services to Business & Employers
- § ePortfolio & Learner Tracking

Distinct from most other LLNs, Leap Ahead was employer-facing from the outset, and the Business Plan drew on demographic and labour market projections to support actions to address national and local higher level skills issues, as they were perceived at the time,

- § Demographic trends highlighted an increasing decline in 18-20 year olds, the traditional source of HE students, and thus threatening the government's target of 50% participation in HE.
- § With 90% of A level students already progressing to HE, the predicted shortfall in higher levels skills had to be made up by people progressing through other routes.
- § With 80% of the workforce needed in 2012 already in employment, work based routes and ways of combining earning and learning were needed.

- § Local issues were particularly acute with the East Midlands being a net exporter of graduates and lagging behind national averages for proportion of adults qualified to level 4 or above.
- § The four occupational sectors were selected because they stood out as particular priorities in the two counties, supported by projections of significant numbers of replacement and new job opportunities and demand for higher level skills.

Whilst the evaluation of any activity must look back to the original aims and objectives, it is important to consider the achievements of Leap Ahead in the light of the quite dramatic changes in the skills and employment landscape since initial submission of the Business Plan. These have required the LLN to be flexible and creative in its delivery as recession; the limitations on the planned expansion of HE opportunities in colleges and universities; and changes in national, regional and local responsibilities for skills, employment and economic development have all had an impact. Recession has thrown the labour market predictions into sharp relief, particularly in construction and retail, and generally people are feeling less confident of such predictions in an environment where the only thing that seems certain is uncertainty. Furthermore increasing research is helping to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complex links between higher level skills, higher productivity, business growth and economic competitiveness.¹ Whilst Leap Ahead was distinctive from the start, in its emphasis on employers and higher level skills, widening participation to higher education for equality and social justice is an important motivation for many of the staff involved and increasingly acknowledged as another layer of complexity underlying economic prosperity.²

Thus while this interim evaluation has looked back at the intentions in the Business Plan, and has taken the opportunity to identify valuable lessons from attempting to implement aspects of it, it is particularly cognisant of the overall objective of the LLNs'

“to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education”

and has sought to identify the contributions made by the three strands to this overall objective. Framing the evaluation in this way and in the context of increasing understanding of the complexity of the issues has enabled evidence to surface of ways in which Leap Ahead activities, achievements and lessons from these three strands are contributing to this more sophisticated understanding.

¹ Exploring the links between skills and productivity: The Final Report. Gambin L, Green A, Hogarth T. Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, March 2009.

² The Spirit Level: Why Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better, Wilkinson R., Pickett K, Penguin 2009;

4. Information, advice and guidance

Aims and objectives

The brief for the interim evaluation was to review the information, advice and guidance (IAG) services developed for Leap Ahead in co-operation with Connexions Derbyshire Ltd (CDL) Adult IAG Services, Guideline Careers Nottinghamshire (GCN) and Nottingham Trent University Careers Service.

The Aims for the Information, Advice and Guidance theme expressed in the Business Plan are:

- § To target learners on vocational pathways (level 3) with improved, coherent and individualised information, advice and guidance on HE progression opportunities.
- § To enable sustainable improvements in mainstream services by raising the capacity of staff in HEIs, FECs, WBL providers and other stakeholder organisations (e.g.) Connexions, Aimhigher & Union Learning Reps) to provide high quality, consistent and accessible IAG on vocational progression into and through HE and to eliminate discrimination in admissions procedures.(p.34)

The strategies to achieve these aims are outlined in the objectives and that most applicable to the services considered in this report concerned the delivery of IAG on vocational opportunities to individuals 19+ through their existing networks of advisers. This was to involve establishing a contract for the delivery of targeted IAG services to fill identified gaps.

However, these services have also made significant contributions to achievement of other objectives under the theme of *IAG and Staff Development* particularly the production of information and marketing materials on vocational HE progression options for the 4 priority sectors, and employer facing activities. Furthermore the way in which the contract was negotiated with the existing services contributed to sustainable improvements in those services.

The target for the number of potential learners receiving guidance on vocational progression to HE was 3000 by the end of December 09.

Leap Ahead also aimed to enhance provision of online guidance through the objective,

- § To develop a database of information on vocational HE progression options for the 4 priority sectors that covers both Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire and is linked to 14-19 Area Prospectuses. (p. 35)

This has been addressed by supporting development of the regional web-based tool offering information and advice on courses, qualifications and careers, *Your Future East Midlands*. By joining EMDA, Skills for Sustainable Communities LLN and Aimhigher East Midlands in supporting this development, Leap Ahead has been able to address its objective and add value to a significant regional development.

Background issues

At the time of writing the Business Plan, the statutory funding for the Connexions Services (CDL & GCN) did not provide for delivery of any one-to-one IAG services for individuals already holding an NVQ level 2 or equivalent. The level 2 threshold had been put into place in 2004/5 and research by Connexions Derbyshire demonstrated that in the year prior to this (2003/4) 3,780 of their clients already held a level 2 qualification. Extrapolating this data across the two counties suggested that around 7000 clients annually, with level 2 or above, might seek IAG support but would be turned away. Clearly this group would include individuals with non-traditional entry profiles who could benefit from specialist IAG on entry routes to HE. In addition to this obvious gap in IAG provision, the confidence, skills and information resources of the services were adversely affected by the absence of experience advising these clients.

Connexions Derbyshire (CDL) and Guideline Careers Nottinghamshire were contracted to deliver 50% of the IAG interview target (1500 by December 09). Negotiations began on suitable arrangements in March 07. There was some preference for dedicated appointments but the Director of Leap Ahead was keen to ensure funding was used to achieve sustainable improvements in the capacity of mainstream service staff to provide high quality guidance on vocational progression (consistent with the objectives above). If dedicated appointments were made, these would be lost when funding ceased. Consequently, agreement was reached to pay for each individual guidance intervention at a rate of £75 per interview and whilst half-time appointments were made to provide the additional staff resource, responsibility for conducting interviews was to be distributed between these and other mainstream staff. The services commenced in September 07. The service provided by Nottingham Trent University Careers Service commenced in August 2008. This utilised a part-time member of staff who had been doing similar advisory work for Aimhigher and positioned her as an independent pre-entry to HE adviser with access to the graduate careers advisers, information resources and destination data.

Your Future East Midlands,³ (YFEM) the online regional course and career information resource has become an increasingly important part of Leap Ahead's strategy to secure sustainable improvement in guidance for vocational learners. Principally funded by EMDA and Aimhigher East Midlands; Leap Ahead and Sustainable Communities LLN have supported specific developments and enhancements to the site. With Leap Ahead funding, Nottingham University's Centre for International E-Portfolio Development has pioneered the implementation of the XCRI standard for exchange of course information. This work promises to save the YFEM team considerable time updating and checking accuracy of partners' data and will ensure online progression maps are based on current data. The XCRI activities form part of a major national initiative including the JISC funded XCRI 14-19 project linking 14-19 prospectuses.

³ www.yourfuture-eastmidlands.co.uk

How did the IAG services approach their role?

The three services took slightly different approaches.

- § Connexions Derbyshire (CDL) integrated the work into the mainstream activity of their ten centres across the county. Clients could access the services by dropping into any of these centres. Primarily the work has focussed upon anyone looking at higher skills learning pathways or starting on vocational learning, including progression from apprenticeship programmes (CDL have looked at this specifically with Acorn training provider).
- § Guideline Careers Nottinghamshire (GCN) provided a one-to-one drop-in and appointment service at their centre in Nottingham City but also placed a heavy emphasis on providing guidance at employer and college premises. This has involved contributing to substantial employer –led guidance and outplacement services, particularly as recession began to bite. With colleges it has involved working with Aimhigher, college and other LLN staff to ensure provision of complementary and independent IAG services.
- § Nottingham Trent University Careers Service (NTU) provided guidance to those aged over 19 years and exploring vocational routes into HE, taking appointments at the Careers Service premises. The Leap Ahead contract was fulfilled by a part-time member of staff who had spent the previous three years working with a similar group with Aimhigher. The Leap Ahead contract extended her area across both counties and built upon her previous experience and contacts.

Achievements

The services are making very good progress towards their overall target and are likely to surpass it. The combined total of client guidance interviews reported at the June SMB was 1160 with a further 103 clients seen at NTU. (Target 1500)

Different recording systems make it difficult to compare and contrast the three different approaches but some general observations can be made concerning the clients. Around a third of those seen have been qualified to level 2, with a further third qualified to level 3, and a fifth with level 4 qualifications or above. The gender split is around 60% female and around 40% are in their early twenties and the largest group aged between 25-49 years. The trigger for these individuals seeking guidance is often hitting a career ceiling in their 20's or considering a career change following divorce, bereavement or redundancy. The ten clients interviewed for this evaluation were overwhelmingly appreciative of the service they received, regardless of which of the three services they had used. A consistent comment was that whilst all the practical information was helpful and necessary, it was the reassurance and validation of emerging aspirations, provided by an independent professional at the right time, that had the strongest impact.⁴

⁴ This concurs with Institute of Employment Studies research informing development of the new Adult Advancement & Careers Service

Sample case studies from interviews



TM – ‘I’d been at home with the kids for six years. I used to be a professional singer but being on tour, you can’t really keep that up with children. I did a numeracy course at the kid’s school, part of a Skills for Life programme, and have started helping out at school. I really surprised myself how much I enjoyed it and thought I’d see if there was any way I could train. I did A levels, but they were geared to my music career, except biology and I used to love that. So I talked to the careers adviser about becoming a science teacher but I wanted to be with my kids too. So I’m starting with an NVQ Level 2 Assistant Teacher in the Classroom and getting experience at my kid’s school. She (the careers adviser) gave me such a boost. I would have done it anyway eventually but I just needed someone to tell me I wasn’t aiming out of my league. I’m determined to show my kids you can do anything, you don’t have to just go along with what everybody else has done.’



KP – ‘I stumbled upon the careers fair in the canteen at work. I’d recently moved to Nottingham and wasn’t enjoying my job as much, although it was very similar position in mental healthcare. I’d been thinking about doing a degree before and I just got talking to the careers adviser at their stand. I’m really passionate about mental health and she listened and now I’m leaving to do an Occupational Therapy Bsc. Everything got sorted out. I’m dyslexic and they sorted out testing. She was emailing me information, letting me know stuff I needed. It’s so good when somebody just offers you the information you need and you don’t have to fight for it.’



J – ‘I’d gone into banking after doing my A levels and gone back part-time after having the kids. But jobs are dodgy and I was bored anyway. I wondered about getting into teaching and rang the local university to get some advice. To be honest they weren’t very helpful, they said it was a very popular course and I’d need extra UCAS points, but didn’t explain how to get them. It was very off-putting really. Anyway he (the careers adviser) was brilliant. He phoned up someone he knew at the university and we sorted out different ways to do it, to fit in with the kids. I was all set to start an Access Course in September but then I got a letter from the university saying it was full. I knew I could go back to the adviser but I couldn’t get an appointment for two weeks. We’d explored another way of doing things with the local college. So I popped round there and that’s what I’m starting in two weeks. I’ll do three days at the bank and two in college.’

“Leap Ahead came at a good time because guidance teams’ focus on the disaffected and those qualified below level 2 had reduced both the scope and the skills for guiding adults at higher levels. LLN has enabled the team to become more confident and better equipped”

In addition to achieving interview targets, and because of them, the managers of the IAG services felt strongly that Leap Ahead had provided their staff with the opportunity to refresh their adult guidance skills and gain confidence advising at higher levels. In addition, involvement in reviewing and producing information resources to support their work, including local labour market information, is leaving them better equipped and prepared for the emerging challenge of the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service.

Other achievements and added value

§ CDL led on a review of information resources to support adult clients to make informed decisions on how to progress into higher education through work. Extensive research was conducted with a range of partners to inform production of a legacy of resources that would be available beyond the lifetime of Leap Ahead. This gave rise to working with the Higher Level Skills and Sector Managers to produce 6 x sector careers and vocational routes brochures with local labour market information (LMI). This LMI data and information is also being used in work with the online careers resource *Your Future East Midlands*, the 14-19 Area Prospectus and the emerging Next Step national websites.

§ GCN is working with a range of employing organizations, supporting human resources departments with personal and career development programmes and outplacement services. These include:

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Nottingham City Council | NHS Trust |
| Silver Spoon | Inland Revenue |
| Clipper Logistics | Bombardier |
| Woodleigh Care Home | Union learn |
| Chilwell Barracks | |

§ They have organised a number of staff development events open to those involved in delivering IAG in a range of contexts, including a good practice event led by the NTU at Fluid Power Centre at North Nottinghamshire College and sector events at Pride Park. These have strengthened the profile of higher level skills pathways, and the number of referrals from staff working in related agencies such as Job Centre Plus.

§ Close involvement with the LLN has

“provided the independent IAG services with an insight into the complexity of curriculum development, and the relationships between institutions, as well as personal contacts within FE & HE including the Progression Champions.”

These personal contacts and a growing understanding of curriculum issues also helped advisers advocate for individual clients concerning access to opportunities. Two of the advisers stressed they had learnt never to make assumptions or to treat course entry information as non-negotiable,

'I've been surprised by the flexibility of courses and learnt not to make assumptions, but to pick up the phone, and where necessary, advocate for the client. The client is unlikely to know where to start and it's easier to ask on behalf of someone else. Also my increasing knowledge can then be used with another client.'

- § The online courses and careers guide, *Your Future East Midlands*, has benefited from the local labour market, sector and other information produced by the IAG services with Leap Ahead staff. Leap Ahead has also provided some financial support and expertise for other key enhancements. These include development of a forum for employers providing them with the opportunity to pose questions on qualifications, and other matters, and promotion to partners of XCRI, an approach to exchange of course-related information enabling re-use in different contexts. The XCRI work, has been led by Nottingham University's Centre for International E-Portfolio Development and it is expected to be rolled out as part of a major national initiative shortly.

Lessons from experience

What worked particularly well?

- § Contracting with the mainstream services to provide guidance on the basis of interviews delivered rather than providing funding for dedicated posts. This has kept the resource focussed on delivery but also on production of resources that feed directly into improving the quality of delivery. *'I'm in favour of anything that helps me to my job better.'* It has also resulted, in the main, in the work being distributed amongst staff in the guidance teams developing their expertise and confidence.
- § Having independent guidance services is important because that ensures the focus is on the individual or employers needs rather than institutional concerns or recruitment targets.
- § Conducting the survey looking at the information needed by advisers to support guidance on vocational routes. This has led to a suite of materials including local labour market information that has been well-received and is being put to use in different ways.
- § Working on developing relationships with sources of referral and channels to reach the target groups. This has included working with colleagues in agencies such as JobCentre Plus and the link with Unionlearn worked particularly well as this gave access to larger companies such as Bombardier and the Inland Revenue. Channels included distribution of postcards and leaflets where the target groups might be found and advertising in different kinds of places. Touchlocal was mentioned as a particularly fruitful source of referrals and brings Leap Ahead onto the first page of google with obvious search terms such as *careers advice Nottingham*.

What didn't work so well?

- § One adviser felt it was difficult to balance the demand for guidance interviews with contributing to research or production of information, particularly being part-time.
- § A more formal IAG practitioner network structure might enhance things further.
- § CDL and GCN submitted monthly invoices detailing the interviews they had carried out. There has been insufficient time to examine these thoroughly for this report and they have submitted quite different levels of data. It was possibly a missed opportunity not to agree consistent and useful reporting parameters from the start.

Reflections on impact, benefits and sustainability

It is salutary to reflect that over 1200 interviews would not have taken place without the support of Leap Ahead. The sample suggests there have been high levels of client satisfaction and staff have been strongly enthusiastic, and certain they are more confident and better equipped to provide guidance on vocational routes. Furthermore they assert good reasons for nurturing the relationships with people and organisations Leap Ahead has brought them into contact with.

Leap Ahead happened at a good time and probably ending at a good time – the team can build upon the relationships formed and the confidence, expertise and resources developed.....

Involvement has provided the independent IAG services with an insight into the complexity of curriculum development and the relationships between institutions, as well as personal contacts within FE & HE such as the Progression Champions. New targets for our service are high volume and these may provide a rationale for continuing these relationships and becoming less reliant on drop-in.

It remains to be seen whether there will be sufficient incentive to maintain the links, and arrangements for the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service may provide encouragement, or focus exclusively upon disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless it would be valuable to maintain links particularly around progression through workplace routes.

“At the moment, CDL sees people at either end – as they start work or as they are finishing. It would be good to maintain contact and provide support on progression while they are in work.....”

5. Services to businesses and employers

Aims and Objectives

This section considers the services to businesses and employers provided by the Leap Ahead Higher Level Skills Advisers (HLSA). The brief for the interim evaluation was to look primarily at the activities they undertake **directly** with businesses and is therefore a partial view of their role, which includes informing curriculum development activities and working in partnership with business support agencies. Similarly it considers a limited aspect of Leap Ahead's services to business and a more complete picture would include activities undertaken by the Sector Managers and those involved in the Information, Advice and Guidance strand. Whilst the findings discussed in this section are limited by the parameters of the brief, reviewing the HLSAs' experience at this stage provides some insights which may help to inform business and employer engagement activities in the future.

The aims of the services to employers and businesses articulated in the Business Plan (p.39) are:

- § To increase the participation of the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire workforce in HE (particularly in Foundation Degrees, CPD and bespoke work based programmes) by raising awareness and demand amongst employers for higher level skills training for their employees.
- § To enhance the ability of the LLN membership to respond to employer needs.

These aims were to be met through achieving a number of objectives and specifically,

- § To recruit a team of Higher Level Skills Advisers to work directly with employers in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire to identify their skills development needs and provide feedback into appropriate sector curriculum development teams to ensure that provision is demand driven 'just in time and just enough.'

The vision was that the Higher Level Skills advisers would

- § Broker flexible solutions from providers to ensure that specific employer requests for training and development are met. This will include facilitating collaborative responses which enable each provider to play to their institutional strengths, thus providing more choice for employers.(p.39)

The Higher Level Skills Advisers would also, together with the Sector Managers,

- § Develop a strong relationship with business brokers (EMB and County Employer Engagement Groups) to raise their awareness of vocational progression into and through HE, avoid duplication and maximise referrals to HE providers.
- § Provide an independent referral and facilitation service to source both individual and collaborative skills development solutions from members of the LLN, thus providing a 'one stop shop' for employers and general business brokers.

Background Issues

At the time of writing the Business Plan, services to businesses and employers were evolving nationally and regionally. The national Business Support Simplification Programme was trying to reduce and bring some coherent order to a confusing plethora of over 3000 agencies and publicly funded projects. In addition, work was progressing in the East Midlands towards the development of a regional skills brokerage scheme following extensive work with lower level skills through Train2Gain. The need to fill the gap and provide brokers for higher level skills was keenly felt. Consequently there was an understanding that the activities of the Leap Ahead HLSAs outlined in the plan would evolve in relation to the developing landscape and a strong emphasis on ensuring their role continued to add value to whatever was put in place. Therefore a key aspect of the HLSA role has been to develop partnerships and good working relationships with the new services as they have emerged, and to shape their own activities to avoid duplication, and maximise opportunities to raise employers' interest in higher level skills.

Leap Ahead LLN was unusual in being employer-facing from the start as most other LLNs emphasised widening participation issues. During 2007-8 HEFCE guidance to all LLNs provided a greater steer towards employer engagement activities. Squashing any expectation of further HEFCE funding to support continuation of LLNs, services to employers, and particularly brokerage services were seen as a potential route to sustainability. However, this assumed employers already possessed sufficient knowledge of higher level skills and their potential benefits, to be able to articulate specific needs. In reality the experience of the HLSAs and increasing research⁵ has demonstrated many employers are starting from a very low base of knowledge concerning high level skills and considerable time and effort is required to raise awareness of their value, and relevance, to begin to *raise* or *create* demand for such skills. It is also poignant to recall there was little anticipation in 2006-7 of the turbulent times to come. The banking crisis, credit crunch and onset of recession changed the landscape dramatically. Employers' limited interest in high level skills was therefore compounded by their strong reluctance, or inability, to invest in training at this time.

How did the Higher Level Skills Advisers approach their role?

The role of the HLSA articulated in the Business Plan was to

'work in the field with employers...to 'create' demand from employers and bring intelligence back for HE providers to act upon ...they will broker flexible solutions from providers to ensure specific employer requests for training and employment are met. This will include facilitating collaborative responses which enable each provider to play to their institutional strengths.'

⁵ Known Unknowns: the demand for higher level skills from business, CFE, Leicester, 2008; Employer Investment in Learning at National Qualifications Framework Level 4-8, GHK Consulting, 2008; The Employment of Graduates within Small and Medium sized Firms in England, Hart T, Barratt B, People, Place and Policy Online (2009): 3/1, pp. 1-15. DOI: 10.3351/ppp.0003.0001.0001

However, as outlined in the background issues, this presupposed an appreciation of the value of higher level skills which would lead to specific requests for which the HLSAs could broker solutions from the LLN. Finding a very low level of knowledge and few employers making specific requests, the HLSAs focussed upon working in collaboration with other agencies to highlight the changing face of HE, provide a comprehensive signposting service to learning opportunities, and ‘sowing seeds that might grow in a better climate.’

‘our approach to working with employers has been based upon a business one. We discuss the full spectrum of skills to understand the business fully and are able to work with partners to meet employer need. Employers have been surprised that we talk their language coming from an educational environment.’

*‘the role is about **signposting** for employers; interacting with the key sectors and raising awareness of vocational programmes and progression routes.’*

‘it’s about ‘connecting the dots’, working across silo’s, bringing employers and academics together and acting as interpreter. It’s an important task that takes dedicated time and effort.’

‘Highlighting the aims and objectives of Leap Ahead, to raise awareness and widening participation into HE and their opportunity to participate in the consultation on curriculum development.’

The HLSA reach out to employers and businesses in three main ways:

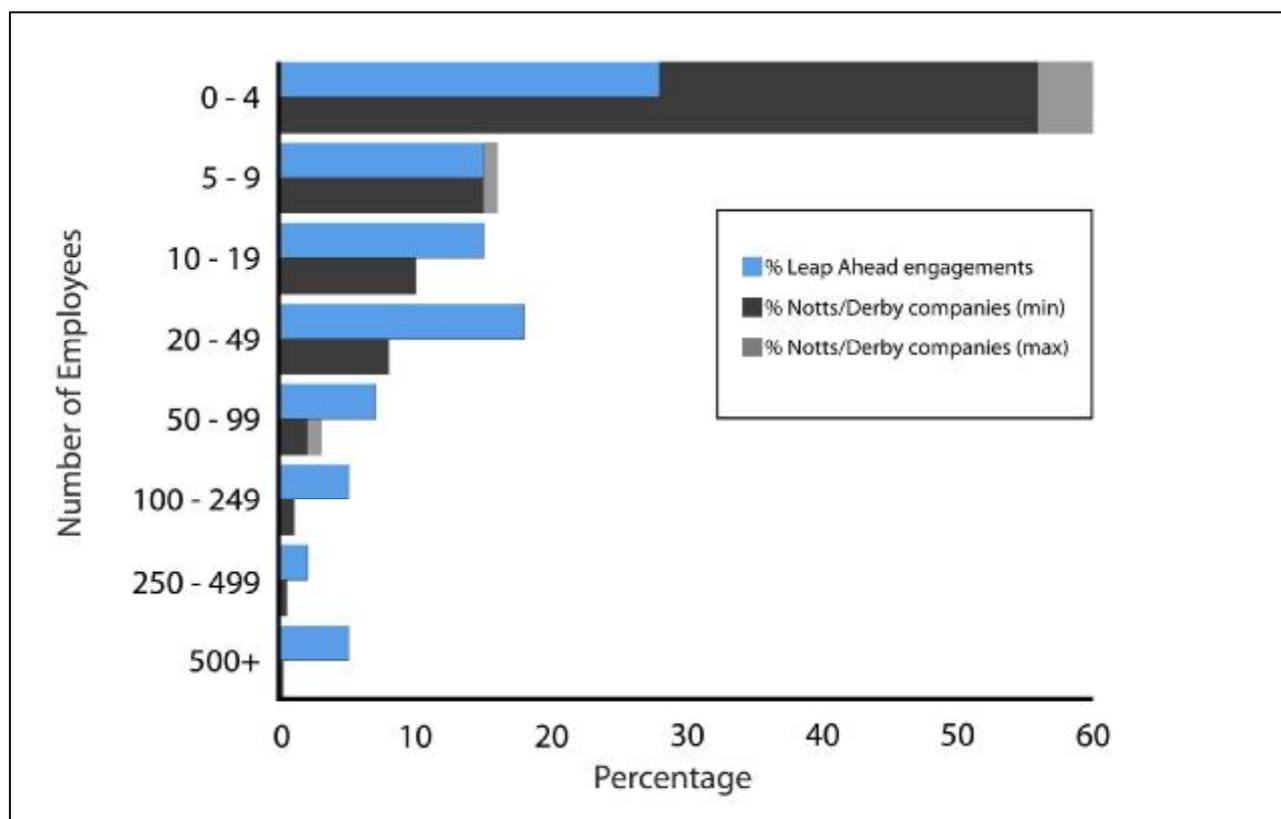
1. Individual consultations or appointments generated through referrals from colleagues in Leap Ahead, business support agencies and others who are familiar with their work.
2. Participating, networking and speaking at business networks and meetings of employer organisations. This has included exhibitions and sponsorship of employer networking groups and meetings such as Chambers of Commerce, Mansfield 2020 and Newark Business Club. These activities also include involvement in sector groups or partnerships focussing on particular skills or geographical areas such as Nottingham STARS Group, Derby City Retail Partnership, Unionlearn and similar. With encouragement from the Director greater emphasis was placed upon this approach from summer 2008.
3. Following up pre-screened appointments generated by an independent tele-marketing agency. In early 2009, Leap Ahead commissioned an agency to deliver warm contacts the HLSAs could follow up. The agency was paid per contact and has generated around 70 contacts to date.

Work is ongoing to compare and contrast the efficacy of these three different approaches and how information from them is fed into other Leap Ahead activities, such as curriculum development led by the Sector Managers and labour market information led by the IAG strand. It is anticipated that the final evaluation for Leap Ahead will reflect upon these broader aspects of the HLSA role.

Achievements

The HLSAs do not have individual targets but share the responsibility of achieving overall employer engagement targets with the Sector Managers and IAG. These were specified as 1200 employer engagements with 720 business referrals by the end of the project. At the time of writing the total number of recorded employer enquiries is 971 with 714 record enquiry forms completed. The guidance has been to count only the first enquiry from a company and not subsequent enquiries, so these records reflect the number of individual companies engaged and are not an indicator of the full extent of engagement.

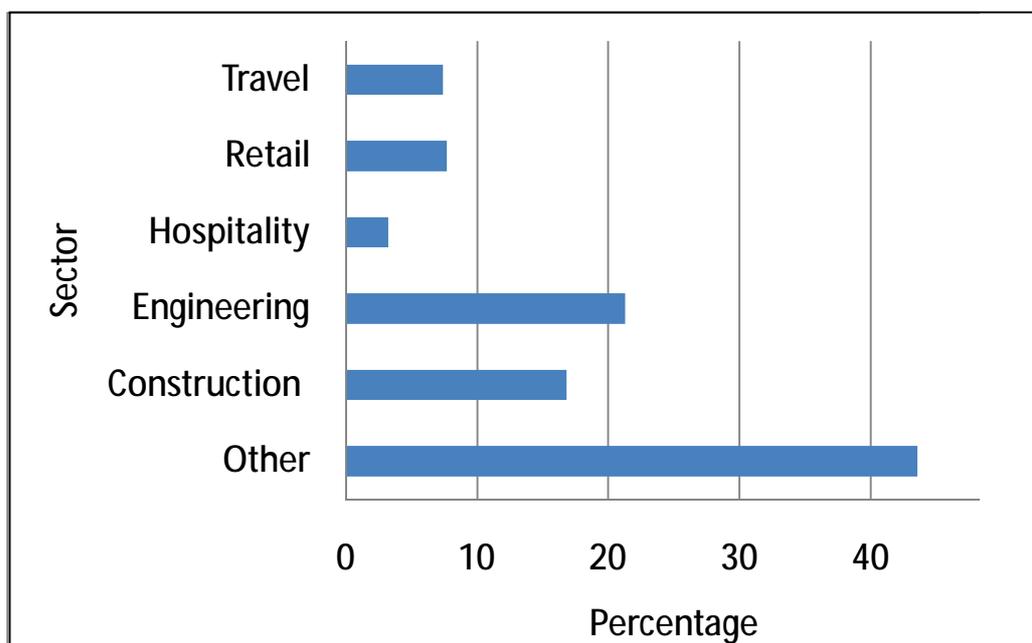
The 714 detailed records have provided information on engagement by size of company (number of employees). The spread of engagement appears well-distributed relative to the size of companies in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.⁶ There is greater engagement with companies with 20-49 employees and there is some support for this focus in current research.⁷



⁶ Data taken from Table A1.2, UK Business: Activity, Size and Location 2008, Office of National Statistics, Sept 2008.

⁷ Known Unknowns: the demand for higher level skills from businesses, CFE, Leicester 2008.

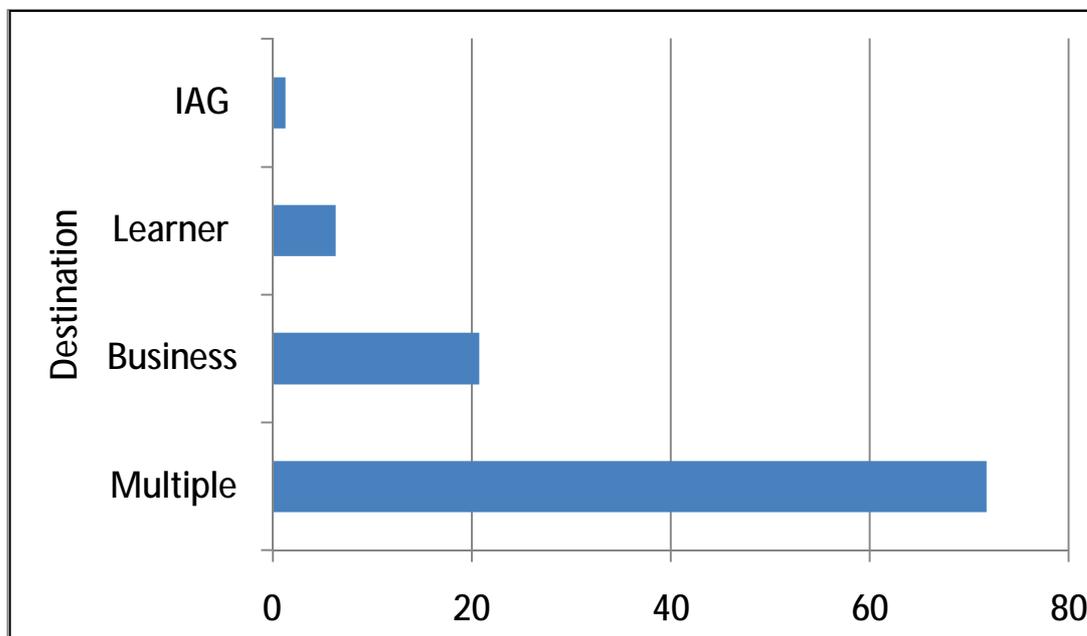
Engagements split by sector



The engagement forms ask the HLSAs to identify the Leap Ahead sector their employer is from and the results are shown above. However, sensibly their approach has not been to limit their engagements with the specific sectors and in reality most businesses do not fall neatly into these but overlap or cover multiple sectors as the large 'other/multiple' category demonstrates.

Similarly, the engagement forms ask HLSAs to note where a referral has been made to IAG (including Leap Ahead or other services), to Learner (a referral to a learning opportunity with a college, university or other training provider) or to business support agencies. However, as reflected in the large other/multiple category, the conversations with businesses and employers have been wide-ranging and might include guidance on business improvement, funding, contacts for business or suppliers, information on networks, knowledge transfer partnerships and all levels of skills issues.

Referrals from company engagements



“our approach has been to listen to employers and talk about their needs using a language employers understand we had to discuss all levels of learning to establish a relationship with employers and for them to see progression opportunities. This was done for us to understand the business and for employers to understand how skills can boost business performance.’

Sample case studies from interviews



‘I hadn’t previously been in contact, somebody from Leap Ahead telephoned me and we discussed training needs. They told me about Train to Gain funding and put me in touch with the College. We have gone ahead and organised the training, but we’re not using the funding – too much operator downtime and too much paperwork.’ - Training Manager, Heavy Engineering Company



‘I met the HLSA at a construction networking event. Actually I’d seen them around before at other events. They made me aware of what they did and how they might be able to help. She (the HLSA) also introduced me to some useful contacts for my business, people in the commercial sector that might become clients and also potential suppliers. She also gave me the contact details of the person dealing with my area at Beyond Brokerage and I’m going to be following that up soon.’ - Company Director, Media Production.



‘She (the HLSA) just popped in one day having previously been speaking to my Business Link Start-Up Advisor. She has helped in many ways, large and small, from helping me to rearrange where and how stock should be displayed for stock control, theft, maximum impact and increasing sales, to arranging for my website to be looked at. I also asked her for some help for my friend who is struggling and looking at college courses and funding. She quickly sent me all the information she needed.’ - Retail proprietor.

Other achievements and added value

§ The HLSAs worked with the IAG and Sector Managers to produce a suite of leaflets and outreach materials for businesses and employers, and careers materials, including sector careers and vocational routes brochures with local labour market information (LMI). This LMI data and information is also being fed into the online careers resource *Your Future East Midlands*, the 14-19 Area Prospectus and the emerging Next Step national websites. The approach to the presentation of qualification information was strongly endorsed by one employer,

'I am constantly confused by all the qualifications that are presented by applicants. I recognise GCSEs, A-Levels, HNDs, degrees etc but remain at a loss about all the other qualifications. As an employer I need a crib card that tells me what all these qualifications mean.'

§ Participation and presentations at networking and other events has had a multiplier effect. PR companies, for instance, would put a monetary value on the free promotion and publicity generated by a presentation opportunity such as the one described below.

'At Newark Business Club we delivered a presentation about the benefits of Leap Ahead and higher level skills to over 100 businesses. This information was later circulated to the community and we were given an editorial in the Newark Advertiser.'

In another example, one of the HLSAs participated in a competition at a business networking event and won work from a design and photography company. This was used to produce the distinctive silhouette design used on a Leap Ahead marketing postcard and news of Leap Ahead's win appeared on a diverse range of business news websites.

- § A strong working relationship has formed with other business support services and brokers bringing about extensive cross-referral.
- § The HLSAs have worked with local authorities to influence local economic strategy and succeeded in ensuring progression issues are included in their main strategy
- § They developed the '*employer journey*' concept, reflecting the flow from initial adviser-employer interaction to resolution, using this to induct new advisers and ensure a methodical process.
- § The six month extension to Leap Ahead is to be used to pass onto partner colleagues the outcomes of their practice, including practical benefits such as links, contacts and forums.
- § The partnership working and collaboration with IAG and Sector Managers has provided a range of benefits informing IAG, information production, curriculum development and recruitment. Some of these benefits arise organically through conversations between the partners and others are the result of formal processes and reports. Contributing to the overall aim of Leap Ahead in this way is a significant aspect of the HLSA role which may be considered in any broader evaluation.

Lessons from experience

What worked particularly well?

- § Recruiting a team of HLSAs with an extensive range of local contacts and knowledge from backgrounds working in business support agencies or similar roles involving interaction with business and employers. Given the way networking became increasingly important, it was helpful that the team already had some knowledge of the local networks and personal contacts. This also enabled them to provide businesses with comprehensive signposting to sources of help, and they have been able to assess the spread of specific concerns by finding out if external colleagues are approached on similar issues. Knowledge and contacts develop over time, and clearly it is helpful in a short-term project to have staff with these assets.
- § Setting higher levels skills in the context of business concerns. Discovering low levels of knowledge and appreciation of higher levels skills, it was critical to discuss all skills needs in the context of business development in the broadest sense.

‘we couldn’t go in just promoting higher level skills because these are irrelevant except as a means of helping to resolve business issues.’

Recent research including that from the universities of Hull and Newcastle⁸ has highlighted that, particularly in SMEs (the majority of companies), employers are unlikely to think of higher level skills except in terms of *tasks* that may require such skills. This supports the HLSA view that effective engagement commences with discussion of business issues or ‘task’ rather than skills.

- § The HLSAs felt being ‘independent brokers’ gave them a considerable advantage.

‘advisers can build up trust with employers/businesses because we’re not trying to sell them anything but ‘listening’ to what the issues are for them, signposting them to possible solutions and endeavouring to meet all needs.’

‘... the feedback has been positive for this approach and employers have wanted to be involved with sector development.’

What hasn’t worked so well?

- § Referrals have been made to and from partner institutions’ employer engagement teams, but attempts to bring meetings of them together faltered. There is an understandable wariness of sharing contacts between institutions who are collaborating, but also competing, and this activity probably needed visible senior management support.
- § The HLSAs felt an ongoing client account management system would have helped them to build and reinforce relationships with businesses and employers. They had discussions with LSC to have access to *ribis*⁹ at an early stage but without success. Furthermore they felt only being able

⁸ The Employment of Graduates within Small and Medium sized Firms in England, Hart T, Barratt B, People, Place and Policy Online (2009): 3/1, pp. 1-15. DOI: 10.3351/ppp.0003.0001.0001

⁹ *Relationships in business support information system*

to count the first engagement with a company towards achievement of targets failed to acknowledge their success building relationships likely to be more effective in the longer term.

- § Some Leap Ahead events targeting businesses failed to attract sufficient interest and the HLSA found the most effective for raising awareness of Leap Ahead and its offer, were those involving other partners and/or using existing business networks.

Reflections on impact, benefits and sustainability

The aims of Leap Ahead's services to businesses and employers are to increase participation of the counties workforce in HE and enhance the ability of the partners to respond to their needs. The services delivered **directly** to business by the HLSAs form only part of Leap Ahead's employer-facing activities and a fuller, more accurate picture needs to consider their broader contribution to curriculum development and IAG. Furthermore, this is an interim review and it is too early to collate reliable evidence of increased participation.

Notwithstanding, there is evidence that the activities of the HLSAs have raised awareness of vocational routes and higher levels skills training, particularly with increased emphasis on participation in networks and meetings of employer organisations. Working relationships with business support agencies have also strengthened, evidenced by cross-referral and collaborative activity, including a forthcoming joint event with Business Link. Their experience in the field has also added significantly to developing knowledge concerning engagement with business.

At the time of writing the Business Plan it seemed possible to foresee the successful development of.

'an independent referral and facilitation service to source both individual and collaborative skills development solutions from members of the LLN thus providing a 'one stop shop' for employers with skills development needs and general business brokers.'

In hindsight this assumed that business would be aware that sourcing high level skills was a potential solution to their business development issue. The HLSAs found the level of knowledge to be so low they needed to 'educate' business to appreciate the potential benefits. Also they needed to do this in context, starting with the business issues to demonstrate how skills training at all levels could help resolve them. Increasing research is supportive of this more holistic approach and indicates employer demand for higher level skills is subject to a complex range of interacting factors.

.....
‘Skills need to be considered in context rather than in isolation.....At the level of the individual workplace, product market strategy tends to drive skill demand, and if that skill demand is to be met, human resource strategies need to be effectively embedded within product market strategies.’¹⁰
.....

Clearly the vision in the Business Plan of an ‘independent referral and facilitation service’ providing a means of sustaining LLN activity was not to be straightforward, and further drawn into question by the development of the regional service *Beyond Brokerage*. However, funding for this is also time-limited and this is a particularly difficult period to explore sustainable business models for skills brokerage. In practice, it is hard to see ways of making such a service sustainable. It seems unlikely that unconvinced business would be prepared to pay, or that LLN partners would pay for a collaborative service and risk sharing the limited space in the marketplace. A potential side issue is that higher level skills can be packaged in different ways, and a business may select training or recruitment or *buying skills in*. The latter provides opportunities for research, work placements or graduate employment. It would probably be more convincing to businesses if they could be offered the full range of solutions that would work for them in their circumstances, but this might require a level of internal collaboration as challenging as that between institutional partners.

The activities of the HLSAs have provided useful discovery, and other valuable material may be as yet untapped. There are 714 quite detailed recorded engagements, many generating multiple or ‘other’ referrals. It would be useful to follow up a sample in the same way as is routinely done for IAG clients. The recent HEFCE commissioned report, *Using Demand to Shape Supply*¹¹, heavily emphasised the need for extensive market research with business and these records might provide a ready starting point that can be trawled for the insights their conversations with the HLSAs could provide. The report also emphasised the need to build responsive, iterative relationships with employers to help to shape supply, and research by the University of Bradford Business School highlights that it could take up to five conversations with a business before they participated in any activity. This suggests only counting the first contact with a business towards achievement of targets is an inadequate measure and a more informative indicator might be progress towards a lasting relationship.

¹⁰ Exploring the links between skills and productivity: The Final Report. Gambin L, Green A, Hogarth T. Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, March 2009.

¹¹ ‘Using demand to shape supply: An assessment of the higher level skills needs of employers in England’, CFE, July 2009

6. Progression Agreements and the role of the Progression Champions' Network

Aims and Objectives

The activities relating to Progression Agreements were outlined in the Business Plan under the theme of Bridges to Higher Education.

The Aim was:

- § to create a more flexible, responsive and transparent set of opportunities for lifelong learning amongst the learner constituency in line with identified demand from learners and employers.
- § To provide guaranteed progression for LLN learners that met clearly agreed criteria.

These aims were to be achieved by:

- § Establishing an LLN credit framework to allow progression opportunities across and between providers, levels and pathways through accumulation and transfer. This framework would be delivered through a 'time-limited task group' led by the Credit and Progression Officer.
- § Establishing a model LLN Progression Accord based on common, clear principles that clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of partners and the conditions needed to support learner progression. The model would be developed by a Progression Task Group who would also provide generic guidance on developing Progressions Accords, reducing the need for every accord to be drafted de novo and ensuring consistency and quality across the network.
- § Developing a set of accords that enabled learners to clearly identify opportunities for horizontal and vertical progression across the LLN for each occupational sector.

These aims and objectives in the Business Plan spoke to the overall LLN objective, seeking to *improve clarity and certainty* of progression opportunities by providing guaranteed progression in line with identified demand from learners and employers.

Background issues

The brief for the interim evaluation was to focus upon the operation of the Progression Champion's Network and assess how far the Network had managed to deliver on Progression Agreements. The target contained in the Business Plan was for 24 Progression Agreements by December 2009 but the Champion's Network had not featured and the decision to establish it was not made until June 2008, eighteen months after Leap Ahead started. A number of factors seemed to have contributed to the Network's appearance as a new strategy.

Firstly it proved difficult to appoint to the post of Credit and Progression Officer despite both national and internal LLN advertising. The responsibility was eventually assumed in July 07 by one of the Higher Level Skills Advisers.

Partly as a result of the above, progress had been slower than expected on establishing an overall Credit Framework, a model Progression Accord and consequently the Progression Agreements. A Progression Agreement Working Group met in December 2007 and work began on preparation of a credit framework in the New Year 2008. A 'Heads of Agreement' document was circulated and a high profile 'signing event' proposed for May 2008. In fact this was postponed until November 2008 and eventually cancelled altogether. Signed copies of the 'Heads of Agreement' had not been returned by all the partners at its last reference in the Minutes in March 09.

In the report of the peer evaluation undertaken with West London Lifelong learning Network in July 2008, the different experiences of the two LLNs were described,

'the drafting of the Progression Accord has required a substantial push from Leap Ahead in order to substantiate the case at all for local PAs. In this regard, the situation was quite different in West London where no partner representatives raised any concerns about the intrinsic value of such activities. Some Leap Ahead HEIs wanted quantifiable evidence of how such agreements would add value before committing themselves to the process.'

Although detailed documents were produced, the processes for developing both the Credit Framework and individual progression agreements appear to have been regarded as particularly bureaucratic and cumbersome, although this may, in part, have been in response to partners' uncertainty about their efficacy. It is outside the remit of this evaluation to examine the reasons for this in greater detail, but discussions suggest the strategy outlined in the Business Plan was a top-down process that involved all partners agreeing processes that would be binding on individual institutions. It may simply have been too early for this new partnership to engage with such an agreement.¹² Even after the Progression Champions were established and agreements started to come through, the Credit Working Group felt uncomfortable being asked to have the final say and endorse an individual agreement made between consenting institutions. Some felt the guidance from HEFCE was complex and hard to understand so it was difficult to know what one might be signing up to.

Utilising an under spend from the previous year, the Director proposed, at the Strategic Management Board in June 2008, to fund 14 positions across the LLN including two in the counties' training provider networks to link with Advanced Apprenticeships. The *Progression Agreement Champions* were to be funded by £16,000 for 2 days a week for 12 months.

What is the Network?

The Network is made up of a champion inside each institution and in the two Training Provider Networks covering Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The Open University divided the position between three Associate Lecturers, each taking responsibility for a different sector. Some

¹² A Rough Guide To Working in Partnership, Booth. J. 2006, has an account of the development of the Leicestershire Progression Accord which succeeded in getting schools, colleges and universities (including over 300 admissions tutors) to agree to a common progression agreement carrying 30 UCAS points. Arguably the most important success factor predicated by its architects was the length of their shared history.

appointments were made from external recruitment and others were internally designated Progression Agreements appointments. The position and seniority of Champions in institutions differs and this is discussed in below. The Network is actively co-ordinated by a member of Leap Ahead staff and meets once a month. Champions are required to submit monthly progress reports.

What is the Champions' understanding of their role & that of the network?

Seven (50%) of the champions, the Leap Ahead co-ordinator and the Open University co-ordinator, were asked for their view of the role, and revealed a remarkably consistent shared view, described as *'a grouping of like-minded folks' charged with 'making sure something happens' and 'bridging the gap between institutions.'*

'it can mean pushing or pulling, but in a facilitative or administrative fashion – contacting the champion in the other institution, getting the academics together, producing key notes and the draft progression agreement, circulating it and getting it signed off.'

Champions also described their role as *'enhancing widening participation, raising awareness and promoting progression opportunities, spotting gaps and identifying ways of bridging them'*. They shared the view of the role as being both external, looking outwards to potential partners in progression agreements, and internal, promoting the concept and persuading colleagues of its value.

In addition to the shared view, each was cognisant of the ways they had adapted the role to their local circumstances. Although they stressed they felt like equals in the Network, there are some significant differences in their positions within their own organisations and that has affected the way they have been able to influence and operate on home ground. Some are positioned within information, advice and guidance or student services areas, and they spoke of the ways in which they were able to inform guidance practice with individual students, enhancing colleagues' knowledge. However they described their Champion function roles as *'a lot of administrative legwork, making it easy for others in the institution to engage, and nurturing agreements along.'* On the other hand, the two or three that held senior management positions in their institution could operate on a more strategic level, calling Heads of Schools to meetings and considering of progression agreements alongside reviewing the journey they could offer their learners into and through higher education. The training networks stressed their role was persuading private training providers it was in their interest to get involved, presenting a business case compelling enough to distract attention from recession, *e2e* and *train2gain* issues, and backed by real life case studies provided by their Network Champion colleagues.

Some had job descriptions providing clear focus to the role supported by senior management. The University of Nottingham Champion described how she, like others, approached the role in ways that fitted well with her institutions ethos, spending a couple of months conducting research into entry routes into the School of Engineering (with some surprising results) and with the benefit of a narrow focus into this sector, could lend particular support to developments with her Network colleagues. The Open University divided the post between three Associate Lecturers to support progress in three subject areas. The staff were co-ordinated by the Deputy Director of the Regional Centre reflecting the

importance that was placed on their work internally. Similarly the University of Derby made an early appointment and the Champion enjoyed the commitment of senior management. At the time of writing most of the completed agreements involve the University of Derby as a receiving institution.

Achievements

Completed progression agreements

At the time of writing (Sept 09) ten agreements have been completed and signed off, a further six are imminent and a further nine are anticipated by December 2009. If successful this will surpass the target in the Business Plan of 24, and given there was little progress in the first eighteen months of the life of the LLN, will have been brought about within half the time allowed.

Some agreements were considered particularly special achievements. For instance, engineering progression routes were approved by the professional body and covered all levels.

'Our joint achievements have included 4 broad agreements – covering all modes of learning and levels (incorporating 14-19 diplomas, BTech, Level 3-4 and postgraduate), more meaningful than 8 separate agreements'

The evaluation exercise recently commissioned by HEFCE (October 09) has asked each LLN to submit details of progression agreements and the data submitted for Leap Ahead is reproduced below. Obviously it will take some time for learners to progress through the routes that have been put into place and it is anticipated that the national evaluation will comment upon this measure.

	FD	Undergrad	Postgrad	Signed & implemented	In development /draft	No. of different institutional signatories (implemented & draft)	Expected no. of learners per year (implemented) that have progressed
Access		2			2	2	
APEL							
Apprenticeships	1			1		1	1
BA/BSc			1		1	2	
BTEC L3&4	10	11		10	8	25	4
Fdation Degree	4	2			4	9	
HNC		1			1	2	
HND		1			1	2	
NVQ	3	1			1	4	
14-19 diploma							
Other							
Total	18	18	1	11	18	47	5

Progression Agreements (at 2.9.09) – discipline detail

Vocational Area	Feeder Institution	Receiving Institution	Date signed
Engineering	University of Derby Buxton Level 3 Vehicle Maintenance	University of Derby FdSc Motorsport/Motorcycle Technology	7/11/08
	South East Derbyshire College Level 3 Vehicle Maintenance	University of Derby FdSc Motorsport/Motorcycle Technology	7/11/08
	NLT Training Provider Level 3 Engineering & Maintenance	Chesterfield College Fd Electrical & Electronic Engineering	5/5/09
	Chesterfield College Level 3 Motor Vehicle Engineering	University of Derby FDSc Motorsport/Motorcycle Technology	2/6/09
	University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University BEng/Bsc (Hons)Eng	OU MEng (Pt) Eng	Imminent
	LEAP AHEAD Partners L3	University of Nottingham, University of Derby, Nottingham Trent University, Open University, BEng, BSC, FD, HND, HNC Eng	Imminent
	Local Authority Consortia Engineering Diploma	University of Nottingham, University of Derby, Nottingham Trent University, Open University, BEng, BSC, FD, HND, HNC Eng	Imminent
Construction	South-East Derbyshire College L3 Construction Award	University of Derby FdSc Built Environment/Construction/Architecture/Civil Engineering	14/10/08
Hospitality & Retail	Premium 4 Training PTLLS/CTLLS (Preparing/Certificate to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector)	Chesterfield College PGCE Yr 1/2	5/5/09
	South Notts College L3 Sport & Fitness	University of Derby Sport Massage & Exercise Therapy Joint Hons	4/3/09
	South East Derbyshire College L3 Beauty Therapy/Beauty Therapy Massage	University of Derby Fd Hairdressing & Salon Management / Spa	5/3/09
	University of Derby (FE) L3 Sport Development /Sport Outdoor Adventure	University of Derby (HE)	1/4/09
	Castle College NVQ Level 3 Hairdressing	Castle College FD Hairdressing & Salon Management	11/6/09
	HIT Training L3 Hospitality Supervision	Derby College CTLLS (Certificate to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector)	Imminent
Sport	Derby College Level 3 National Diploma Sport	University of Derby FdA Sports Coaching	Imminent
Countryside Management	Derby College Level 3 National Diploma Countryside Management	University of Derby Joint (Hons) Countryside Management	Imminent

Other achievements and added value

Asked to identify other achievements, the Champions provided a range of examples including personal achievements, those they considered to be shared with the Network or individual colleagues, and examples of ways their activities had added value to their own professional development and that of their organisation.

- § Most mentioned the Network had improved communication between different providers and developed better understanding of each others' provision, course content, services and the needs of staff and students.

'Overcoming the difference in language between universities and work-based learning has been a real issue but also a great achievement e.g. Key skills/NVQs/assessors/D32&3/quality issues. Work based learning is very different with no UCAS points and different funding arrangements.'

- § Improving the vocabulary used by internal colleagues was also identified as an achievement.

'Progression agreements were put into the vocabulary internally and externally, sowing a seed and encouraging people to think differently.'

- § Champions valued the opportunities the Network provided for them to meet and talk with others they wouldn't normally meet.

'we would never normally have had the opportunity to sit down with the training providers, it was a real eye-opener'

Conversations in meetings also meant they could identify other ways to help each other, with Aimhigher activity for instance.

- § In at least three cases activities coincided with their institutions reviewing strategies and developing new priorities, and enabled the Champion to feed into this and be recognised for the experience and expertise they could offer. This could be a win-win with the organisation gaining from enhancing the experience of their learners, and the Champion using the role to broaden their experience and progress to opportunities that build upon it and/or negotiate future roles.

'The work to date has positioned us well in relation to the new Diplomas.'

- § Finally value was added by uncovering some surprises. The University of Nottingham told of how the initial research she carried out revealed that some of the underlying assumptions influencing learner and tutor actions could be wrong. She unexpectedly found a higher proportion of those applying with vocational qualifications were offered places, but there were too few applicants.

Similarly, Champions involved in individual learner guidance commonly found cases of learners progressing onto courses with vocational qualifications where they least expected it, *'I've learnt never to make assumptions.'*

Such examples could then be used as a lever to persuade others of the potential benefits from facilitating progression and making the route clear and explicit.

'My role included persuading work-based learning providers that it is in their interest to get engaged – it looks good on OFSTED reports to provide for progression – and it's really helped to have case studies of people who have gone before – an example of someone who's gone onto an OU Openings course has been particularly useful.'

Lessons from experience

What worked particularly well

§ The camaraderie between the Champions.

'The Champions spoke the same language... frank and honest discussions could take place, facilitating greater understanding of the issues for different institutions.'

- § Getting as much work done in the monthly meeting as possible. Giving over as much time as possible for individual discussions between Champions engaged in progression agreements between their organisations.
- § The notion of shared targets between the Network rather than individual ones – although there was also concern expressed for more individual accountability.
- § The speed networking facilitated for the first 90 minutes of the monthly meeting was mentioned as something that worked particularly well at first,

'forces you to speak to people you wouldn't normally speak to but less valuable and more time-wasting as people knew each other better.'

- § The Progression Agreement Toolkit was used by Champions in different ways. Some felt they needed it earlier than it was available, but gradually dispensed with it as they grew more confident promoting the concept of progression agreements to their colleagues, or they extracted key parts to make it appear less intimidating.

- § Having a central co-ordinator to arrange the meetings, follow through and monitor progress, but also to provide advice and reassurance, keep an overview of all activity and identify where colleagues could make useful connections.

What didn't work so well

- § The aspect mentioned most often was the appointment of Champions at different times. It is understood that this occurred for a range of reasons, most commonly because of the different approaches/means available to organisations to identify a part-time role over 12 months. The absence of Champions in some institutions that have only recently managed to recruit has been keenly felt as a lost opportunity. The fact that some Champions are winding down while others are just getting started is unsettling and limiting.
- § The short time-span of 12 months means that the benefits of the progression agreements won't be realised within the life-cycle of the project. Also there isn't enough time to try something, fail and try another approach. The training providers expressed particular frustration following attempts to run a focus group of HE/FE and work-based learning providers to draw out key issues. Having failed to get people together once, there wasn't enough time to try again.
- § Some Champions engaged less than others, and whilst there was good turn-out for initial meetings, some appeared less often. Some of the active Champions felt more individual accountability would have been helpful. Frustration was expressed by those that had hoped to take links forward with institutions that did not turn up to meetings.

Reflections on impact, benefits and sustainability

- § There were a number of ways people felt their work would be taken forward within their own organisation, involvement in the Network having demonstrated it was in their interest to do so. Examples included appointment of a member of staff responsible for outreach in a specific sector and pursuit of progression agreements in areas identified as important strategically, and in their learners' interest.
- § Many felt they would continue to use the skills and experience they had acquired. Even if not explicitly sustaining activity, they would use their insights in their guidance practice or continue connections with individual Network colleagues to pursue other shared interests. Some thought they would continue to use the Progression Agreements Toolkit and alter it to suit new circumstances. They suggested the Champions should review the toolkit and agree what had emerged as the '*really useful bits*' to use in future work activities.
- § All those interviewed felt more could be achieved by the Network itself. Some, who had already decided it was worth maintaining some aspect of the Champion's role at their own expense were prepared to commit time to meeting as a Network with support of a central co-ordinator.
- § There was also cynicism or perhaps justifiable discomfort at the prospect of pursuing and developing progression routes without funding for additional students. Also in 12 months there wasn't time to deal with some issues that were bound to emerge with more activity. An example given was how progression agreements might interact with validation arrangements between individual FE and HE institutions, if these were predicated on assumptions of usual or exclusive progression routes.

Reviewing the achievements against the aims and objectives articulated in the Business Plan, it is clear that the Progression Champion Network strategy introduced half-way through the life of the LLN, has ensured that the targets for completed progression agreements should be met. There has been less progress on putting a credit framework in place and this may have been a far too ambitious aim for a new partnership or as one person put it, *'an aim imposed as a condition of the funding and not demonstrably in any of the partners' interests or particularly demanded by learners or their employers'* Furthermore, the agreements do not offer 'guaranteed' progression but how could that be possible with limitation on funding and places, even without the current circumstances?

Whilst important, the Progression Agreements themselves may not have the strongest impact upon the further development of *flexible, responsive and transparent set of opportunities for lifelong learning* but the staff development that has taken place and the ripples the Champions' activity has caused across the Network and in their own institutions will continue to be felt.

7. Overall Review

The overall objective of the HEFCE lifelong learning networks is *'to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education.'* It is too early to measure success in terms of increasing numbers pursuing these routes, and this interim evaluation only looked at three aspects of Leap Ahead activity that would contribute to such an outcome. However there are clear indicators that the reviewed activities will contribute to achievement of the overall objective, and will continue to do so following completion of Leap Ahead. It is also clear that the particularly lasting impact may arise from the opportunities Leap Ahead has provided for people, from different positions of influence in a progression continuum, to work together. Success is likely to be brought about by the conversations Leap Ahead has initiated and nurtured as much as by the visible products or formal processes put in place.

The IAG services are likely to surpass their targets and, working with Leap Ahead colleagues, have produced information resources, including local labour market information, that will provide content for *Your Future East Midlands*. Involvement has enabled them *'to gain confidence advising at higher levels'* and will leave them *'better equipped'*. The immediate number of people progressing through vocational routes would be a limited impact measure set against the multiplier effect of a well-timed guidance interview,

"She (the careers adviser) gave me such a boost. I would have done it anyway eventually but I just needed someone to tell me I wasn't aiming out of my league. I'm determined to show my kids you can do anything, you don't have to just go along with what everybody else has done."

The challenges faced by the Higher Level Skills Advisers and their experience addressing them may point the way to successful strategies in the future. They have highlighted low levels of knowledge of higher level skills and how effective engagement begins with listening, and setting skills in the context of business concerns. Finally, the actual number of Progression Agreements signed off, may not have as great an impact as bringing together the Champions, *'a group of like-minded individuals'* and resourcing them to develop better understanding of each others' language, provision, course content, services and needs of staff and students.

There is increasing evidence that most change in complex systems is *'emergent'*¹³ and arises from changes in the nature of daily conversations, negotiations and patterns of relationships between members (and their interaction with the external environment). The actions that may have the most impact are those that open up spaces for new conversations, build connections across boundaries and encourage lots of interaction. Leap Ahead has demonstrated that it has prioritised such actions in the ways it has pursued the three areas considered in this review.

¹³ Seel, R. (2000) "Complexity & Cultural: New Perspectives on Organisational Change.", *Organisations & People*, Vol 7 No 2, pp.2-9.

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Nena Dubaic	Higher Level Skills Adviser, Leap Ahead
Lisa Smoothy	Higher Level Skills Adviser, Leap Ahead
Mark Hodgkinson	Higher Level Skills Adviser, Leap Ahead
Patrick Barber	Sector Manager, Leap Ahead
David Tooth	Sector Manager, Leap Ahead

Plus employers

Retail owner/manager
 Company owner/manager, care services
 Company director, media
 Training and recruitment, heavy engineering

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Julia Bristow	Careers Service, Nottingham Trent University
Neil Raven	Your Future East Midlands

Plus clients

JB, self-employed mechanical engineer
 SC, recently made redundant and changing career
 CB, full-time carer changing career
 KP, in f/t health-care work progressing career
 SH, store manager recently made redundant changing career
 PB, in banking changing career
 TM, professional singer changing career
 WI, council administrator under redundancy threat progressing career
 VB, client referred by UnionLearn, changing career
 MW, career change into healthcare
 DV, career change into psychotherapy

Employers

NHS Trust
 Care Home