

# Adult Learners, Admissions and IAG

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## Introduction

This report follows from the two conference sessions. We focused on IAG for adults and it was clear from both sessions that LLNs have developed a unique understanding of higher education across a wide range of institutions across the country in terms of progression opportunities, pre-entry information advice and guidance and the admissions process. Our joint experience confirms that adults experience many barriers to higher education before they are able to get to the point of choosing a course, making an application and becoming part of the admissions process. We looked at issues around raising aspirations to HE for those in employment and identifying those for whom HE could be a way back into work as well as focusing on the experience of those who do aspire to HE but struggle to get high quality IAG.

## Background

In addition to the papers listed below, the recent publication of *Higher Ambitions* makes it clear that higher skills and education remain a key imperative and universities will be expected to support economic growth in the recession.

- Shaping the future (Oct 2008)
- Informal Learning: The Learning Revolution (March 2009)
- New Industry, New Jobs: Building Britain's Future (April 2009)
- Understanding Advancement (April 2009)
- Emerging stronger: the value of education and skills in turbulent times (April 2009)
- Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK (May 2009)
- Building a society for all ages: choice for older people (July 2009)

Whilst we are aware that universities were over-subscribed this year, demographics inform us that the number of 18 year olds is going to decrease by 18% within the next 10 years. This will affect the number of young people applying to higher education (HE). In addition, adults will be expected to stay in the workforce for longer as the pension age gradually increases.

There is thus a mismatch between national skills objectives and operational policy. LLNs have worked closely with partner universities and colleges to increase progression routes and develop new curricula to support vocational learners. Many have also used their resources to provide IAG. Whereas much of the progression and curriculum development has been embedded as LLNs come to the end of their operational periods, this is not the case for IAG that relies on unbiased pre-entry exploration and advice about options across a number of institutions.

## Early engagement - raising awareness of HE

This is the first hurdle for adults who know little or nothing about higher education or, indeed, those who did their first degree a long time ago. Our joint LLN experience of working with the Adult Advancement Service Prototypes is that the gap in the provision of HE IAG is likely to prevail with scarce

resources being directed towards those looking to achieve levels 2 and 3. In addition JobCentre Plus advisers currently have no time to develop the expertise that would enable them to identify higher education as a possible route back into work for some clients. (BBC News, 3 December 2009). Similarly, Business Link/Train to Gain need quick access to high quality resources in order to provide advice to employers, particularly small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) without dedicated HR and training departments.

## Considering HE and returning to learning

Traditional routes to HE for young people wishing to study full-time are well prescribed and supported. However, the adult, who has vocational qualifications and/or experience, and is unlikely to be confident about returning to learning, currently has to negotiate the complexities of prospectuses (and front line staff) with a primary focus on full-time provision for young people with A levels applying through UCAS.

Whilst LLNs have done much to raise awareness of HE and vocational routes during their operation, there needs to be an intermediary service between the individual and the institution. From our joint LLN experience, we have identified these as some of the most persistent questions asked by those in work, hoping to return to work or currently studying level 3. They indicate the complexity and confusion surrounding entry to HE.

- Am I too old to study at university?
- Will I fit in with the younger students?
- What does HE mean and is it different from higher level skills?
- What can HE do for me?
- What do the levels and qualifications mean?
- What's the difference between part-time study and a short course?
- What is vocational education? I thought it was about being a nurse.
- What is work based learning?
- How do I know if I have the right entry requirements? It says in the prospectus that entry requirements for adults are different.
- How can I fit study around work and other commitments?
- How often will I need to attend classes?
- What will it cost me and is there any financial support?
- What other costs should I consider? (For example, childcare, travel, books, equipment.)
- I'm a carer, will there be any help for me?
- What can I do about childcare?
- Will my writing/maths skills will be good enough?
- I'm on benefits, can I still study? Where can I get authoritative advice about my individual circumstances?
- Do I have to do a whole degree or can I take study breaks?
- I failed at school, how will this be different?
- Will I get support (e.g. time off or a financial contribution) from my employer?
- I've got a disability, will I get support?
- What does the accreditation of prior experiential learning mean and how does it work?

- I'm confused about the difference between full-time and part-time because all the courses have different attendance patterns. Can I work and do a full-time course?
- How will it affect my career? What are my options?
- Are there jobs with the potential for degree level training?
- Can I do higher education after an apprenticeship?
- How do I apply? Will I need a reference and how do I write a personal statement?

Most of these barriers have to be dealt with before the individual can get to the point of applying to study. Much work has been done by LLNs, both individually and collaboratively, over the past three years to address and deal with these barriers by providing clear, up to date, information and advice and, where possible, individual guidance. The LLNs are naturally concerned that as their funding ends, so will the IAG.

The cap on student numbers at HE should not be allowed to undermine the work done by LLNs to broker progression opportunities and encourage vocational learners to aspire to higher education. There are serious concerns that there is an incorrect assumption that adults interested in higher level skills need less IAG, but experience and practice show that this is definitely not the case. There is a concern that if the new adult careers service is under pressure because of insufficient funding, it will give a low priority to higher level skills.

## Solutions

Some LLNs have extended their funding period and will be able to continue their local IAG work. However, these are local solutions that are a long way from consistent provision across the country.

Learning Opportunities in the South East is the culmination of two and a half years of research and development, latterly by four LLNs who have been working collaboratively. Other LLNs have expressed an interest in either using a similar tool or adding their area information to the existing tool. There are therefore two possibilities, both of which would build on existing expertise and resources and could be linked to the National Careers Service.

1. Version Learning Opportunities for each of the regions using existing LLN expertise where appropriate.
2. Remove all the regional data from Learning Opportunities to produce a basic, generic guide to higher education linked from the National Careers website.