

Workforce is key to improving quality

Providers of lifelong learning are recognising the importance of upskilling their own staff by establishing the new sector skills council for lifelong learning.

According to David Hunter, chief executive of Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), it is vital that all young people and adults have positive experiences of lifelong learning across all elements of the sector.

"We have to ensure that what we provide matches the needs of employers and individuals more closely," he says. "The quality of our own workforce is the key factor in achieving that goal."

David Hunter became chief executive of LLUK in August after leading the Further Education National Training Organisation, one of the NTOs that helped to set up the new sector skills council.

LLUK is an employer-led body representing more than one million learning professionals in work-based, community and educational institutions. It will start work in January, once it receives the final go-ahead from the Sector Skills Development Agency.

One of the major aims of LLUK is to help employers tackle skills gaps by making lifelong learning a career of choice for staff. Better training and development, says David, will help to retain employees that might otherwise leave for jobs in other sectors.



ICT resources in public libraries have hugely increased the diversity of learners

LLUK will also promote improved mobility within the sector with employees having more opportunity to gain skills and move into new roles that will help to raise the quality of learning. "The bottom line is that learners have a better experience," he adds.

LLUK will be responsible for workforce planning and development, as well as collating labour market intelligence. It will help employers lobby for greater government investment in learning and skills.

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Skills to cascade through other sectors

LLUK should champion the acquisition of new skills by staff in lifelong learning and the wider workforce, say employers.

About 100 employers and other stakeholders from the lifelong learning sector who attended recent consultation events have backed the vision and strategic priorities of the sector skills council.

The SSC has a vital role to play, they concluded, in upskilling staff who face the challenge of raising skills levels among employees in

other sectors. "Its unique role is to upskill the workforce that upskills all other workforces," said one employer.

Participants at the three events, held in Bristol, Newcastle and Belfast, recognised that learners are entitled to be taught by properly qualified staff, and discussed the importance of finding new ways to meet the needs of learners.

LLUK must push for greater investment in workforce development from the government and individual learners, as well as employers, and promote the importance of skill acquisition. "Learning to learn is the most important skill you can acquire in your lifetime," said one participant.

Another stressed the need for creativity. "We need to stimulate ideas about new and different approaches to meeting learning needs."

Entitlement to learning sought by Unions

Staff working in lifelong learning must be guaranteed initial training and continuing professional development, according to trade unions.

Through LLUK, unions will be urging employers to offer staff a training entitlement and to protect CPD budgets when money is tight.

“We would like to see agreement that people will be trained to sector-wide standards and that there will be proper and continuous funding of CPD,” says Paul Mackney, general secretary of Natfhe.

Natfhe represents staff in adult education and the voluntary sector, as well as further and higher education and supports greater mobility across the sector. “There could be substantial benefits in people that were trained in industry coming to work in a college,” he says.

It also wants more emphasis on diversity, and believes that LLUK has a key role to play in ensuring that recommendations made by the Commission for Black Staff in FE are implemented by all learning providers in the wider sector.

Christina McAnea, national secretary for education at Unison, stresses that LLUK must see learning support staff as having as vital a role to play as teachers. Unison has more than 100,000 members in the post-16 sector, including staff working in local authority libraries.

“If we are talking about improving standards, we must look further than just teachers,” she says. “Learners come from an increasingly wide range of backgrounds and may require guidance staff and counsellors. There is a need for a wide range of people to support learning.”



Trainee PCET teachers on University of East London's PGCE programme

Improved dialogue must flow from SSC



John Hedger

Lifelong Learning UK has a real opportunity to improve the dialogue between learning providers and employers in other sectors, according to LLUK's inaugural chair.

John Hedger, a former senior civil servant, became interim chair of LLUK in January 2004 and, once the sector skills council receives its licence, will continue as chair for up to 12 months.

John spent a total of 37 years in the civil service, having joined direct from university. He worked in the Department for Education and, later, the Department for Education and Employment before leaving in 2000 to work independently as a trustee of two national education organisations.

As operations director at the DfEE, he was responsible for relations with training and enterprise councils and national training organisations, the forerunner of SSCs.

“I want to see some real progress made,” he says. “Over my career, the dialogue between learning providers and employers has been improving, but far too slowly. It's not exactly a dialogue of the deaf, but there is room for considerable improvement.”

For the past ten months, John has chaired LLUK's shadow board, made up of representatives from employers and trade unions. The LLUK Council, which will oversee the new organisation, is currently being set in place.

It was not surprising, says John, that employers in the sector took longer than others to set up the SSC because they were not used to thinking of themselves as a single entity with overlapping interests. “It was never going to happen overnight, but the pace has quickly picked up and we are determined to act together to make a difference.”

LLUK commits to “quick wins” for sector workforce



David Hunter

After three years as chief executive of the Further Education National Training Organisation, David Hunter believes he has even less time to ensure that LLUK makes a positive impact on the wider lifelong learning sector. Here David answers some of the questions that he is frequently asked about the new sector skills council.

How does LLUK intend to raise the quality of professional development?

The first thing to do is create a set of occupational standards built around a common core of teaching and learning support. There will be convergence, but with specifications for each constituent part of the sector. The common core should ensure that colleagues can progress and work across the different boundaries which traditionally existed within the sector. The important thing is that the sector feels it has ownership of the standards. The worst thing we could do is impose standards that people don't want.

Will it be harder to get some parts of the sector using the standards than others?

Occupational standards are being developed throughout lifelong learning, including higher education and adult and community learning. We will be looking for convergence and coherence, but we are not just talking about competencies. We want to see practitioners using standards in a creative way to improve the quality of teaching and learning support. Occupational standards used for training and development must be fully respected by employers and practitioners. The important thing is that the sector feels it has ownership.

Are you confident LLUK has the support of employers and practitioners throughout the sector?

That is one reason for having sector skills agreements, to enable people in different parts of the UK to plan how they intend to upskill workers in their particular 'footprint'. LLUK will take a lead in promoting such agreements and in suggesting ways that employers can work collectively.

A lack of up-to-date labour market intelligence has been identified as a barrier to raising skills. How long will it take to get more accurate LMI for employers?

We should see better data within 18 months to two years. LLUK will work with government departments and bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council to gather accurate LMI and then analyse it so that employers can make coherent decisions about skill gaps, and the sort of training that is required.

We are particularly concerned to improve our data on work-based and adult and community learning. This will enable government departments to bid for funds from the Treasury to improve the skills of these workforces.

How does LLUK hope to improve the dialogue between learning providers and employers in other sectors?

LLUK is part of the Skills for Business network. More than 90 per cent of UK workers are represented by a sector skills council or a SSC that is in development. We have to ensure that what we provide matches the needs of employers more closely. SSCs give us the opportunity to do that. This is the first time that employers have come together on a UK-wide basis and approached learning and the acquisition of skills strategically. It is very much a collective model.

Is LLUK going to speak for the learner as well as those working in the lifelong learning sector?

If we don't consider ways of improving things for the learner, there is no point in going through this exercise. The goal is that learners have a better experience. They should be able to learn faster and not have to repeat things later on. By working with others to improve opportunities for employers and staff, LLUK will also benefit the learner.

It has taken a long time for LLUK to get off the ground. When will we know that it has all been worthwhile?

In my own mind, we have got to make a real difference within three years. If LLUK doesn't make the required impact on employers, practitioners and learners, then what is the point?

We have the broad principles for how we can achieve things jointly with employers. I can see the big picture but I need the support of others to help fill in the detail. What we are seeking to achieve has never been attempted before. We will only learn how by doing it.

LLUK – The Facts

- Lifelong Learning UK is in charge of workforce planning and development in the lifelong learning sector. It will develop sector-wide occupational standards for more than one million employees and produce labour market intelligence for the sector.
- LLUK will also enable employers in the sector to influence national and regional policies for workforce development and improve the dialogue with other employers who look to the sector to meet their skill needs.
- The lifelong learning workforce includes an estimated 430,000 staff in higher education; 271,000 in further education; 249,000 in community-based learning; 70,000 in work-based learning and 50,000 in libraries, archives and information services.
- LLUK will work closely with key bodies such as the Higher Education Academy, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- LLUK is part of the Skills for Business network, set up during the past two years. Nineteen sector skills councils are already in operation and a further six are in development.
- LLUK is establishing a wholly owned subsidiary, Standards Verification UK which will continue the endorsement and approval work previously undertaken by Fento. It will also be able to offer commercial verification activities.
- LLUK has a pivotal position in the drive to upskill workers across the UK, as the quality of staff in lifelong learning dictates whether everyone else can acquire new skills.

Career opportunities expand in Lifelong Learning



Joel Whittle

Professional development is providing opportunities for career progression and movement across the boundaries within the learning and skills sector, according to technician-turned-teacher Joel Whittle.

Joel, who began working at St Helens College as a technician 31 years ago, is studying for a Certificate in Education after starting to teach at the college earlier this year.

Teacher training, he says, helps with activities such as lesson planning and student assessment even though he already had extensive experience of working with learners in his previous role.

Joel, who represented Unison on the Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, teaches equality issues at St Helens. He is also equality and diversity officer at the college.

“Lifelong learning is not just about teaching. Support systems are just as important,” he says. “The opportunity to change roles is much greater than it used to be, but it is important that more support staff are able to make choices across a range of career options.”

LLUK’s David Hunter, stresses that the shortage of teachers with the right vocational experience and skills in lifelong learning means that it is in the interest of employers to increase mobility within the sector.

David himself has worked for the youth service as well as teaching in further, higher, and adult education.

“Hopefully more people will have the opportunity to build the sort of career profile that I’ve enjoyed,” says David. “We want to offer people choice rather than see them placed in straitjackets.”

Role of library staff recognised

The sector skills council will help staff working in libraries to gain wider recognition as learning professionals.

Jon Anderson, enquiry services manager for Cambridgeshire Libraries and Information Service, says the role of information workers in learning has come to the fore during the past five years, mainly due to the expansion of online learning. “It’s something that we are moving towards.”

Ten libraries in Cambridgeshire are accredited with the Matrix quality standard in recognition of their work in providing careers guidance. The council runs learning centres in eight of its larger libraries.

“One of the biggest challenges has been reskilling of librarians in terms of IT and web surfing,” adds Anderson.

Alix Craven, acting chief executive of ISNTO, the NTO for libraries, archives and information services, says employees who have not previously considered themselves learning professionals will start to see their work as a crucial part of lifelong learning. “The bonus for information professionals will be that their role will be seen as equally important in supporting learners’ progress as other professionals working in the field.”

Alan Watkin, chief officer for leisure, libraries and culture at Wrexham Council, says better workforce development should increase opportunities for career progression. “LLUK will enable colleagues in libraries and archives to develop new careers as the artificial barriers that currently exist between different parts of the learning environment are reduced.”

A UK-wide operation

Lifelong Learning UK will reach across the United Kingdom and ensure that employees have access to CPD opportunities in order to update and enhance their skills.

Sector skills agreements will be signed with organisations in different parts of the UK and LLUK will work closely with government departments in the four nations.

“It’s absolutely essential that we rise to the challenges of federalism in the UK,” says LLUK’s chair, John Hedger. People who wish to move jobs should not have impediments put in their way. We all benefit from migration between different parts of the lifelong learning sector and between the different nations.”

Where to contact LLUK

Lifelong Learning UK is based in temporary offices in Fleet Street, London, while it awaits licence approval.

During the next few years, it will operate from offices in London and Leeds while at the same time seeking to establish permanent headquarters in the Birmingham area.

LLUK can be reached at

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A website will go live soon as www.lifelonglearninguk.org