

COLLABORATING FOR SUCCESS: CLARE LIFE LONG LEARNING

Defining and providing a full and varied Life Long Learning (LLL) curriculum is a challenge in all areas of the European Union. Doing this in a rural area with a wide range of fragmented and small-scale providers is even more difficult – yet this is exactly the challenge the *Clare Life Long Learning Network* has been set up to address. In order to meet this challenge, the project has used a combination of traditional and innovative methods, bringing providers and learners together to improve LLL in County Clare. This is very much in line with the emphasis on partnership in LLL policy at European level.

County Clare is a predominantly rural area on the West coast of Ireland. As with much of the rest of Ireland, the local economy is undergoing a significant transformation, moving away from agriculture and manufacturing toward a knowledge-based economy; areas of significant employment growth include professional services, tourism and commerce. Ennis, the County's major centre, is known as Ireland's 'Information Age Town' and has developed a high-specification ICT infrastructure to cover the whole town.

The key issue relating to this restructuring is the need to ensure that all people are in a position to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the knowledge economy. The EQUAL programme's emphasis on LLL is critical to addressing this issue and the *Clare Life Long Learning Network* is exploring the role of learning in helping vulnerable and excluded groups to play a full role in the labour market and to develop personally and socially.

The premise of the project is that increased collaboration between LLL providers will lead to an improved and more appropriate learning offer, which will provide benefits to learners across the County. By bringing providers together in a strategic network, the project is aiming to reduce duplication, increase quality and improve joint working. Working with existing providers is central to the approach of the project, as Seamus Bane, Project Coordinator, says: "*We aren't here to re-invent the wheel!*"

This strategic approach is especially important given that much of County Clare is rural. This has provided the project with two crucial motivations: to reduce duplication and ensure that the limited resources available are used to maximum effect; and to develop innovative ICT-based tools to help address barriers presented by space and time!

The main aspects of the DP can be summarised as:

- Partnership, which has been fundamental to the work of the project;
- Innovative use of ICT; specifically the website, database and e-learning; and
- Empowerment through the bottom-up development of a LLL strategy for the county.

Each aspect is discussed in detail below.

PARTNERSHIP AS A PRODUCT

Partnership is absolutely central to EQUAL and a key part of the stated aim of the *Clare Life Long Learning Network* is to: "...enable a wide variety of community groups, voluntary organisations and state agencies to collaborate in the provision of a continuum of lifelong learning opportunities for learners in all parts of County Clare..."

In fact, establishing a functional network of providers is the main product of the project! Teresa Larkin from the Clare Youth Service believes that this means that any work done will be

sustained into the future: *"We have been brought together and the knowledge, partnerships and cooperation will remain long after EQUAL has gone."*

The project has indeed brought together a wide range of partners, building upon and adding to more ad hoc pre-existing networks in a systematic fashion. Overall, there are some 80 groups and organisations in the Clare Lifelong Learning Network, including representatives from the public sector - such as the Community Education Service; the Back To Education Initiative; Clare Reading & Writing Scheme; Department of Social & Family Affairs; and the Clare County Development Board – and the voluntary and community sector, e.g.: Brothers of Charity Clare; Clare Youth Service; Clare Family Learning Centre; and the Congress Information & Opportunities Centre.

The partnership has been organised around five area-based networks and has four cross-cutting thematic sub-groups:

- Learning Network Steering Group - responsible for activity in relation to the development of provider collaboration and partnership development.
- ICT Steering Group - responsible for activity in relation to the development of ICT capacity to support lifelong learning.
- Lifelong Learning Curriculum Steering Group - responsible for all activity in relation to the development of an appropriate curriculum of lifelong learning opportunities.
- Equality & Access Steering Group - responsible for all activity in relation to addressing issues of equality and access to lifelong learning opportunities.

Increasing the capacity of partner organisations is necessary to achieving the overall goal of improving LLL provision in the County; it is also important for the network that individual organisations benefit from involvement. To this end, the project has provided training and support in areas of growing significance to the sector; for example:

- Equality & Diversity Awareness Training has been devised and offered to all members of the project. Not only is this at the heart of EQUAL, but it is also a growing issue for providers as the make up of Irish society continues to change and become more multi-cultural. This training has been devised using input from a carefully devised and supported Learner Forum, which has a variety of functions, one of which is provide a sounding board for project development.
- Peer support and training for partners who need to comply with nationally specified Quality Assurance standards. Again, this is central to improving the capacity of individual providers - particularly small organisations and the voluntary sector - helping them to meet challenges facing the sector as well as ensuring quality for learners across the County.
- Training to support effective partnership working is being devised following a specific piece of research, which looked at different organisations' approaches to partnership working. Specific points of good practice and means of addressing barriers have been identified and are built upon in the training programme, which is currently being rolled out (and should improve the functioning of the Network itself!).

THE PERKS OF PARTNERSHIP

The emphasis of EQUAL on collaboration and partnership has already delivered benefits in Clare – to LLL provision in the County; to organisations involved and to individual learners. Mike Ryan from the Back To Education Initiative is very clear about the benefits to involvement in the Network, *"It's not a competition that we're in, we're about cooperation and collaboration...as a provider we benefit from the Network, and if we benefit, then so do our learners."*

So far there have been several benefits from the increased levels of partnership working within the Clare Lifelong Learning Network; these include:

- New courses are being offered in rural areas because providers are able to coordinate their provision and resources, for example combining different partners' facilities, tutors

and learning materials. The database developed by the project (discussed below) has been a useful tool in providing evidence to reduce duplication or offer new courses.

- Because providers are coordinating their efforts in rural areas and have reduced the gaps in provision, learners now have better routes for progression from entry level, right through to higher education.
- Providers have access to one another and are able to share expertise and local knowledge. One area where this has been particularly important has been the sharing of approaches to working with specific target groups, such as travellers or people with learning difficulties.
- Providers have increased knowledge in terms of which organisation can best support their learners. For example, the Clare Youth Service was recently able to negotiate a supported work placement for a young woman with learning difficulties; this was possible because of the relationships formed through the Network with the employment service.
- Individual tutors have been brought together to share approaches, good practice and even worksheets! This has improved the process of cross-mediation of students' work and should lead to a more consistent offer across the County. This is important for learners - who will have more appropriate routes of progression - and also employers, who have a better knowledge of what is meant by a particular level of qualification.

Smaller organisations have benefited from the Network's approach to tackling issues of relevance to the sector. For example, Teresa Larkin is clear about the impact the work on Quality Assurance has had on smaller organisations; because of the project: *"...no-body is left working on these things alone in their office!"*

TRANSCENDING SPACE AND TIME

As noted above, *Clare Life Long Learning Network* is – in the spirit of EQUAL - making innovative use of ICT to enhance the other areas of activity and to overcome the challenges presented by working in rural areas

There are three main strands to this work:

1. THE WEBSITE

The site - www.clarelearningnetwork.org - has several interesting features, including:

- Details of all courses run by all providers in County Clare, where learners can search by location, subject, course level and timing;
- Listings for all providers, including a brief outline of the organisation, their courses and contact details;
- An online forum for tutors. This area of the site provides a space for tutors to exchange ideas and good practice. This was developed as tutors of LLL courses are typically paid an hourly rate – this makes it difficult in establishing networks as it is not often that there are resources available to pay tutors for time spent networking; this is particularly a problem in rural areas, where travel times are often prohibitively long.

There is also an online forum for learners, where learners can support one another through the learning process and can exchange ideas and experiences. There are a growing number of learners accessing the forum and the fact that access to this support is not bound by time or distance is valued by its users.

The forum has been incorporated into an Active Citizenship module, which has been developed by the project and aims to improve the participation of learners in community activity and the planning of lifelong learning provision in the County; 45 people have been through the course and the hook of an interesting subject matter, combined with an online forum, has proved attractive to learners. This is echoed by Helen Skerritt, who followed the module: *"I feel like I want to get more involved in my community and more involved in learning."*

Fellow learner, Margaret Donovan, agrees: *"The more I get, the more I want - I've got a daughter who's nine years old; I want to be able to show her how she can become a future leader in her community"*

The peer support aspect of the forum has been important to the learners on the Active Citizenship module, as this quote taken from one of the postings shows: *"If a person tries and doesn't succeed in all they were trying to do they can sometimes feel a bit down about it, but when someone is willing to learn from their efforts or to recognise possible mistakes they made, then that person is learning and in my opinion succeeding."*

2. THE DATABASE

The database brings together management information held by over 40 providers in the County. It contains details for each adult learner in the County, including their location, subject area and level of course.

The database has enabled providers to track the progress of learners from course to course and level to level. Collecting this information has had several important benefits, for example:

- It shows specific areas and subjects where learners are not progressing to further learning;
- It has provided evidence of need for providers looking to expand their offer;
- It has highlighted areas where there is poor uptake of learning and where providers can concentrate their efforts.

Each of these benefits is crucial to providing a better LLL offer in rural areas, and the database has already attracted attention from organisations working in other rural areas and from planning authorities at national level.

3. E-LEARNING

E-learning has also been provided at five centres, and has been used particularly to address the challenges faced by learners in rural areas; as Breda O Driscoll, one of the project staff, says: *"You just need to be creative - everywhere has a primary school and every primary school has broadband."*

Within the project, the view is that ICT is just a tool and use of a computer should not be viewed as an end in itself. The aim is to demystify ICT for key target groups and to equip learners with the skills needed to support their own learning. The development of learning skills has therefore gone hand-in-hand with development of ICT skills. Again, the project has used research to establish the needs of learners in order to provide the right kind of support from tutors.

BUILDING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Creating and sustaining the Network has obviously been a major achievement and the benefits of working in this way are clear. However, the *Clare Life Long Learning Network* is also trying to formally change the way in which LLL is delivered in the County.

Producing a County-wide Life Long Learning Strategy has been the main tool for making this change and the approach adopted in producing the Strategy has been highly successful. This approach has been very much in the spirit of EQUAL and has been deliberately empowering, bottom-up and participatory. The strategy has drawn on the participation of over eighty stakeholders through a series of fifteen workshops as well as local plans produced by the five area networks within the project. The workshops invited participants to raise issues of concern to them, before the issues were grouped together under common themes and prioritised – using a voting system that gives all participants an equal say in this process.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this participatory approach to producing the Strategy; Seamus Bane's view is that: *"This is one of those times when the process you go through is probably more important than the products you end up with."*

The introduction to the Strategy, written by Sean Conlan, captures the importance of the process: *"If the planning process teaches us anything it is that wisdom and commitment emerge from the group and that no one individual, however experienced, carries a monopoly of knowledge."*

As Seamus Bane notes, whilst the Strategy itself is undoubtedly important, many of the benefits have arisen from the way in which it was put together. The fact that individual providers have been given a chance to think about issues outside of their everyday work has had an important effect; as has the opportunity to reflect on and debate the thinking behind LLL. The Strategy has also shown crucial links to other areas of policy, such as transport and childcare, which will enable a more joined up response to the challenges faced by vulnerable groups.

When asked about the impact of the Strategy, Sean Conlan cites the increased coordination of providers' efforts, before reflecting that: *"I've worked in this area for 20 years without this sort of strategic plan! Putting this together has been a remarkable achievement."*

SOLID FOUNDATIONS

The work of the Network has clearly gone well so far and early results suggest continued success for the future. People involved in the Network credit the EQUAL programme with the speed and efficiency with which these results have been achieved; as Seamus Bane says: *"EQUAL has given us space and time to think - this has allowed us to innovate and improve."*

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