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The networked learning change agenda for local authorities

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Background

During 2005-2006, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) asked Aubyn Howard to engage with the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme as it drew to its conclusion. As an outside expert in organisational learning and change, he was asked to provide a different evaluative perspective on the impact of networked learning and to offer insights into its wider implications.

This paper focuses on the local authority (LA) viewpoint. It is aimed at local authority officers engaged in implementing educational reform and the whole-child agenda, such as directors of children's services and heads of education and social services. It delivers a big picture overview of the challenges and opportunities that networked learning presents to local authorities. Its purpose is to help these key leaders to manage and navigate the challenges of organisational, cultural and personal change that lie ahead as they seek to implement more integrated, collaborative and networked solutions.

Summary

Networked learning is proving to be a powerful strategy for educational reform and improvement. The impact of learning networks is as much about making a difference to the children and adults involved, in terms of personal motivation, professional development and engagement with learning, as about achieving measurable improvements in attainment and achievement. Learning networks help bring about a shift towards a more collaborative and network-oriented culture as well as growing a new generation of system leaders, and hence they are helping build capacity for problem solving, innovation and standards improvement.

Networked learning is part of a system-wide shift towards a more collaborative and interconnected way of working – the system LAs support is becoming more networked. Alongside this, LAs are also being asked to network internally to deliver *Every Child Matters* (ECM). However, many don't know either how to do this or how to reconfigure to support school-to-school networks – why would they? Moving into networked learning mode themselves (within services, between services or agencies and between LAs) such that they model practices and apply them in new forms of

engagement with networks of schools, is a good way to start. This means embracing collaboration, networking and learning within the way they work.

There is much learning from the NLC programme – good and bad – that can help them with this. Many local authorities are already playing significant roles in brokering, facilitating and supporting learning networks between their schools and their ongoing learning can be exchanged through LA to LA networking. (The Innovation Unit sponsored LEARNING project in particular has provided a powerful example of this taking place.)

However, LAs also need to engage in a deeper internal process of organisational and cultural change if their efforts to model networking and work differently in support of ECM are to be sustained. Effective organisational change starts with leaders at all levels engaging with personal and professional change and exemplifying the desired behaviours, attitudes and values to the rest of the organisation.

Introduction – orienting questions

This summary explores the following key questions for local authorities:

- What is networked learning and what is its role within the school reform and improvement agenda?
- What is the nature of the change that local authorities are facing, and what role is networked learning playing within it?
- What impact has networked learning had? Does it make a difference?
- What is the role for local authorities in supporting networked learning, and what are the different ways that you might approach it within your authority?
- What are the implications of this for your authority, for your service and for you as a leader of change?

The story so far

Q1 What is networked learning?

This paper focuses on the networked learning experience of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, but it is important to remember the other pathways along which schools may have come across similar ideas and practices, including Leading Edge Partnerships, Primary Strategy Learning Networks, Education Improvement Partnerships and school-to-school programmes such as Excellence in Cities, federations and specialist schools. Out of 150 local authorities in England, 90 have schools that have been involved with the NLC programme. Altogether, more than 675,000 pupils and 35,000 teachers within 1,533 schools have come together within 135 networks. These were intentionally diverse in situation and type. LAs have been involved in NLCs from the start in different ways, particularly in their role of brokering effective collaborative relationships and providing support and critical friendship.

The goals of the NLC programme were primarily two-fold:

- Creating excellent networks that would make a difference in their own right
- Learning about networked learning and making this learning available to influence the wider system, through generating knowledge as part of a development and enquiry programme.

The NLCs were designed as an intervention that would impact at six different levels of learning:

- Pupil learning (a pedagogical focus)
- Teacher or adult learning (creating professional learning communities for CPD)
- Leadership learning (at all levels, not just headship)

- Organisational or school learning
- School-to-school learning (within networks)
- System-wide learning (between networks)

As the NLC development and research programme drew to its conclusion, a significant body of material has been produced about the theory, practice and impact of networked learning, which can be accessed on-line. A good starting point is the publications directory, which along with everything else, can be found at <http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk>

Collaborative ways of working in general, and Networked Learning in particular, can be seen as reform and improvement strategies which are in the process of being taken to scale within the educational system. This involves two particular challenges (as identified by Cynthia Coburn, 2003) which are of great relevance to LAs. The first is the need for a shift in ownership for the reform from external agencies (such as the NCSL) to *“teachers, schools and districts”*. *To become self generative, any reform must transition from “an externally understood and supported theory to an internally understood and supported practice”* (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001). In some instances, there are roles for LAs to take the lead with this process and in others the schools they are supporting are leading the transition and their LAs need to ‘catch up’.

The second challenge Coburn describes as ‘spread’ – not just in terms of numbers of classrooms and schools participating but from externalised activities (eg structures, materials, classroom organisation) to an internalised culture (underlying beliefs, norms and principles). A central theme of this paper is that to successfully support collaboration, networking and learning within their schools, LAs need to engage in a deeper process of internal change. This paper aims to help LAs explore their role in taking ownership of networked learning as well as to map out the organisational change needed to support this.

The context for change

Q2 What is the nature of the change that local authorities are facing?

LAs are aware they are facing the need for unprecedented organisational and cultural change, driven by a number of factors, including:

- *Every Child Matters* and the need for a multi-agency approach to child well-being
- the need to break through the standards improvement plateau
- the challenges of succession planning and the need to create the next generation of leaders

Arising from these is a number of relevant current policies directed mainly at schools, including:

- Primary Strategy Learning Networks
- Education Improvement Partnerships
- 14–19 reforms
- personalisation
- governance reform

This is set within the context of seismic, ongoing change taking place within the education system as a whole, perhaps partly catalysed by an evolving policy

Where do local authorities fit in?

It could be argued that LAs initially got left out of the networking 'revolution' as funds for many of the policy initiatives were distributed directly to schools, bypassing LAs. As these initiatives developed, the importance of LA involvement in brokerage, facilitation and knowledge-management became more apparent, but a piecemeal approach to this has left a rather chequered landscape of LA capability in supporting networks. Some NLCs were established with the active support and participation of LAs and some were not, particularly in cases where a key driver for schools to form an NLC was that they didn't feel they were getting the support they wanted from their LA.

landscape that has children's welfare, well-being and learning at its heart as well as an unwavering focus on standards. However, this is an emergent, viral change which has a life and intelligence of its own and represents a fundamental shift in paradigms, worldviews, value systems and mindsets: basically, how people view and engage with the world around them, the kinds of issues, problems and challenges they focus on as well as the way they go about meeting them. A difficulty with this kind of change is that it is messy, uneven and uncertain, and that different parts of the system and people within it embrace it to varying degrees.

This change is variously characterised as: complex and in need of systemic solutions; requiring creative innovation that comes from within the system rather than from the top; drawing upon the emergence of collaboration, partnership and networking as new ways of working in an increasingly interconnected world; challenging all levels of the system to look outwards as well as inwards; and forcing leaders to constantly innovate and adapt to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Within this context, there seems general agreement that the top-down, policy-directive approach has reached its limits in terms of incremental standards improvement and that the creativity and innovation within the system needs to be released through more collaborative, bottom-up or middle-out approaches.

The very architecture of the role of LAs within the educational system is changing too. Replacing the traditional hierarchical model of policy implementation is a more dynamic and interactive process, in which LAs are active agents, working with networks of schools as well as individual schools, and the networks are also interacting and exchanging learning with each other. Models of these new practices exist across the country, as recent work by the Innovation Unit in partnership with NCSL and IDeA has shown.

Key dimensions of change for local authorities

The network learning change agenda for local authorities full report (available via <http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk>) provides a guide to the key dimensions of networked learning for LAs, as well as a set of maps and models to help LAs navigate organisational and cultural change. This summary explores one of these models.

Introducing an integral model for navigating change

Organisational and system-wide change is a complex phenomenon which can be approached in different ways as well as at different levels. In effect, different approaches tend to emphasise different dimensions of organisational change, because it is too complex a phenomenon to grapple with all in one go. However, it is possible to reduce the ways in which you can approach organisational change to four essential

perspectives. A change leader needs to develop an ability to manage change through each of these perspectives.

The four essential perspectives arise from the need to work with objective and subjective realities at both individual and collective levels. This gives rise to four different ways of seeing and engaging with the world, which are, in the slightly technical terminology of the model:

- objective/behavioural
- subjective/psychological
- inter-subjective/cultural
- inter-objective/social

The integral model	Interior/inner world	Exterior/outer world
Micro/individual	Subjective/intentional Psychological perspective <i>Focus on individual development</i>	Objective/behavioural Rational perspective <i>Focus on measurable improvement</i>
Macro/collective	Inter-subjective/cultural Cultural perspective <i>Focus on shared values</i>	Inter-objective/social Systemic perspective <i>Focus on system-wide learning</i>

The impact story

Q3 What impact has networked learning had?

The integral model helps us shift from a narrow focus on measuring pupil improvement to also include the health and development of the system, its schools and its pupils, and the growth and development of leaders within it. In simple terms, there are four essentially different ways of looking at impact:

- the achievement story
- the developmental story
- the cultural change story
- the systemic change story

This model implies that to be able to assess impact, we need to look at what is happening in several different ways simultaneously. It is not enough to evaluate impact rationally and analytically (which may come naturally to the traditional local authority mindset) in terms of attainment improvement. We also need to be able to think psychologically, culturally and systemically about the impact that is taking place.

The achievement story

One of the major pieces of work that looks at the NLCs' impact in terms of attainment and achievement is the External Evaluation study by Aporia Consulting, 'How Networked Learning Communities work' (Earl et al, 2006). Through extensive surveying of the schools taking part in the Networked Learning Communities programme and analysis of attainment data, the authors have been able to show that when networks of schools work together, there is an impact on pupil learning. Although there were quite erratic variations

in results, which is not surprising given the complexity of the factors involved, they were able to distinguish some distinct patterns. They found that 'the number of people in the school who are active in the network was positively correlated with pupil outcomes in English, maths and science at [Key Stage 2] and value-added scores at [Key Stage 3]'. The authors were able to validate a connection between the level and quality of participation in a network and improvements in pupil attainment.

The development story

Everywhere I have been in learning networks, I have heard stories of how people have become inspired and re-motivated through their involvement with a learning network. There is a tangible sense of excitement and enjoyment about professional learning and development that is reinvigorating the profession in a practical way and which also makes an immediate difference to the children within the schools involved. Involvement in NLCs has made a real difference to the adult learners involved and the longer term knock-on effects of this could be substantive – keeping teachers in the profession, reducing staff turnover, helping find new headteachers and systems leaders, addressing succession planning issues and so on. These are the measurable and visible signs of a subjective but very real experience for which there is now plenty of evidence. The testimonies included in the full report are examples of this.

Within NCSL, there has naturally been a great deal of interest in understanding how participating in and leading learning networks have helped to develop the system leaders of tomorrow. In many ways, network leadership is being considered as the proving ground for system leadership, the natural first step for leaders to broaden their horizons beyond the single school and develop the systemic and integrative competences needed to lead across the system. Network leadership opportunities are helping develop the 'systems leaders in action' that Michael Fullan (2005) refers to.

David Jackson summarises it well: "Emerging evidence suggests that networks are creating environments in which school leaders are responding to the challenge of leading and learning beyond their own schools. Networks create joint work arrangements that are developmental of leadership, making leadership more widely available and developing system leaders."

The cultural change story

To help map and manage the complex currents of cultural change, it is useful to consider a model called Spiral Dynamics devised by Beck & Cowan (1996). Spiral Dynamics describes a series of value systems or worldviews which emerge and evolve within human beings, organisations and societies according to prevailing life conditions. Each value system represents an increasingly complex expression of a worldview or way of relating to the world, which tends to emerge in a predictable sequence as if to solve the inherent problems of the previous value system. Value systems alternate between individualistic and collectivist expressions in a spiral revisiting of the contrasting challenges of expressing the self and sacrificing the self, of seeking individual freedom and belonging to

something greater than the individual. Each value system is more or less activated in every person, organisation or society; in other words we all have the potential to express any combination of these value systems.

The five value systems which are of most relevance to organisations in western society (such as schools or LAs) can be summarised as Ego-centric, Absolutist, Multiplistic, Relativistic and Integrative. There is a general evolutionary progression over time through each of these systems (ie from the bottom to the top in the table on page 7). Each system transcends and includes what has been learned from the previous system.

Value system in terms of thinking/ <i>key orientation</i>	Leadership style/ <i>primary motivations</i>	Structures and forms	Key characteristics and examples Learning styles
Integrative/ <i>knowledge</i>	Integrative leadership/ <i>learning and synergy</i>	Self-organising networks, virtual communities	Draws upon the previous value systems appropriately to meet the presenting challenges Network-based learning Working with complexity at system level Personalised self-directed learning
Relativistic/ <i>relationship</i>	Social leadership/ <i>participation and growth</i>	Collaborative groups, communities of practice	Collaborative ways of working Collaborative enquiry Participative and observational learning Experiential learning
Multiplistic/ <i>achievement</i>	Enterprising leadership/ <i>goal achievement and progress</i>	Flexible hierarchy, matrix organisations and project teams	Uniform national strategies Target-setting and external accountabilities Expectant learning Developing best practices
Absolutist/ <i>role</i>	Hierarchical leadership/ <i>responsibility and order</i>	Hierarchies, bureaucracies, command and control	Uniform policies and dictates Tightly prescribed curriculum Avoidant learning
Ego-centric/ <i>power</i>	Autocratic leadership/ <i>rewards and respect</i>	Autocracies, empires, power bases	Arbitrary directives Charismatic hero leaders Operant conditioning

Adapted from Beck and Cowan, 1996

This model implies that instead of facing a single cultural change from one old paradigm to another new one, the education system is undergoing a series of significant shifts between essentially different worldviews. The importance of recognising this is that different people, schools, services or LAs will face different developmental or evolutionary challenges at different times. This is compounded by the fact that each individual, group or organisational unit will have its own unique profile in terms of these five value systems.

The key cultural shifts important to LAs are explored in the full report, using this model.

There is good evidence that networked learning has helped create a cultural shift towards a more collaborative culture within schools. It would also seem that some signs of this culture need to exist before networked learning can take hold.

The systemic change story

The systemic aspect of the impact of networked learning can be explored in many ways, but perhaps the most relevant to LAs given their current priorities is in terms of the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda. Many of the LA projects that were part of the LEArning project (which will be described later) were focused on how learning networks could help with ECM. Some of the answers to this include:

- schools becoming more outwardly focused towards the community
- developing system leadership capabilities within schools – many leaders of learning networks are well prepared to play a role in leading ECM networks
- creating a context for collaborating with other agencies – schools realising that they can't achieve educational improvements in isolation

Systemic impact is about changes in the structures and relationships between people within the system, as well as about how impact works its way through these relationships and interactions over time. Today, we can observe changes in structures and relationships taking place within and between schools as a result of participation in an NLC, most strikingly in terms of an increase in distributed leadership and therefore the capacity of schools to tackle a whole range of issues not directly related to networked learning. We can also start to see the longer term systemic impact as network leaders and participants move on and take up new responsibilities. A tracer study by Ann Lieberman focuses on the stories of some of the systems leaders who are emerging from learning networks and demonstrates that through the development and movement of the individuals involved, the eventual impact of the NLC programme will be felt more widely than just in the schools and localities that are directly involved.

The role of networked learning for local authorities

Q4 What is the role for local authorities in supporting networked learning?

Many leaders within LAs will have become aware of an upsurge in networked learning within their region which may have already had an impact on how they operate and support their schools. In some cases, schools are helping them to adapt to their new roles. Just as the motivational and cultural terrain is changing within schools as a result of networked learning, so will responses to local authority requests and interventions by schools and school leaders be changing.

The primary challenge is to help schools take advantage of networked learning, which can take place in a number of ways, through brokering networks, as well as providing the resources and infrastructure to support and challenge networks. A critical issue is whether LAs can do this effectively without first embracing the new way of working themselves – in other words, being more internally networked, and taking a learning orientation rather than just a delivery or accountability stance.

The LEArning project

The LEArning project was set up to explore the role LAs could play in developing partnerships and how this might enhance the learning and well-being of young people. It involved the participation of Chief Officers and other participating officers from 22 LAs over more than two years of hard work. Project objectives were to:

- help local authorities develop their capacity for facilitating and supporting networks of schools and multi-agency partnerships

- research and share knowledge about the most effective ways in which local authorities can support networking and collaboration
- develop models and new practices within local authorities that will influence and shape policy

Find out more about the LEArning project and its key findings: Go online to view the full report (<http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk>).

Levels of local authority engagement with networked learning

Networking between local authorities

The LEArning project has shown the viability and value of LA-to-LA networking and collaborative learning, but it has also shown that it does not come easily. In some form the LEArning project is likely to continue and may even transform into something new, but there will remain many LAs that are not engaged in any such networking. LAs need to take the initiative in starting to form learning networks, as well as to think about how some of the school-to-school networked learning practices might translate for LA-to-LA networking, and perhaps evolve new networking practices and types of network that meet the specific needs of LAs in this situation.

Inter-service networking within local authorities

It is becoming clear to many in education that they have hit a glass ceiling in terms of what schools can do directly without the involvement of other agencies. Community capital needs to be built to tackle the most deep-seated issues. The key is that there are ways of working which are more likely to enhance outcomes for young people, and much of this concerns the way that teams are designed and services work with each other within local authorities. The appointment of Directors of Children's services and corresponding 'structural' changes in the design of teams and ways of working have already taken place in most LAs in response to the *Every Child Matters* agenda. However, the question for these new appointments to consider is how deep these changes run and whether a more fundamental programme of change is needed to transform the way that services work together.

Local authorities supporting school-to-school networking

One of the key issues about the LAs' role in supporting networked learning concerns the extent to which the authority imposes or facilitates a networking structure within their locality. At one end of the scale, there are those such as Lancashire LA, who feel strongly that you can't impose a network structure on a group of schools and that the reasons for LA clusters created for management purposes, are not always the reasons that schools might like to collaboratively network with one another. Others, such as Kent LA (where I visited the very successful neTWorks NLC, based upon an existing geographical cluster structure) or Liverpool or Bedfordshire might argue that within the overall cluster structure there is plenty of freedom for smaller groups of schools to come together to explore common child-centred learning topics of interest. There is also the argument that if schools want to cross-network between clusters within an authority, they can still do that.

Strengths can also be weaknesses – a critical view of how to build on the NLC experience

Over the last year, I have been frequently amazed and moved by what has been achieved within the NLCs programme, both by individual NLCs and by the Networked Learning Group (NLG) in its supporting role. However, the brightest lights can also cast long shadows, and as a critical friend to the NLG, I have identified some aspects of the programme culture which, although not necessarily lessening the value of what has been achieved, may *in my view* affect the ability of LAs successfully to engage with this model of networked learning.

As an external observer, there are four issues which stand out. The first is the tendency for the NCSL literature to seem to promote networked learning as a universally applicable solution to school improvement issues. This isn't surprising, given the group's work is networked learning. However, there could be more recognition of the range of other types of solution that might also be valuable in different situations. Advisers within LAs should develop their diagnostic skills and a critical awareness of how best to use networked learning and how also to combine it with other solutions.

Secondly, within the NCSL's branded concept of networked learning, the idea of learning networks has become conflated with a number of other intervention elements, including: collaborative working and enquiry, new approaches to developing self-awareness and self-sufficiency in children's learning, and innovations in continuous professional development. LA policy makers and advisers may want to separate out these elements when they consider how they can support and encourage them within schools.

Thirdly, the NLC programme has been well funded and it is difficult to distinguish sometimes whether learning networks or the funding that has come with them has made the most difference. This makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of networked learning as an intervention strategy in its own right. One cohort of NLCs without funding was established and supported. The learning that has come out of this about how to seed and sustain the growth of networks in the absence of special funding is particularly relevant and needs more exploration.

Finally, there seems to be a strong bias in the learning networks community towards the collective voice, with a consequent muffling of the individual voice. Building shared purpose and vision is important and very powerful, but it can also mask individual difference. Individual passions, feelings, learning needs and development challenges are important, too. Individuals don't just exist in relationship to others (through the 'knots and threads' of a network), but also in relationship to themselves.

The heart of change

In *Spreading innovation across local authorities: Realising the Potential of School-based Networks*, (available from the Innovation Unit) change programmes in local authorities are described as being ‘typically centred upon the requirement to appoint a Director of Children’s Services and work across social care, education, health and other agencies to make sure that competing priorities no longer get in the way of the best deal for children’. Following the initial impetus of organisational structural change, LAs now face how to bring about more deep-seated change in the organisational culture to support their aims. The essence of the change is about creating a shift in the ways of working and mindsets:

- from authority to agency
- from directing to collaborating
- from control to connecting

Lancashire’s learning from its LEarning project (see the full report for this case study) highlights an elementary principle of change management – that you need to go through a change first before you can expect others to do the same (or be able to facilitate them in doing so). The change needs to be embraced not just in terms of the way that LAs work to support schools, but it needs to go to the heart of the culture within the LA and the leadership behaviour of its senior officers.

The experience of all the participating local authorities in the LEarning project also supports the realisation that any transformational change starts at the individual level of personal and professional development and, within this, it starts at an emotional level, because all negative or unproductive mindsets are held in place by unconscious or unexplored emotions.

Implementing educational reform may seem to be mostly about remodelling service delivery, or about new policies, strategies, structures, skills and practices, but these need to be underpinned by a more essential cultural change which starts with an individual, personal process of change.

The cultural change challenge is defined in terms of the existing culture and the desired culture and a process of transition or transformation between the two. Invariably, the existing culture is the result of a complex combination of factors – historical, political, personal, organisational etc. Most attempts to change culture focus on the new culture and encourage the new values, mindsets, styles and behaviours that represent this new culture. However, first you need to let go of the old culture, removing the reasons for defensive, bureaucratic or hierarchical behaviours and helping those in key roles develop the skills and competences needed in the new reality, as well as manage their personal emotional journey of change.

Facing the new change agenda

Q5 What are the implications for you as change leader?

It is critical that LAs start to use networking and collaboration more widely to share their existing and ongoing learning (both internally and externally), not just about networking but about their experience of tackling ECM and the wider organisational changes they are facing. The key challenge is for LAs to embody and model the new ways of working that they are seeking to encourage in and between schools. The real world of education is constantly moving on in a way that is beyond the control of any of the individual elements, agencies or policy-makers within it (DfES, LAs, the NCSL etc), whether they like it or not. The choice for LAs is whether to be leading or lagging behind in this process.

The NLC programme was a development and research project which postulated a hypothesis about how networked learning can make a difference in the real world and tested it to scale through an extensive and

diverse programme of networking experiments. There is little doubt that the majority of NLCs made a significant difference to all those involved and that improvements in pupil learning and attainment have followed. The overall impact of networked learning can be explored from a number of different perspectives, as we have started to do in this summary. A considerable body of knowledge has been generated about networked learning that is now available in the public domain for use by schools and LAs alike. There is also a new generation of experts and experienced practitioners in networked learning within schools and LAs, as well as consultants and facilitators moving around the system to where help is needed.

In summary, the challenge (as articulated by Michael Fullan) is to consider “how we now build on these early initiatives to accomplish the greater ownership, coherence, capacity and impact which systemic change beyond the plateau demands of us all”.

Questions to help define the agenda for change in your local authority

As a next step, you and your team might want to engage in dialogue about some of the following questions:

- What do you consider to be the key issues and challenges facing your LA in relation to collaborative working and (i) school-to-school networking (ii) LA to LA networking and (iii) inter-service networking within LAs for ECM?
- Does the LA have a coherent vision for the future that embraces collaborative working, networking and learning? How would you articulate it in a simple statement?
- How would you characterise the current and the desired culture for your LA? (Perhaps using the Spiral Dynamics value systems model outlined in this summary)? In other words, how does the internal culture need to change in support of the external practices, strategies and activities you want to implement?
- What are the most counterproductive mindsets, attitudes and behaviours that need to change within the authority for this to happen?
- What are your needs for personal, professional and leadership development in support of this cultural change? What are your team’s needs?
- Who could you be learning ‘from and with’ (i) within the authority and (ii) outside the authority, and how could you initiate this?
- Who could you be supporting or coaching to help adapt to the change? Who could be supporting or coaching you in your process of change?

Now go on-line to view the full report at: <http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk> and find out more about the following:

- Key dimensions of networked learning for LAs
- Key dimensions of change for LAs
- The critical cultural shifts that LAs need to make
- Examples of how LAs have been tackling networked learning
- The LEarning project and its findings

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