



NW Higher Level Skills Pathfinder October 2006

The development of this project was led by the North West Universities Association (NWUA), as the representative body of the fifteen North West Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in partnership with the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA), Government Office North West (GONW), the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the NW Regional Skills Partnership (RSP).

The aim of the Pathfinder is to increase demand from employers for higher level skills provision and therefore increase employer engagement with skills provision (development and delivery) in NW HEIs and FECs. In order to achieve this the Pathfinder will aim to increase capacity in the NW HEIs and FECs to respond quickly and effectively to employer demand for higher level skills. These aims will assist in achieving the HEFCE objectives for this Pathfinder as well as the objectives of the NW Regional Economic Strategy 2006-09.

The NW Model will be driven by demand and the encouragement of employer investment in skills. Therefore the model is based on two aspects: brokerage and the development and delivery of new and existing provision which meets employer demand. These two areas will be the focus for activities undertaken through the pathfinder and will ensure that the pathfinder is both proactive and reactive.

The brokerage will be fully integrated with the Information, Diagnosis and Brokerage (IDB) service run by NWDA, this service is also being used by the LSC as the Train to Gain Skills brokerage and therefore this will ensure a fully integrated approach to brokerage in the region. The work of the pathfinder will ensure that the existing brokerage offer includes the HE higher level skills and wider knowledge transfer capability by providing training for brokers around developing a full understanding of HE activity and capabilities. This training will be combined with the appointment of four Specialist Advisors to support the brokers by providing detailed HE advice and acting as the key point of contact between the HE providers and the brokers. A database of HE provision will also be developed as a tool for brokers and other regional partners to use when dealing with enquiries relating to current HE courses.

The development of provision also has two aspects; the first is the proactive development of provision which will be carried out in conjunction with the SSCs and regional sector partners. HE providers will be asked to submit proposals for the development and delivery of HE provision which meets the higher level skills needs identified by the SSCs through their sector skills agreement work. These proposals will then be assessed by Sector Panels before receiving approval and funding from the Pathfinder. The second aspect is the reactive development of provision in reacting to needs identified through the brokerage

work. NWUA will focus the reactive provision developments through the HE Specialist Advisors who will liaise with both the brokers and the providers to try and identify a suitable solution to meet the identified employer need.

The development of provision will be focused in four key sectors, and a Specialist Advisor will be appointed to oversee each of these sectors:

- Advanced Engineering & Materials
- Business & Professional Services
- Digital & Creative Industries
- Construction

Through the activities outlined in the business plan to Pathfinder hopes to achieve a step change in employer engagement with higher level skills. This will ensure that there is a significant increase in the proportion of the NW workforce with higher level skills and therefore an improvement in the knowledge economy of the region.

Currently NWUA has received initial approval from the HEFCE SDF Panel for the first three months of funding (Oct – Dec 2006) which has allowed NWUA to begin recruitment to the HLSP team. Work has also started on setting up the sector panels for the assessment of HE proposals for the development of demand led provision. By the end of 2006 NWUA will also have started work on the development of the online database of provision, the broker training, the communications strategy and the development of a strategy for monitoring and evaluation. NWUA will also use these three months to ensure that strong links are made with other initiatives such as the Lifelong Learning Networks, Aimhigher and organisations including the LSC and FDF.

Final approval of the Pathfinder will be considered by the HEFCE Board at their meeting on November 2nd. If approved this will then allow NWUA to ask HEIs and FECs offering HE to submit proposals for the development of demand led provision. It is envisaged that the Pathfinder team will be in place in early 2007 and the four Specialist Advisors will then develop linkages with the regional brokerage service.