



To be an informal or formal University LLL network?

At the EUCEN Paris Conference in November 2006 National & Regional Network members met to discuss the question of whether national networks for University Lifelong Learning function best as an informal group or as a more structured formal network.

The discussion, and answers to a questionnaire that had been circulated prior to the meeting, reflected the following advantages and disadvantages of formal or informal groups.

Informal groups

- Can be more appropriate in smaller countries with fewer universities engaged in LLL
- They are not too bureaucratic and have greater flexibility e.g. in arranging meetings etc
- Only the motivated people will be involved, so ensuring that the activities lead to action back in their own institution
- They can be used as a way of seeing if there is a need for networking and possibly could develop; into a formal network as a second phase

Formal networks

- They have a formal recognised position at national level i.e. greater visibility, which assists in lobbying government etc
- They are more likely to be able to take advantage of external funding opportunities
- To join such a network is a formal commitment by the rector of the university and member universities may be more likely to fund attendance at network meetings
- There is a critical mass of opinion, for example the network might produce common documents for guidance about common issues e.g. quality assurance. This in turn supports the local members as a resource to be used in their own institution
- Most networks charge fees (either as an annual membership fee or a fee for their services) and this may discourage some small universities from joining.
- Many networks do not have paid staff and so they rely on members giving their own time to undertake the various duties

This is not an exhaustive review of this topic but outlines some of the points considered by EUCEN network members to be relevant to any country thinking of setting up a ULLL national network.