

## **Background Report: Ireland**

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Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

R3L+ Quality Framework For Learning Regions  
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## ***LIMERICK CITY OF LEARNING***

## **IRISH BACKGROUND REPORT ON LEARNING REGIONS**

***R3L+ Project***

**NEXUS**

## 1. GENERAL BACKGROUND: FACTORS SHAPING THE LEARNING REGION AND LEARNING CITY CONCEPT IN IRELAND

The emergence and subsequent development of the Learning Regions concept in Ireland was influenced, as in other countries, by both economic and social factors. Of particular importance in considering what shaped developments in Ireland, however, are:

### IN ECONOMIC TERMS:

Unprecedented growth from the mid 1990s onwards brought new demands in terms of servicing economic activity and the labour market. For example:

- The need for greater flexibility and responsiveness, on the part of education and training, in the light of rapidly growing and evolving sectoral demands. The Irish economy went through a transformation in a very short period of time: from being agrarian and traditional manufacturing-based to one increasingly based on the hi-tech and internationally traded services sectors. The late 1990s in particular saw significant skills shortages develop in certain sectors – creating new and immediate challenges for learning.
- The related dramatic increase in inward migration. The non-Irish born fraction of the population increased from 5.4 per cent in 1994 to 9.4 per cent in 2003. Not only did this present learning challenges associated with diversity of language and culture; it also led to the need for adaptation of skills and competences.

### IN SOCIAL TERMS:

A focus of continuing debate and policy development at the same time in Ireland was on social aspects of education and learning: especially on the potential contribution to be made by education to promoting social inclusion. This was most apparent in:

- The fact that significant inequalities persisted nationally – despite the scale of economic growth and wealth creation. Particular sections of the population remained distant from opportunities for progression: named in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy as older people, children and young people, women, Travellers, disabled people and new and emerging groups such as migrants and ethnic minorities<sup>1</sup>.
- Specifically acknowledged inequality amongst the population in the capacity to access and benefit from formal education. The assessment of Ireland's National Employment Action Plan for 1999 highlighted the relatively poor national levels of adult literacy as a barrier to labour-force participation. The assessment also signalled the need for a greater emphasis on increasing the participation of the older long-term unemployed and the lower skilled in suitable mainstream education and training programmes. In recognition of this, the Department of Education and Science, in its current strategic plan has set out elaborate objectives under the goal of 'Supporting an Inclusive Society'.

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1 Irish National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) 2002.

#### IN EDUCATIONAL TERMS

Priorities directing the development of educational policy at the time generally reflected the challenges noted above. But they were also influenced by recognition of the need for:

- A more strategic and long-term approach to planning education. A review of Irish educational services in 2000 led to a shift from what was seen critically as an ‘overwhelming focus on day-to-day operational matters’ to a situation where ‘serious attention could be given to the vital areas of policy development, planning and evaluation’. Together with structural reorganisation at national and regional levels and internal staffing improvements, the review prompted a strengthening of linkages between the Department of Education and Science and other Departments. It also strove to create an enhanced capacity to formulate effective policy options in relation to major social, demographic and economic trends – with the intention of anticipating and planning for medium and long-term educational needs.
- Promotion of the personal and social roles of learning (the role of education and learning in promoting values of tolerance, civic participation and social cohesion).
- Support for a ‘knowledge and innovation-based society’ (with increased emphasis on a much wider range of competencies and personal qualities, particularly flexibility, teamwork and communication).
- Maintain a strong focus on the Lifelong Learning agenda: *“in keeping with Ireland’s policy of moving up the skills ladder in an increasingly knowledge-driven economy and in line with the Lisbon Agenda.”* (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2005: 6)

#### IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT TERMS

Central to the analysis of learning region potential in Ireland is, on the one hand, the history of social partnership as the predominant development model at national level and, linked to this, the collaborative and partnership-based nature of development structures at local and regional levels. Specifically:

- Reliance on the involvement of social partners in planning, implementation and review of strategies at national level to increase co-operation and collaboration. This is most apparent in the National Development Plan itself, where multi-stakeholder involvement in a co-ordinated approach to education and learning is evident.
- A strong community and voluntary (NGO) sector, locally but also recognised as a partner in national development planning, implementation and review.
- Most importantly, the translation of these relationships into the local development ‘infrastructure’. The last two decades has seen the rapid expansion of this infrastructure – based on partnerships formed at local and regional levels. These partnerships became the focal point for attempts to co-ordinate and integrate service and programme delivery – including educational services and programmes, within which the development of adult and community-based education has become a significant dimension.

## 1.1 Development of the Learning City Network in Limerick

Within this overall national context, Limerick City has a particularly strong history in the promotion of education in the context of broader local and regional development. It was the site of the first area-based development partnership in Ireland, a number of initiatives that have fostered co-operation amongst further and higher education institutes, as well as projects and programmes that seek to promote educational access as a key element in tackling social exclusion.

A City of Learning Steering Group was established in Limerick in 2003, comprising representatives of all the main education training, enterprise and development agencies; together with social partners. The main aim of the group is to support the design and implementation of a city-wide learning strategy that will enable Limerick to grow as a *'vibrant successful city, which recognises and strives to meet the learning needs of all its citizens'*.

The rationale and basic logic driving the development from the beginning can be summarised in the hypothesis that

*IF*

Citywide interaction and partnership among all involved in the provision of education and learning is improved and enhanced,

*THEN*

Positive outcomes can be achieved in relation to:

- Expansion of the City's 'social capital': by recognising the value of personal and social development in learning.
- More active citizenship, in that 'people will have the confidence to contribute to their communities and participate in shaping the future of our City'.
- Embracing multi-culturalism and diversity: 'to enhance the City's economic and cultural development'
- Challenging inequality and exclusion through the development of new models of education and learning.

Central to this strategic orientation was the conviction that the development of successful partnerships would add value to the work of individual organisations and programmes; and that including the local community and citizens (insofar as possible) as active partners was essential to achieve the desired results.

### DELIVERY MECHANISMS

Actions and processes in furthering City of Learning aspirations were envisaged, from the outset, as being part of a 'Framework for Learning'. The framework was developed by the Steering Group over a 12-month period and involved consultation with a wide range of stakeholder interests.

An important defining factor, in the organisational sense, is that the City of Learning Steering Group is itself a sub-set of the Limerick City Development Board (CDB). Membership of this Board already reflected a wide set of interests on the statutory side (including education, training employment, social welfare and health); but also on the community and NGO side (with the participation of representatives from more

disadvantaged areas in City). The CDB, significantly, had already officially adopted the goal that Limerick should become a City of Learning.

In developing and agreeing the Framework, therefore, the Steering Group already had the endorsement of all major stakeholders at City level – at least in the moral sense. The Steering Group became, and remains, the mechanism through which City of Learning initiatives were planned, implemented and reviewed.

## 2. COLLABORATIVE PATTERNS

Interaction and collaboration amongst partners takes place both within and across four thematic areas, or what is referred to as '*pillars*' of Limerick City of Learning. These are:

1. Initiatives to promote or stimulate demand for learning: referred to as '*Creating a spark for learning*'. The principal axes of collaboration in this context are between providers of education (including formal and non-formal; adult and continuous) and those representing the interests of communities and residents in the city (community development groups, locally-based voluntary education services, family resource centres etc.)
2. Efforts to improve and expand learning experiences and opportunities for children in the City: referred to as '*Giving children and young people the best start in life*'. The most critical area of partner collaboration within this pillar relates to building bridges and working relationships between young people and their families (as learners) and the formal school system (especially management and teachers in primary schools). But there is also the recognition of the need for, and efforts to promote, collaboration in relation to:
  - Ongoing assessment of needs in relation to young people and learning. These change and evolve, and present different challenges depending on different family and community circumstances. There is a recognised need for ongoing collaboration between education providers and community interests so that these needs can be addressed in an informed, flexible and responsive manner.
  - Addressing a range of development challenges for young people and their families (other than educational). It is a stated objective in the City of Learning Strategy to '*Use a multi-disciplinary and multi agency approach to support individual Children's needs*'. Efforts to promote collaboration in this broader developmental sense have included agencies and services addressing both the welfare and health needs of children and their families; with a particular focus on disadvantaged families and disadvantaged communities in the City.
3. Actions to promote and improve progression: in terms both of labour market and access to employment opportunities; as well as in terms of promoting equality of access in the broader sense of progression. This is referred to in the Strategy as '*Fostering a thriving and inclusive society*'. There is a three-way base for collaboration and partnership: involving providers of work-based training, employers and community. As well as enhancing employability prospects for individuals, collaboration and closer liaison amongst partners in this pillar aims to promote work-based learning opportunities; as well as to develop new models of education that challenge inequality and exclusion. There is also the aspiration to embrace multiculturalism and diversity, so the active of participation and

collaboration of organisations representing non-national and ethnic minority communities has been encouraged.

4. Initiatives designed to 'promote quality learning environments'. Efforts to promote and sustain effective collaboration here have been focused on education and learning providers. The higher-level intention here has been to *"Enable citywide interaction and partnership among all involved in the provision of education and learning to improve the coherence and enhance the profile of the sector."* At a more practical level, however. Co-operation and collaboration has been actively encouraged through efforts to:
  - Maximise the use of public buildings and spaces as safe places for recreation and learning activity;
  - Maximise the use of new technologies for communication and learning purposes;
  - Support informal learning through the development of high quality dedicated
  - facilities and services for all in communities

### **3. MAIN ACTORS IN THE LEARNING CITY NETWORK**

The roots of strategic development for the Learning City concept were in the Limerick City Development Board – within which most major stakeholders in a development and service provision sense are represented. This, together with the fact that CDB partners continue to endorse and support the strategy, means that the stakeholder participation base is very broad. The Table below summarises the main actors and their respective functions.

### Summary of Main Participant Actors

<i>Name of Partner</i>	<i>Description</i>
City Development Board	Host agency and statutorily constituted mechanism for city-wide planning.
City of Limerick VEC	Vocational Educational Committee: lead partner
Dept Education & Science	Government Department with regional offices in Mid-West Region
Diocese of Limerick	Education Secretariat of Catholic Church in the Region
Employers/Enterprises	With key commitments from Stryker and Flextronics, based in Limerick
FÁS	Responsibility for design and delivery of training, job centres
Health Executive Service	Design and delivery of health services (including community-based)
Limerick Business School	Higher Education Institute
Sports Partnership	Design and delivery of community-based sports programmes in City
Community Education Network	Umbrella group for statutory and voluntary education providers
Institute of Technology	Limerick IT: Further education institute
Limerick Regeneration Agency	Statutorily constituted agency to oversee social and physical regeneration
Limerick Trades Council	Council of Trades Unions
Limerick City Youth Forum	Umbrella group for statutory and voluntary providers of youth services
Limerick Youth Service	Co-ordination of community-based youth development programmes
Mary Immaculate College	Further Education Institute
Schools	Primary and Post-primary Schools Sector
Probation & Welfare Services	Services for offenders and ex-offenders
PAUL Partnership	Statutorily established partnership to deliver local development
University of Limerick	Higher Education
Limerick Anti-Poverty Strategy	Organisation to deliver strategy to tackle social exclusion/poverty
Limerick Childcare Committee	Responsibility for co-ordination of childcare services in the City
Community & Voluntary Forum	Umbrella group for community-based and voluntary organisations (NGOs)
Limerick City Enterprise Board	Promotion of, and supports for, locally-based enterprise

The Illustration below provides a visual indication of how different elements of the collaborative framework co-exist.

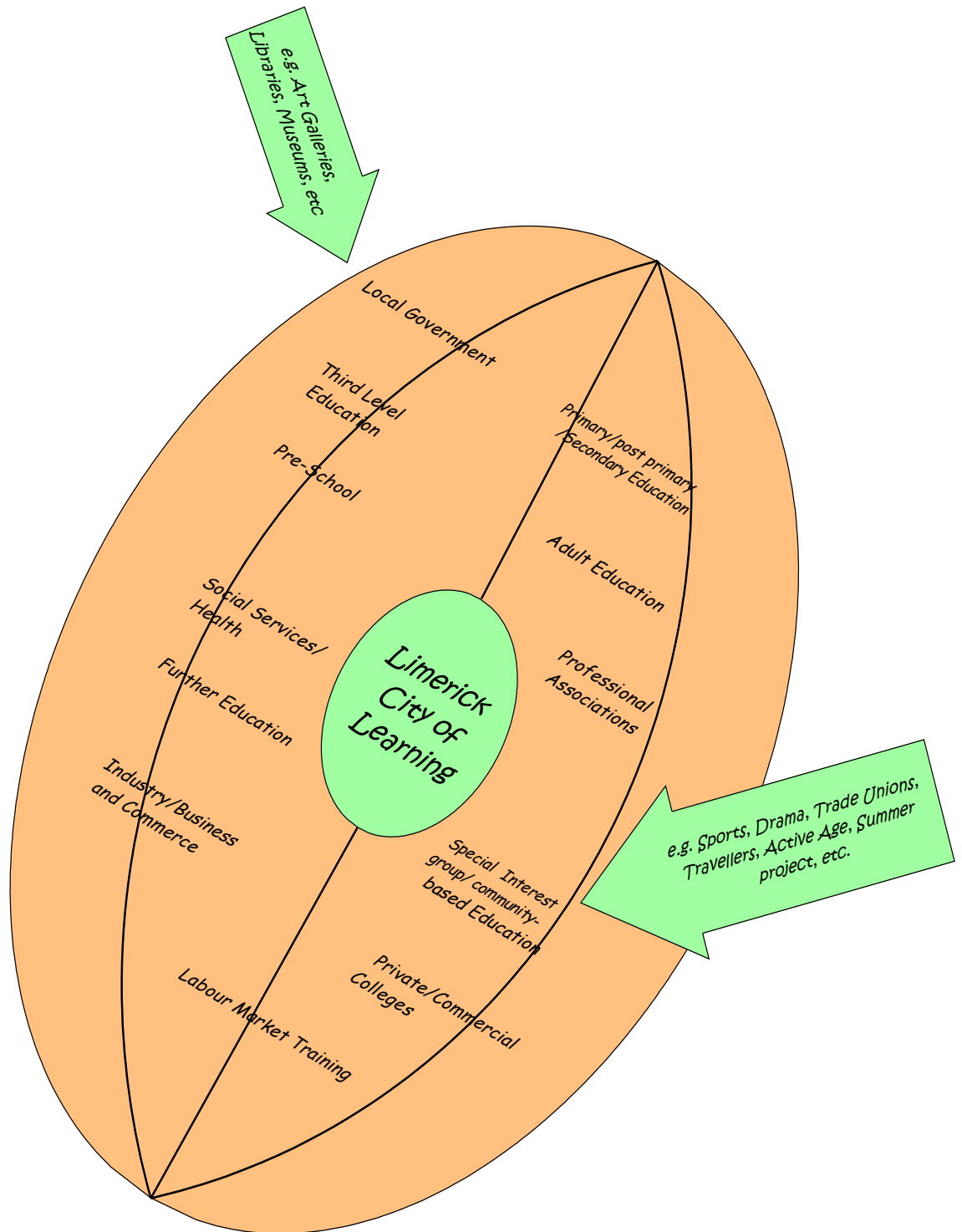




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**LIMERICK: A CITY OF LEARNING**

#### **4. MANAGEMENT OF THE LEARNING REGIONS NETWORK**

Responsibility for facilitation of the ongoing collaboration process rests with the City of Learning Steering Group, as does responsibility for review of outcomes and sharing of lessons emerging. The City of Limerick Vocational Educational Committee has been designated as the lead agency within the overall process.

Ongoing management is through quarterly (four times pre year) meetings of the City of Learning Steering Group. Meetings typically cover:

- A review of activities undertaken in relation to strategic objectives.
- Planning of actions over the coming quarter.

The absence of paid full-time dedicated staff and secretariat has meant that development of the process has been slow. Substantial efforts to date, for example, have been in managing the planning rather than the implementation process. The first meeting of the Steering Group for the City of Learning met in January 2003. but it was not until December 2008 that the Framework Strategy document was agreed and published.

Considerable time and effort has been invested, as part of co-ordination meetings since, on identifying resources to support specific measures and overall strategic development. A key part of these efforts are about securing finance to support the employment of a full-time co-ordinator for the Strategy (mainly from central government sources via the Department of Education and Science). Efforts have to date been unsuccessful. In the absence of full-time management and secretarial functions, activities of the network between meetings have been co-ordinated through Vocational Education Committee staff.

Of more critical importance at the present time are developments in relation to regeneration activities. The City of Limerick has been designated by the Irish Government as the site for a substantive regeneration programme – especially concentrated on areas of disadvantage. Deliberations about how this should proceed has encompassed serious debate about the role and central contribution that learning can make to any development process: ensuing social and civic as well as physical regeneration. The Regeneration Board is now represented on the city of Learning steering group and (despite the fact that the regeneration process will suffer somewhat in terms of government cutbacks) there is a real opportunity for mutual benefit and synergy. The regeneration process will no doubt benefit from the existence of a Learning City Strategy and structure – especially one that emphasises the need for promotion of learning opportunities in disadvantaged areas. And a regeneration programme certainly provides the Learning City Steering Group with a very practical and appropriate context within which the strategy can be pursued.

#### **5. QUALITY ISSUES IN THE NETWORK**

Quality management has not become an issue within network discussions. But there has been an emphasis upon, and acknowledgment of the need for, evaluation in a

broader sense. The Learning City Strategy commits itself to setting 'targets and milestones to measure progress' And there is the stated intention to link review and evaluation and ongoing planning:

"Capture the impact of the range of participation and partnership efforts, and use the lessons learnt to address future issues and challenges" Limerick City of Learning: A collaborative Framework for Progress, 2008.

However, there is no formal commitment of resources, either financial or human, to implementing evaluation, review or quality assurances processes. No quality mechanisms, criteria or standards have been established.

It is important to point out, however, that there is a marked openness to exploring possible means of evaluation and quality assurance. Contacts with the Steering Group to date have established that the capacity to review, evaluate and understand more about quality is seen to be beneficial in terms of:

- Contributing to the capacity for stakeholders in the process to become more flexible and responsive to needs in promotion of learning. Ongoing evaluation would offer reliable information and feedback on results of actions – improving the ongoing planning process and allowing for changes in orientation and focus where necessary. Indeed this capacity for ongoing review, evaluation and quality assurance is seen as central part of the learning region strategy and integral to its success – not merely an obligation to be fulfilled; nor an exercise that is competed 'after the event'.
- Demonstrating the benefits of learning in the broadest sense of the term. The potential benefits of quality assurance and evaluation activities are recognised as providing information and evidence of the contribution learning can make to social and economic development of the City.

## 6. ROLE OF EU POLICIES

At the stage of establishment, the City of Learning initiative was influenced more by local and national than by European policies. The main motivations were in relation to access (ensuring equality of access to learning in particular) on the one hand; and, related to this, the need for improved co-ordination of education initiatives and services. Some reference was made in early stages of development – through representation of the University of Limerick on the Steering Group – to the EU Lifelong learning Programme<sup>2</sup>. But it was an understanding of challenges and development needs locally that provided the main push for the strategy to be developed.

There was acknowledgement later in the process (early 2005) of the results contained in the Irish national Report: "Achieving the Lisbon Goal". The report concluded that City and County Development Boards, as well as area-based partnerships were playing a key role in 'measures to improve the integration of different learning sites'. It was stated that 'projects such as the "City of Learning" (Limerick) are providing models of good practice in this field.'

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<sup>2</sup> The University of Limerick were participating in a transnational project under the Lifelong Learning Programme at this time (2003).

## 7. ADDED VALUE AND IMPACT

Initial contacts with steering group have established that connection with the R3L+ project is seen as both beneficial and timely:

- *Beneficial* to the extent that a process to define approach to quality assurance would help to focus steering groups members, as well as wider stakeholders, on core objectives of the strategy. Also acknowledged is the potential to contribute to a more formal organisation and management of the strategy. Quality assurance, especially to the extent that it can help assure more effective collaboration and co-ordination, is at the core of learning city development. Developing an implementing a system of quality assurance could therefore provide the steering group with a useful mechanism through which progress can be acknowledged, challenges identified and the need for new approaches or actions highlighted. The opportunity to learn form how quality assurance issues are addressed in other learning region contexts elsewhere was also seen as beneficial.
- *Timely* to the extent that this process (of clarification and focus on quality) can help now with the challenge of instituting more formal structures and processes governing the City of Learning Strategy. Movement from what is now still seen as a 'Framework' into a more formalised and recognised strategy is especially important if the opportunity to create synergy with the Limerick City regeneration programme is to be fully realised.

## 8. TRANSFER STRATEGY

### Enabling Factors

Development and testing of a quality assurance framework will be assisted in this instance by the existence of:

- A formal commitment (as part of the agreed Learning City Framework) to capturing impact and measuring progress.
- An acknowledgement (from direct contact with Chairperson of the Steering Group) of the importance of developing a formal way of fulfilling this commitment, in a practical way, at this time. Key stakeholders are likely to welcome discussion on how quality can be measured and promoted.
- An openness to involve a wide range of stakeholders, and to welcome feedback from potential beneficiaries within the context of ongoing review, planning and quality assurance. The Learning City Framework commits partners to "Consult with the people of Limerick to inform the ongoing development of their City".
- A commitment to establish string links between the City of Learning Strategy and the state-sponsored programme for regeneration in Limerick. This acts as an enabling factor in that the capacity to demonstrate quality and potential benefit is key to establishing learning as a central platform in social regeneration.

- An openness to learn from the experience of learning region networks elsewhere, and to hopefully use results from the project to inform their own development options.

### **Constraints and Risks**

The most significant constraints and risks are about:

- Most importantly, the lack of resources committed to fulfilment of the strategy. The fact that there is no full-time secretariat or fully-resourced co-ordination for the network makes it more difficult to ask partners to commit time to quality assurance. While there is a definite willingness and enthusiasm to be involved in *designing* a quality assurance framework, there will undoubtedly, justifiably so, be equations raised about the practicality of implementing QA procedures agreed – given constraints on the resources that core partners are able to commit.
- Related to this, the absence of clear programmes of action within which a QA process can be applied. Many of the action named within the Strategy Framework have remained at the level of aspiration, mainly where efforts to secure the necessary resources for implementation have not been successful. This means that application or ‘testing’ of the QA framework will be restricted mainly to the operation of the network at the higher level of co-ordination (Steering Group), and more difficult to apply to particular strands of activity or programmes initiated. Application will therefore tell us more about how the main partners work together and co-operate at the macro level, than it will about how they collaborate to progress particular measures.

### **Objectives of Transfer Strategy in Relation to Network Requirements**

The overall guiding principle for involving stakeholders will be to demonstrate and promote the *mutual benefits* of involvement in the R3L+ project:

1. We will benefit greatly from an open and candid discussion of what kinds of approaches to QA are appropriate and practical in their circumstances. We will also benefit from the fact that our contacts will be with those stakeholders who recognise the potential for themselves in developing effective approaches to QA – and not with those who may be engaging just to fulfil a requirement or obligation. This results in a much more positive engagement and higher quality input into the project.
2. The network will benefit through the articulation and development of a framework they can actually use in ‘real life’ – not a generic or top-down system where both applicability and usability are questionable.

If the project is helping the network to develop indicators and methods that are of benefit to them, then the feedback we are able to give into the production of more generic guidelines and handbook will be richer, more contextually-relevant and ultimately more easily applicable.

We will pursue the process through:

- A meeting with core stakeholders (associated with the overall Steering Group at City-wide level). This will take the form of a focus or working group – using the *guideline to consultation* framework to provoke discussion and capture

feedback on what are seen as key indicators and possible implementation mechanisms at the three different levels.

- Using this meeting to identify the need for follow-up discussions – where particular stakeholder organisations are willing to explore the process further in their own institutional settings (again using the *guideline to consultation* document).

We will replicate this process at the ‘micro’ or ‘operational’ level. In this case, it will be with the Limerick Community Education Network: a network of organisations involved in delivering community-based and adult learning initiative in the City (with a particular focus on disadvantaged areas and socially excluded sections of the population).

Results from both levels will be fed back to participants and contributors before being finalised and submitted to other R3L+ partners.

Country: Ireland	Policy Framework	Scope	Lead sector	Locus of control	Organisational type of network	Dimensions (vertical, horizontal)	Key issues	Key elements of regional/local strategy	Financing	Role and improvement of quality
MACRO-level (city level)  Limerick City of Learning	1. Lcoal Development Programme  2. City Regeneration Programme	City	Adult and Community Based Education; Government Agency	City-Wide Steering Group	Formalised membership and plan, but less formal procedures, meetings etc	Initiated as Top Down but significant focus on supporting community involvement	Expansion of City's Social Capital  Active Citizenship  Diversity  Social Inclusion and Equality	State investment in major urban regeneration programme  Focus on building local partnership and integrated services to address unemployment	No funding apart from small contribution to secretarial costs and planning  Seeking funding has become a primary action	Quality has not been central theme as such, but the strategy places great emphasis on ongoing evaluation of both process and outcomes.
MICRO-level  Limerick Community Education Network	Social inclusion and local development	City Wide but with focus on four areas of disadvantage	Community based voluntary providers of adult education	Equal Representation of all member organsitions at planning and review meetings	Formal	Bottom-up: actions based on needs identified in communities	Promoting access to learning for disadvantaged and socially excluded  Developing accessible spaces for learning  Sharing good practice in adult education	Commitment to lifelong learning in natinal development plan.  National state-funded agency to promote adutl and community education  National and Local Anti-Poverty Strategies	Central Government funding to cover Co-ordination costs	Quality focus on design and delvery of courses.  No application of qaulity processes or standards in networking