

CURRICULUM DELIVERY METHODS EMPLOYED IN SCOTTISH FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

**A REPORT BY HM INSPECTORS OF EDUCATION FOR THE SCOTTISH
FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL**

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1. Introduction

Part-time further and higher education, in its many variations, attracts a large number of enrolments in Scottish further education colleges. In academic year 2002/03, there were 420,460 part-time enrolments in the 46 colleges¹. In this way, colleges made a significant contribution to meeting the strategic goals of the Scottish Executive lifelong learning strategy.

This report:

- identifies the range of strategies, programmes and modes of delivery which are in place to meet the needs of these part-time learners. These modes include: open, flexible and distance learning; online learning; community-based learning; work-based learning; and blended approaches (Section 3);
- reviews the planning, delivery and management of programmes delivered flexibly (Section 4);
- reviews the arrangements for guidance and support, and links with other agencies, including community education (Sections 5 and 6);
- evaluates achievement of learners studying in flexible modes (Section 7);
- identifies strengths and weaknesses found in flexible delivery and highlights good practice (Sections 3-7 and appendix); and
- makes recommendations for improvement (Section 8).

2. Methodology

HM Inspectors compiled this report from a range of sources. They visited six colleges in Autumn 2004 and interviewed key staff and examined documentation. They interviewed a number of employers and students by telephone. Key messages were identified from analysis of reports of college reviews between 2002 and 2004. They also analysed performance indicators and reviewed other quantitative data from SFEFC databases.

¹ Source: SFEFC Infact database

3. Strategies, range of programmes and modes of delivery

Strategies

All college strategic plans aimed to deliver a portfolio of programmes which was responsive to local and, in many cases, national needs, including the Scottish Executive Lifelong Learning Strategy goals. Most colleges had explicit strategy statements or policies relating to academic affairs, e-learning and community learning. Many plans made explicit the aim to allow learners flexible access to such programmes. This flexibility often depended on ICT support, both through access to online learning materials and through ICT-enabled guidance and support. Provision of part-time learning opportunities in the community was often an important strategic aim.

Many colleges had adopted the term *blended learning* to indicate the adoption of a number of different approaches to delivering learning. These approaches involved selecting a range of modes of delivery to meet the needs of a particular learner or learner group. These modes included face-to-face delivery in class, independent private study, paper-based distance learning and online learning. However, it was not often the case that learners had real choice of which *blend* was most appropriate, with the result that not all modes of delivery fitted well the learning preferences and needs of all learners.

Range of programmes

All colleges offered flexible programmes in a range of subject disciplines. In some disciplines, for example construction, electrical engineering and motor vehicle engineering, colleges delivered programmes in the workplace. In others, such as ICT and administration, learners had access to programmes in college learning centres or community-based locations. Online learning materials in an increasing range of disciplines offered further choice of mode of study to learners. Many colleges offered distance learning in a range of disciplines. These included management, care, administration, accounting, languages, customer care, health and safety, food hygiene, training and development, human resource management, and personal and social development. Programmes of core skills development were available in a number of modes of study. However, in a few colleges, the range of programmes offered flexibly was narrow and did not offer effective learner choice.

All colleges provided programmes leading to summative assessment and certification. Many of these programmes were based on the delivery of individual units from National Qualifications or from HN provision. In many cases, colleges had made these units available through distance learning or through infill into full-time or day-release programmes. This flexibility of access provided effective choice for learners able to travel to college at fixed times and for those wishing to study away from the college at times to suit them. A few colleges had provided flexible access to whole programmes, including HNC Management, HNC Administration and Information Management, and HNC Business Administration, as well as a number of professional development awards in care and for classroom assistants. Programmes of training in ICT, including European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and PC Passport, continued to attract high numbers of learners. The addition of Advanced ECDL in recent years had enhanced learner progression in ICT skills and the range of levels in PC Passport provided similar opportunities.

A large number of programmes, mainly in ICT, provided training but no assessment for certification. Many of these programmes were available in community outreach centres or in college drop-in centres, where learners had access to a computer and to appropriate paper-based learning materials. A large number of these programmes were available at different levels so that learners could progress from an introductory programme, through an intermediate level, to advanced programmes in word processing, spreadsheets, database applications and other ICT topics.

Many flexible programmes were developed from popular units in full-time programmes. Colleges used the same assessments for certification in both modes of delivery. In this way, learners on a number of full-time programmes benefited from an element of flexibility in their programmes.

Flexible modes of delivery

These included the following.

- Distance learning: those learners studying at a distance from their college. A number of these learners attended college occasionally for study sessions.
- Locally-based learning: learning taking place mainly at home but with some attendance at college.
- College-based private study: learners studying in open access centres on a drop-in basis.
- Online learning.
- A blend of the above.

Accommodation for learning included:

- drop-in college facilities;
- community outreach centres;
- mobile ICT facilities; and
- learners' homes.

Almost all colleges had made very good progress in introducing facilities for independent private study, for drop-in learners or for open access study. These learning centres, study centres or flexible learning units provided access to computers, online learning materials and paper-based resources in a number of subject disciplines, but predominantly in ICT subjects. Staffed either by teaching staff or by administrators, these centres provided a useful resource for part-time learners who were able to attend college, with the added benefit that learners could choose the times and duration of their attendance. Full-time learners wishing to study independently were able to use the resources of learning centres on a bookable basis, thus enhancing flexibility of study opportunities for this group of learners. Assessments completed by drop-in learners were marked by assigned tutors but not all tutors met learners to provide face-to-face feedback on assessment decisions. No college had yet evaluated rigorously the success of these learning centres in promoting effective learning.

Almost all colleges offered community-based provision, often in partnership with other agencies such as local authorities or other community agencies. A number of colleges had rented high street premises in outlying towns and were delivering a range of programmes, mainly ICT based. Many community programmes took place in community centres, church halls and local secondary schools. One college delivered English for speakers of other

languages in the communities where these learners lived. Core skills provision was very good in a large number of outreach centres, and many colleges, working in partnership with community agencies, delivered programmes in literacies and in pre-vocational studies.

One college with a large rural hinterland in central Scotland had co-operated successfully with its local authority to deliver a large number of programmes in over 40 community-based locations. This was successful in removing barriers to participation caused by transport difficulties. Most of this provision was delivered in the evening. This same college had placed computers in a number of libraries to encourage online access to its programmes but this had not led to any significant increase in learner activity and had been discontinued. A few colleges reported difficulties in co-operating successfully at operational level with their local authority in the provision of community-based learning.

Commendably, a number of colleges were working in the community with learners with additional support needs. In one college, the programme incorporated employment and voluntary experience, with support workers on-site linking with college staff. Learning materials met individual needs and the college offered assessment for SQA certification where appropriate. Individual learning plans (ILP) took into account the attendance patterns for those with disability or emotional and mental health issues. Fifty learners were undertaking this provision in a wide range of venues: the college, two shops, day care centres and voluntary organisations. Approximately 25% of learners progressed to employment or further college programmes.

A number of colleges enhanced the flexibility of community-based provision through the use of mobile classrooms equipped with ICT. They used these facilities to bring access to communities with no permanent accommodation for learning. One college used this facility in Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) areas. Another brought ICT programmes to rural communities through the use of two mobile computing labs. One college had noted that sustainability of outreach provision was an important issue for rural communities. For example, a short burst of activity was not useful to a community as it raised expectations and did not provide opportunity for progression when the service was withdrawn. The college had therefore planned its provision to ensure sustainable learning opportunities.

Online provision

All colleges had strategies for the development and implementation of programmes of learning delivered online. Almost all colleges had acquired and implemented a virtual learning environment (VLE) and a number of colleges had invested heavily in learning materials, either produced in-house or bought in from commercial sources. Many colleges had made online learning materials available to learners from centrally-supported sources such as LT Scotland, the National Learning Network and Heriot-Watt University's Scholar programmes.

Although almost all colleges had implemented a VLE, this development had not yet had a substantial impact on the learner experience. Many online materials development initiatives had been piecemeal, without a convincing underlying rationale for choice of units or topics. A number of complete qualifications had been developed for online learning, including ECDL, a number of Higher and Advanced Higher courses, and HNC Computing, as well as a useful suite of online materials for core skills developed by LT Scotland. However, most developments had resulted in online materials for single units, unrelated to each other and

providing a patchy online experience for learners. There were few collaborative arrangements between and among colleges to produce coherent suites of online materials to cover a complete subject area. The dearth of such initiatives had contributed to the piecemeal coverage of curriculum and syllabus. However, there were encouraging developments in computing and ICT, where a few colleges were beginning to collaborate effectively.

Enrolments on flexible programmes

SFEFC collects data from colleges on enrolments in all of the above delivery modes as well as in a category for enrolments which do not fit specifically under a particular mode. Total enrolments in the five years for which data was available is shown below²:

1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	Total
66338	70169	82789	79790	74134	373220

It can be seen that enrolments peaked in academic year 2000/01 and declined in the two years since then.

The table below shows an aggregation of the enrolments for the five colleges delivering the greatest amount of open learning in this period³. It shows a steady decline in enrolments from 1998 to 2003. Reasons for the decline are not clear.

1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	Total
32216	30106	28341	24919	24213	139795

These five colleges delivered 49% of all open learning in Scottish FE colleges in 1998/99. In 2002/03 this had dropped to 33%. Across all other colleges, enrolments increased until 2000-2001 but declined between 2001-2002 and 2002-2003.

The growth of blended learning and the variety of modes of delivery and learning with which an individual learner may engage have implications for colleges in the reporting of their activity. A single category of enrolment, such as *mixed mode* will not allow colleges to report separately the various activities of students learning in a blended mode.

Work-based learning

Since the introduction of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ), Skillseekers and Modern Apprenticeships, work-based learning had grown in importance as a curriculum delivery method. Colleges had played a major role in supporting workforce development through the delivery of SVQ to Skillseekers, Modern Apprentices and others, mainly in the workplace but also in colleges. Such college provision helped to underpin knowledge and understanding and develop practical skills in realistic working environments (RWE). The development of RWE in colleges had added to the flexibility which colleges brought to the learning and assessment processes for SVQ candidates. Not only were colleges active in assessing candidates in the workplace, but they were able, through RWE, to teach and assess in college. RWE had been set up by colleges in construction, electrical installation and hospitality. An

² Source: SFEFC Infact database

³ Source: SFEFC Infact database. Query based on all distance learning, locally-based learning and college-based private study at Aberdeen College, Stevenson College, Stow College, Edinburgh's Telford College and Fife College of Further and Higher Education

added benefit for colleges in providing SVQ programmes was the close contact between employers and teaching staff, thus enhancing the knowledge and understanding of teaching staff of current industrial and commercial practice.

A number of models for the delivery of SVQ were in place in colleges. For some employers, the college provided only registration and internal moderation services. In such arrangements, it was usual for the college to have a role in training workplace assessors for their duties. For other employers, the college undertook all assessment activities as well as internal moderation. In some cases, the SVQ formed the entire programme of full-time hospitality students in college. In a number of organisations, the role of the workplace mentor was not well developed.

Strengths

- All college strategic plans aimed to deliver a portfolio of programmes that was responsive to local and, in many cases, national needs, including the Scottish Executive lifelong learning strategic goals.
- The addition of Advanced ECDL in recent years had enhanced learner progression in ICT skills, and the range of levels in PC Passport provided similar opportunities.
- Full-time learners on a number of programmes benefited from an element of flexibility deriving from the development of flexible modes of delivery for units which were also components in full-time programmes.
- Almost all colleges had made very good progress in introducing facilities for independent private study, for drop-in learners or for open access study.
- Partnership working with community agencies delivered effective programmes in literacies and in prevocational studies.
- A number of colleges enhanced the flexibility of community-based provision through the use of mobile classrooms equipped with ICT.
- All colleges had strategies for the development and implementation of programmes of learning delivered online.
- Colleges had played a major role in supporting workforce development through the delivery of SVQ to Skillseekers, Modern Apprentices and others.
- An added benefit for colleges in providing SVQ programmes was the close contact between employers and teaching staff, thus enhancing staff knowledge and understanding of current industrial and commercial practice.

Weaknesses

- In a number of colleges, the range of programmes offered flexibly was narrow and did not offer effective learner choice.
- The blended learning approaches adopted in a few programmes did not match well the learning preferences and needs of all learners.
- No college had yet evaluated rigorously the success of college-based learning centres in promoting effective learning.
- There were few collaboration arrangements between and among colleges to produce coherent suites of online materials to cover a complete subject area. The dearth of such initiatives had contributed to the piecemeal coverage of curriculum and syllabus.
- A single category of enrolment, such as *mixed mode* did not allow colleges to report separately the various activities of students learning in a blended mode.

4. Planning, delivery and management

Arrangements for programme planning and management

In all colleges, a senior manager had direct responsibility for the strategy and direction of the curriculum. In most colleges, the planning process was well established and operational plans related well to colleges' strategic aims. At the operational level, a range of managers with clearly allocated responsibilities ensured the implementation of operational plans for the delivery of curriculum in a range of modes. These posts included:

- community and open learning managers;
- commercial managers for SVQ work;
- an e-learning development manager; and
- learning resource managers.

Their responsibilities included:

- the operational management of accommodation, including learner resource centres and outreach centres;
- processes for recruitment and certification of open learning students; and
- management of central administration staff.

In most cases, these managers were also responsible for selection and recruitment of open learning tutors, work-based assessors and learning centre tutors. In other cases, curriculum managers performed this function. A few colleges had no central support for the administration of open and flexible modes of delivery. In these cases, learners had no central point of contact nor effective systems for handling correspondence and distance learning assessments.

Staff development managers played an important role in preparing staff for delivery of an ICT-based curriculum. Staff development activities included training in the use of VLE as well as training in online tutoring, guidance and support. Almost all colleges were participating in the SFEFC-funded⁴ *eMerge* staff development programme for e-learning. Peer support among teaching staff was an important way of meeting staff development needs in e-learning. A few colleges had recognised the importance of such support and had implemented measures to encourage it.

Arrangements for delivery of programmes

In many colleges, responsibility for the delivery of flexible and work-based programmes lay with subject department managers who liaised with central administration staff and open learning managers to ensure effective administration of programmes. Subject department managers were responsible for the recruitment, timetabling and deployment of open and flexible learning tutors, and workplace assessors and tutors. In this way, subject departments were closely involved in the delivery of these programmes and were more able to assure the quality of provision.

⁴ Delivered through a partnership between the JISC Regional Support Centres and SFEU.

Other colleges had placed responsibility for the delivery of open and flexible learning in a centrally-managed open learning or flexible learning section. These sections acted like subject departments, with their own teaching and administration staff. The extent to which they liaised and co-operated with subject departments varied. There was usually very good liaison in respect of identification of appropriate units and supporting materials, but arrangements for co-operation in quality assurance were not always effective.

The appointment of co-ordinators or managers with responsibility for online learning had contributed to the effective delivery of online curriculum to learners in a number of colleges. Typically, these co-ordinators and managers worked with subject departments to develop programmes and to implement the systems and procedures related to learner access to and use of the college VLE.

Effective arrangements were in place in most colleges for the delivery of work-based programmes. Typically, each college had a co-ordinator for Skillseeker and Modern Apprenticeship contracts and this co-ordinator acted as a link between the college and employers. In addition, the co-ordinator liaised with the local enterprise company (LEC) in relation to outcomes and milestones. One college had devolved this responsibility to its commercial company, which maintained close contact with subject departments that were involved in the delivery of SVQ programmes.

Quality assurance and improvement

Almost all colleges had appropriate and effective quality assurance and improvement policies in place. These covered all modes of curriculum delivery. Subject departments had responsibility for programmes which fell within their subject area. In one college, the focus of quality assurance and improvement was shifting from programmes to individual units. The aim of this change was to ensure consistency of application of quality standards across all units taught. Quality assurance procedures for open learning and work-based programmes included internal moderation of assessed work and programme review through self-evaluation, course team reports and evaluation of the views of learners and stakeholders.

All colleges had effective arrangements in place to identify departmental responsibility for internal moderation of assessed learner work. Internal moderators included occurrences of open and flexible delivery in their samples of work for moderation. In a few colleges, this was less comprehensive for open and flexible programmes than for full-time programmes.

In many colleges, course teams did not produce self-evaluations of flexible programmes. As a result, they did not identify strengths and weaknesses and missed opportunities to identify good practice for adoption more widely. Units for which there was certification by an awarding body were included in consideration of Student Achievement Ratio by Unit of Learning (SARU) data but most programme teams did not evaluate the achievement of learners on non-certificated programmes.

One college had analysed its flexible provision for curriculum coverage and had identified related issues for staff development. A number of colleges evaluated the quality of service they provided through their drop-in centres.

Feedback from learners and employers

Most colleges collected evidence from learners in order to evaluate the level of client satisfaction. They used questionnaires extensively, both for distance learners and those using college facilities. Many colleges carried out this exercise several times each year and analysed the results with a view to identifying actions for improvement. A few colleges used formal procedures to collect the views of employers but most used informal methods.

Strengths

- In most colleges, the planning process was well established and operational plans related well to colleges' strategic aims. At the operational level, a range of posts and responsibilities ensured the implementation of operational plans for the delivery of curriculum in a range of modes.
- Staff development managers played an important role in preparing staff for delivery of an ICT-based curriculum.
- In a number of colleges, the appointment of co-ordinators or managers with responsibility for online learning had contributed to the effective delivery of online curriculum to learners.
- Most colleges had effective arrangements for the delivery of work-based programmes.
- A number of colleges evaluated the quality of service they provided in their drop-in centres.
- Most colleges collected evidence from learners in order to evaluate the level of client satisfaction.

Weaknesses

- A few colleges had no central support for the administration of open and flexible modes of delivery.
- Where centrally-managed open learning sections had responsibility for delivery of open learning programmes, arrangements for co-operation with subject departments in quality assurance were not always effective.
- In a few colleges, arrangements to sample assessed learner work were less comprehensive for open and flexible programmes than for full-time programmes.
- Most programme teams did not evaluate the achievement of learners on non-certificated programmes.

5. Guidance and support

Arrangements for guidance and support

Almost all colleges publicised their open and flexible learning programmes through a prospectus or leaflets. These materials were effective in presenting the range of open and flexible learning opportunities to prospective students. Many colleges used community locations, including community centres, health centres and libraries to promote flexible learning opportunities.

Overall, colleges used an effective range of activities to support learners studying at a distance or by other flexible means. In one college, learning centre staff provided pre-entry guidance and ongoing support for drop-in learners. The college used a pre-entry self-assessment questionnaire to help potential learners to assess their suitability for flexible learning. This service was not commonly available across all colleges. Another college had an open learning student handbook that set out arrangements, facilities, entitlements and responsibilities. A useful open learning study guide supplemented the handbook. The same college interviewed prospective open learning students on business programmes to ensure their suitability for this mode of study. All distance learning students had a named academic tutor and were expected to maintain contact with the tutor, and many tutors were proactive in contacting students who had not been recently active. In general, open and flexible learners did not have enough information about guidance and support services or about next steps when they had completed their programme of study.

Staff in learning centres in a number of colleges had a role in referring learners for further support or guidance as appropriate. This included referrals to learner support services within the college and to such agencies as Careers Scotland. In several learning centres, alternative formats of materials were available in line with disability discrimination legislation. Materials in languages other than English were available in a few subject disciplines.

Where SVQ candidates were assessed by college staff, they met regularly in the workplace, on average about once a month. In some cases, the candidates also attended college from time to time for help and support. One college had provided SVQ candidates with college e-mail accounts to enhance communication with the college.

Use of ICT

Videoconferencing, e-mail and e-groups had begun to have an impact on the level and quality of communication between colleges and remote learners. VLE facilities were used to facilitate enhanced communication, especially for online learners. Interestingly, online learners in one college wished it to retain telephone-based tutor support, and the college had agreed to do so.

In colleges with remote and scattered populations, videoconferencing was an important support tool for distance learners. Tutors and learners used it to discuss progress in completing learning plans or meeting additional support needs, and the facility gave a more personal background to the distance learning process. One college was developing e-guidance systems to support remote and community-based learners.

A few colleges had recognised the difficulty experienced by some learners in the use of ICT to support their learning and were developing induction programmes for learners on blended learning. The programme incorporated videoconferencing, Internet access and the use of specialist software. One college had recognised that online learning was an inappropriate mode of delivery for some learners and was careful to match delivery methods to learner abilities and preferences.

Almost all colleges made assistive technology available to students in learning centres and a few colleges provided this technology in the learner's home.

The role of employers in supporting work-based learning

Support for SVQ candidates in the workplace was provided by colleges through visits by advisers and assessors to the candidate. Employers also had an important role to play by providing workplace mentors who were colleagues or supervisors of the candidates and who had a role in guiding the candidate towards appropriate work activities that would demonstrate the competences associated with the qualification.

Most employers participated in the mentor scheme. In some organisations, the scheme worked very well but elsewhere it was not fully effective in supporting students. A few colleges provided training for workplace mentors. In other cases, the employer provided this training. One college reported that mentors frequently did not understand the occupational standards. There were difficulties in bringing employers in for mentor training because theirs were often small enterprises where time was a barrier to participating in college events.

Strengths

- Many colleges used community locations, including community centres, health centres and libraries to promote flexible learning opportunities.
- Overall, colleges used an effective range of activities to support learners studying at a distance or by other flexible means.
- Videoconferencing, e-mail and e-groups had begun to have an impact on the level and quality of communication between colleges and remote learners.
- Almost all colleges made assistive technology available to students in learning centres and a few colleges provided this technology in the learner's home.

Weaknesses

- In general, open and flexible learners did not have enough information about guidance and support services or about next steps when they had completed their programme of study.
- In a number of employer organisations, the role of the workplace mentor was not well developed.

6. Links with other agencies

Local authorities

All colleges had strategic aims that committed them to close partnership working with a range of agencies, including local authorities. Links with community learning and with social work were particularly strong in a number of colleges and facilitated education in the community for disadvantaged groups of learners, including unemployed people, ethnic minorities, homeless people and people with drug-related problems. Colleges and local authorities worked together to deliver programmes in core skills, skills for work, ICT, English language, and a range of taster programmes designed to inform learners about further learning opportunities. Programmes delivered in collaboration with social work departments included projects specifically targeted at unemployed and vulnerable adults and young people.

Links with education authorities were strong in a large number of colleges. These links led to many good programmes for school pupils. Provision ranged from taster days which allowed pupils to sample a range of vocational education opportunities, to two-year programmes in such subjects as construction and hospitality, aimed at preparing pupils for further vocational education. Some colleges experienced difficulties in making provision for school pupils. These difficulties related to such practical issues as transport for pupils, different lunch hours among schools which made college timetabling difficult and poor understanding in a few schools of the value to all pupils of vocational education. Colleges and education authorities worked well together in many instances to minimise these difficulties and to provide a valuable learning experience for large numbers of school pupils.

Other agencies

Many colleges located in areas of social deprivation worked closely with partners within SIP, to provide programmes aimed at meeting the learning needs of people experiencing social exclusion. These programmes gave learners opportunities to improve their core and employability skills as well as offering them the opportunity to progress to further study at college. A large number of these programmes were delivered in the community.

A large number of voluntary agencies co-operated with colleges in the provision of learning opportunities for their client groups. These client groups included housing association tenants, travelling people, adult returners and blind people.

LECs were important partners for almost all colleges. Economic growth and regeneration were important themes of these partnerships, and college-run SVQ programmes for Skillseekers and Modern Apprenticeships contributed effectively to these themes. Most employers and SVQ candidates expressed satisfaction with the level of service provided by colleges, although a few employers stated that colleges communicated candidate progress poorly to them.

Strengths

- Links with community learning and with social work were particularly strong in a number of colleges and facilitated education in the community for disadvantaged groups of learners.

- Links with education authorities were strong in a large number of colleges.
- Many colleges worked closely with the local SIP to provide programmes aimed at meeting the learning needs of people experiencing social exclusion.

7. Student achievement

Retention of learners

A few colleges had in place arrangements that helped the monitoring of learner progress. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), agreed between staff and learners, identified key dates and achievement milestones and helped learners to maintain the momentum of their studies. Colleges which delivered learning through their VLE monitored logins to the system and thus tracked the activities of learners studying online. This enhanced colleges' ability to identify learners at risk of dropping out and to take remedial action.

However, most colleges found it difficult to monitor retention and generate reliable data on students following flexible modes of study. Statistics on retention, normally readily available for full-time and day-release learners, were not so readily available for flexible learners. Flexible programmes in colleges did not have fixed start dates. They were unlike full-time or day-release programmes which had fixed start dates and fixed days of attendance which applied equally to the whole cohort. In any flexible programme, ECDL for example, many colleges had large numbers of learners, all of whom had started at different times in the year, including outwith normal term dates. Learners decided their own attendance or study pattern. It was not always easy for colleges to determine whether learners were still active on a programme if it did not involve attendance at college or the submission of assessable work. As a result, colleges did not always know which of their flexible learners were still actively studying. A large number of colleges only withdrew students at the end of the academic year and re-enrolled them at the beginning of the next if they knew that the learners were still actively studying. Otherwise, the implicit continuation of learners' involvement was equated to retention. Consequently, retention rates, generally very high and frequently reported at 100%, were unreliable.

Attainment

Colleges reported levels of attainment on SVQ programmes with varying degrees of precision. A few colleges were able to quantify attainment. Others reported attainment as "high" or "patchy". The lack of an agreed method of calculating the number of students satisfying the attendance criteria, because of flexible start dates and flexible duration, caused particular difficulties in calculating attainment figures.

There were wide fluctuations in attainment on certificated flexible programmes other than SVQ. One college reported open learning SARU attainment at 8%. Others reported unit attainment at around 65%. For learners on non-certificated flexible programmes, most colleges reported high levels of completion or continuation. These figures were frequently close to 100%. These programmes had no criteria for success other than completion of the work, which was largely self-reported. Learners who had not withdrawn before the end of the academic year were deemed to have completed or were reported as continuing to the next year. It was not clear what they had achieved. As with retention, information on attainment by learners on flexibly delivered programmes was unreliable in many instances.

Strengths

- A few colleges had agreed ILPs with learners. These plans identified key dates and achievement milestones and helped learners to maintain the momentum of their studies.
- Colleges which delivered learning through their VLE could monitor logins to the system and thus track the activities of learners studying online.

Weaknesses

- Colleges did not always know which of their flexible learners were still actively studying.
- The lack of an agreed method of calculating the number of students satisfying the attendance criteria, because of flexible start dates and flexible duration, caused particular difficulties in calculating attainment figures.
- Non-certificated flexible programmes had no criteria for success other than completion of the work, which was largely self-reported. Learners who had not withdrawn before the end of the academic year were deemed to have completed or were reported as continuing to the next year.

8. Recommendations for improvement

Colleges should:

- review their range of programmes offered flexibly with a view to providing effective choice of modes of study for a greater number of learners;
- take into account learners' prior learning experiences and their learning preferences when recommending to them a particular mode of flexible learning;
- evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their learning centres in promoting effective learning and form action plans for improvement based on their evaluations;
- consider how best to collaborate in the production of online materials to ensure a coherent learning experience for students.
- apply their quality assurance and improvement procedures comprehensively and rigorously to all open and flexible learning programmes;
- ensure that employers understand fully the role of the workplace mentor and provide adequate training for workplace mentors; and
- ensure that communication between college assessors and supervisors of work-based SVQ candidates is effective.
- ensure that the retention and achievement data they use to evaluate the progress of learners following flexible modes of study are as robust and accurate as practicable.

SFEFC may wish to:

- review its collecting of further education statistics with a view to improving data on students studying in a blended learning mode; and
- support colleges to devise methods of calculating student retention and attainment data for flexible programmes which take into account the flexibility of their start dates and their duration.

Appendix: Examples of good practice taken from HMIE review reports

Strategies, range of programmes and modes of delivery

Clydebank College had developed an extremely responsive part-time *Learning Works* programme. This programme had been established initially in conjunction with Scottish Enterprise Dunbartonshire, and West Dunbartonshire Partnership, and with the support of European Social Funding. The programme aimed to help learners acquire new skills, develop their core skills and regain confidence in their abilities. It allowed students to study up to a maximum of 24 weeks, was free of charge, and designed on a flexible basis. Students could begin at any time in the academic year and choose one or more subjects from a range including computing, Internet skills, communication, numeracy and confidence building. Learners completing this programme benefited by receiving a grounding in core skills and obtaining support in progressing to training programmes, other programmes in the college, or employment.

Aberdeen College had introduced the *Further Education Opportunities* programmes in both hospitality and bakery on a part-time basis for students with additional support needs. The programmes were based on a successful partnership between the college and the social work departments of Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire councils. The "Introduction to Catering" and the "Introduction to Bakery" programmes required attendance at college for one day per week for 40 weeks. On completion of the introductory programme, catering students could enter the SVQ Level 1 in Preparing and Serving Food, and bakery students could enter the SVQ Level 1 in Bakery. An alternative for students on completion of either introductory programme was to enter the SVQ Level 1 programme for kitchen porters. The social work departments organised appropriate work placements to allow students to put into practice the skills they developed in college. From the SVQ Level 1, students could progress to full-time programmes with opportunities to achieve qualifications that met industry standards. These arrangements provided good opportunities for students with additional needs to gain vocational qualifications and provided a route into employment.

Perth College had developed a work-based hairdressing training programme in response to requests from local employers who wanted to train their own staff. The college supported salons across Tayside and Fife to become established assessment sites that met the assessment requirements of the Hair and Beauty Industry Authority. The college developed the initiative further by employing a dedicated vocational qualifications advisor based in the college's Business Development Centre. The advisor maintained good links with college hairdressing staff to support the assessment and moderation process in the workplace. This support helped to ensure standards were achievable and assessment was valid and reliable. The advisor established a good rapport with salon employers and candidates. She developed clear assessment plans and objectives for positive learning outcomes and achievements. Effective systems were in place to monitor all stages of candidate training and development and to ensure quality of services. As a result, the work-based training programme was valued by local employers and many students had benefited from workplace-based assessment.

Cardonald College staff in the art division had worked in partnership with a range of industrial agencies to develop and deliver a customised programme of work-based training to small and medium enterprises in the central belt of Scotland. The programme included training in product development, operative multiskilling and upskilling, selection and

induction training, and supervisory training. A key factor in the success of the programme was the early recognition by staff that many companies needed customised training to reflect their own particular needs rather than standard 'off-the-shelf' training. The team had secured additional funding to allow extension of the programme to companies across Scotland. The programme complemented the range of specialist full-time and part-time programmes provided by the college. It extended opportunities to learners who because of their geographical location and business commitments would not otherwise have been able to access the skills and expertise of staff in the division.

Cardonald College had developed an Advanced Care and Management Practice Award (ACAMPA) to meet the needs of supervisors and managers across the care sector by delivering the qualifications necessary for formal registration as managers with the Scottish Social Services Council. The programme comprised SVQ Level 4:Care, SVQ Level 4: Registered Manager Award, PDA – Advanced Certificate in Supervising and Managing Personal Social Services, and underpinning knowledge for Level 4 Care (HND style units). Candidates attended this integrated course on a day-release basis over 18 months, undertaking a planned programme of lectures, workshops, portfolio building, group work and individual learner support. Course tutors, programme advisers, assessors and candidates used the college's VLE to support learning. Peer support was actively encouraged. An important feature of the course was a partnership agreement that ensured that the college and employing agencies protected candidates' time for study and portfolio preparation. Staff integrated assessments to alleviate many of the transition and interface problems encountered between academic and vocational approaches. The careful, collaborative design of the course provided experienced practitioners with highly effective professional and personal development and the opportunity to gain appropriate formal certification.

Planning, delivery and management

Dumfries and Galloway College's Mobile Learning Initiative (MOLI) was an innovative project funded under the European Union programme 'Equal' and supported by Scottish Enterprise. The college worked in partnership with Glenrothes College who led the project. MOLI was based on an executive coach equipped with state of the art ICT facilities and broadband Internet access via satellite. It could be used as an office, a demonstration centre or a classroom at any organisation's geographic location. The college used MOLI to remove barriers to participation. It provided ICT training and impartial advice directly to Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) located throughout Dumfries and Galloway, many of which were situated too far from existing ICT training facilities to utilise innovative technologies.

MOLI had improved existing approaches to ICT training by developing the concept of a mobile learning unit and using it to introduce ICT and the benefits of broadband technology. It had helped to encourage the take-up of broadband in rural areas through:

- awareness and empowerment workshops for SME
- stimulating demand amongst SME and rural communities for broadband
- delivering training in ICT skills.

Some two thousand people had used MOLI since its launch in May 2003. The college's monitoring of these individuals had shown that they would not otherwise have had access to the level of ICT that MOLI provided. MOLI had successfully broken down the key barriers of access for these people, namely time and distance.

Lauder College staff had developed good-quality open learning materials in science to support students on a wide range of programmes. All units had good student guides which explained helpfully the learning requirements and expectations to distance learning students. The teaching packages were clear, well laid out and designed to develop and assess knowledge and understanding as students worked through the interactive materials. Staff used the packages extensively to support distance learners and classroom teaching. Some of the units had already been developed for online use, taking advantage of the college's VLE. Other units were in the process of being developed. This facility had enhanced the learning experience of all students but had proved particularly successful in supporting open learning students by allowing them easy access to the tutor and to fellow students.

In **Lauder College**, e-learning co-ordinators supported the application of e-learning methodologies to learning and teaching. These co-ordinators worked with lecturers within cluster groups to promote e-learning and increase student participation. E-learning co-ordinators mentored academic staff in the use of the VLE and electronic resources. They informed colleagues of the impact of e-learning on programme design and delivery, and developed guidelines on how to incorporate e-learning resources into course materials and how to communicate with and support learners. Best practice events for each curriculum group helped to embed ICT into curriculum delivery and demonstrate the portfolio of online content available through the VLE. The e-learning co-ordinators were contributing significantly to the quality of the students' experience by enhancing learning materials, improving learning and teaching methods and providing staff development and training.

Guidance and support

Through audit and self-evaluation activity, **Perth College** had identified weaknesses in the level of guidance it provided. Building upon feedback from lecturers and students, student support staff had developed a model of guidance under the title of "The Enhanced FE Curriculum" which aimed at improving the level and quality of student support. A timetabled guidance structure was in place for all full-time FE students and those with a substantial part-time programme. The structure embedded the use of personal development plans, and the use of SQA units as a mechanism for timetabled delivery.

Tutors had developed centrally a number of information and teaching packs, and student advisors within the teaching faculties were briefed on the approach and procedures for delivery. The packs were available in hard copy and through the college intranet, ensuring clear and wide distribution of information. A FE Student Advisors' Forum monitored implementation and provided opportunities for staff to share good practice. Staff and student feedback confirmed the positive impact of this initiative. By appropriate identification of difficulties and concerted college-wide action, staff had made a significant improvement to the student experience.

Creative technologies students at **Lauder College** had access to a website that provided a comprehensive service through a wide range of online materials. General information on timetables and unit details allowed students to plan ahead. By clicking a guidance link, students could check personal guidance interview times, access sample CVs and gather details of how to build an online portfolio of work. Notes on classroom etiquette and use of the Internet were also available and there were links to library resources. Most of the NQ course materials were available in electronic format, which was particularly useful for students who worked off campus. Links to commercially-produced online training materials

and Internet resources allowed students to access these at a time and place that was suitable to their own needs. The range of support materials included notes on web design and information on the use of digital and video cameras. The website contained a good range of photographs, music and video clips which could be downloaded and used in projects. It also served as a useful virtual tour of the creative technologies area and provided information on options available to prospective students. Late entrants received a virtual induction through the website. This comprehensive and widely-used resource benefited a wide range of learners.

Lauder College staff had worked with Babcock Engineering Services and the Ministry of Defence to develop a very comprehensive mentor handbook. Babcock employees used this handbook to enhance their support for new Modern Apprenticeship trainees and for continuing apprentices who were moving from one phase of their training to another. A very well-structured set of guidance notes and procedures ensured that the key aims of the apprenticeship system were achieved. Learners obtained a consistently high level of work-based learning experience carefully mapped to the VQ standards to be achieved. They also raised their awareness of the culture of the company employing their services. The handbook contributed significantly to the effectiveness of learners' transition into the workplace environment.

Cardonald College developed the concept of 'Online Guidance 24:7' to improve guidance for students on less conventional modes of study. It had received financial support from the European Social Fund to produce a promotional CD-ROM and had created a system of online support. Staff issued all infill students with a card at induction, which gave them a named guidance contact in their division and the e-mail address for 'Online Guidance 24:7'. The college had established a team of four advisers, who each had a PC at home with access to the college's e-mail system. It arranged staff cover for evenings, weekends and holiday periods, and students received a response to their enquiries within 24 hours. The advisers had specialist expertise in finance, careers and learning support. The frequency of enquiries had varied, but on average '24:7' was handling around 20 e-mails per week, including four or five over the weekend period. Students benefited from the support given.