



FE Transition Project – Creating Independent Learners

**Final project report for
The North Forum
for Widening Participation in Higher Education**

**Prof. John McClatchey and Karen Manson
2007**

FOREWORD

The North Forum for Widening Participation in Higher Education is one of four Regional Forums for Wider Access in Scotland, which are funded by the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education. It was set up in late 1999.

The Forum is a partnership of all of the Colleges and Higher Education Institutions in the North of Scotland (i.e. the local authority areas of Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Highland, Eilean Siar, Shetland and Orkney) and other organisations that are interested and involved in lifelong learning, including local authorities. A full membership list is set out at the back of this report.

The Forum's mission statement is: "to work in partnership to increase the number of people from under-represented groups in the North of Scotland who progress on to higher education and to work together to reduce barriers to progression between education sectors."

The overarching aim of the Forum is to develop a strategy to increase the number of people in the North of Scotland from under-represented groups who participate in higher education (i.e. advanced courses and above) and to implement this strategy through a defined work programme. This work programme is made up of projects that are either commissioned by the Executive Group or are the result of bids from partner institutions or organisations.

The Forum works to fulfil its strategy through a work programme that concentrates on three key areas; communities, schools and transitions. This project relates to the transitions area of the Forum's work and it was identified as a priority by the Transitions Sub Group that the Forum set up in 2005. The purpose of the project is to research good practice in relation to independent learning and then to assess the degree to which this good practice has been adopted within Colleges. The report makes recommendations and suggests practical steps that can be taken to improve the situation within Colleges. The development of independent learning skills is vital because these skills are so fundamental in enabling people to take on future lifelong learning opportunities and are a particularly important element of preparing students for the transition to study at an HEI.

The Forum will be considering the recommendations carefully as it develops the work programme for 2007/08 and beyond.

Rob Wallen, Chair, North Forum
March 2007

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Executive Summary

Further Education colleges play a major role in post-16 education both in terms of delivering vocational qualifications and in providing higher education, particularly at HNC and HND level. Increasingly it is recognised that learning is important throughout life and many employers send staff to colleges for vocational or further training.

While traditional didactic approaches are still used, increasingly it is recognised that learners need to become more responsible for their own learning and that developing independent learners is important.

The North Forum requested colleges to bid to undertake a project that would investigate the creation of independent learners within further education and as a result of that bidding process Shetland College was requested to undertake this study.

The study set a number of specific aims which were to identify:

- why independent learning is being developed and delivered;
- whether and to what extent it can be developed at all levels and in all subjects;
- what barriers there are to its development including the issue of core skills development;
- how successful has it been; and
- to make recommendations about the development of independent learning.

In order to undertake the investigation a total of 12 colleges were included within the study, the colleges being chosen to provide a representative sample of large urban, medium sized urban/rural colleges and remote colleges across Scotland.

Although colleges in England and Wales could also have been included within the study, there are difference between Scotland and the rest of the country, particularly with regard to the provision of HNC and HNDs, the numbers of which are declining sharply outside Scotland, possibly due to the development of Foundation degrees. It was therefore felt that the study should be limited to Scottish colleges.

Independence in learning was apparent in some programmes in all of the colleges involved in this study, sometimes as part of a clear college-wide strategy while in others as a result of the initiative of individual teaching staff or sections within a college. A successful example was in a college where there was a pedagogical strategy that encompassed the development of independence in learning as a key element within the strategy which was based on a blended learning approach.

The investigation showed that in all colleges, the development of independence in learning was in response to the perceived needs of the students and many staff highlighted that students at all levels benefited from being able to learn independently, irrespective of the level of their programmes.

In a number of cases the provision of opportunities for students who could not readily come to the college campus was noted as being important, particularly in the case of those who were remote from the college. Although this was an important driver in the case of some programmes at remote colleges, it was not necessarily the main strategic driver at remote colleges and there were some large urban colleges in which provision for remote students was important in the case of some programmes.

The methodological approach was through the use of semi-structured interviews with college staff and the use of focus groups of students. A deliberate choice was made to interview staff from four different groups which were: senior managers, teaching staff involved in developing and/or delivering independent learning, staff not involved in independence in learning and senior support staff.

A total of 81 staff were interviewed, the largest number of whom were teachers involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning across 18 different subjects.

A total of 13 student focus groups were held with a typical group size of five to six.

In the case of e-learning, the importance of having high quality materials was highlighted and it was noted that as much use as possible should be made of materials that are available through consortia or subscription and also of freely available materials on the web.

It was noted that it was crucial that such materials were carefully reviewed and where necessary adapted before use. In addition, in the case of web-based e-learning materials, because of the rate of change in the amount of and links to web-based materials there was an issue about what time was needed to review and update those materials.

The study found that staff valued the benefits students gained from having some independence in their learning and that they felt that students had found it of value, particularly those who went on to HE. Importantly, the vast majority of the students themselves noted that they had not only benefited from undertaking independent learning but they had enjoyed the experience. It was also apparent that independence in learning could be developed at all levels although there was a general consensus that more support for learners was needed at lower levels

In the case of e-learning, the study found that it was an important component of independent learning within colleges but that there were many examples of independent learning which were not based on e-learning. It was found that e-learning was best developed where there was the availability of learning technologists who could support academic staff as there was a particular skill set in developing academic material into high quality e-learning materials. It was noted that this would pose a challenge for smaller colleges which may have less flexibility within their budgets, yet in the case of remote colleges (which are all small) there may be a greater need to develop flexible e-learning programmes.

As well as providing some detail about the type of development which had proved successful, the study made a number of recommendations about how best to develop independence in learning.

These recommendations included:

- Developing a clear college-wide pedagogical strategy that addresses why independence in learning is being developed.
- Staff development is vital for independence in learning to be developed successfully
- Champions can help encourage other staff to become involved.
- Independence should be developed for students on courses at SCQF levels 4-6 as well as above as employers will expect students to have the ability to learn on the job without much supervision.
- Prepare student contracts to clarify expectations of what they have to do and what response (such as how quickly they should expect a reply to an e-mail) they can expect from tutors.
- It is important to monitor student involvement (ie whether they are actually accessing and using the materials – this can be done easily in most VLEs but also applies to paper-based activities) and whether they are enjoying what they are doing.
- Make use of materials/software already developed through consortia (eg COLEG, NLN), which are already available, and consider using good commercial materials which are often of high quality.
- Do not just use electronic notes. Independent learning is better supported by interactivity using software, quizzes, self-assessed questions. This can be interactive software (for example for automotive engineering) or materials designed through a package such as CourseGenie.

Developing independence in learning would therefore appear to be worthwhile for all levels of FE and that it would certainly assist in the transition from FE College to an HEI. It would also appear that there are no educational or other reasons why independence in learning should not be developed, despite the reluctance of some academic staff to become involved.

Acknowledgements

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Creating Independent Learners in Further Education

1. Introduction

The SFEFC (2004) in reviewing student learning in Scottish Further Education (FE) Colleges noted that educationalists regarded developing the independence of students is as an important part of the educational process stating that:

“... a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning can help people to be more independent. This independence is seen as equally important for all learners, regardless of their previous achievements.”

Colleges of further education play a major role in post-16 education. The LSDA (2005) suggested that FE provision in England might be characterised under four broad types of learning:

- Skills for employability and inclusion
- Skills for (productivity and) economic competitiveness
- Learning for personal interest, well-being and development
- Learning underpinning community regeneration and neighbourhood renewal

This is not dissimilar from what the SFEFC (2004a) noted was involved in teaching and learning in FE colleges in Scotland in that it:

“... involves preparing learners for employment and citizenship, improving their ability to function within the economy and to contribute effectively to the wider social and cultural environment. It also involves motivating a wide cross-section of our society to become lifelong learners, equipped with core skills which enable them to adapt to change and enhance their own quality of life.”

Although the purposes of FE provision are clearly similar across the UK, the LSDA (2005) did note that in England, although higher education in FE colleges is mainly at levels below first degree level, some HE institutions in England also offer sub-degree programmes (generally Higher National qualifications but increasing numbers of Foundation Degrees are now being offered). This contrasts with Scotland where HNC and HND programmes are the preserve of FE colleges and the Higher Education sector has no significant involvement in sub-degree qualifications.

The SCQF framework also provides a contrast with England as there is a much clearer mapping of the level of HNC and HND against university degree programmes with the HNC being equivalent to year 1 and the HND to year 2 of a four year honours degree. The three year honours degree programmes in England do not allow such a clear equivalence and the situation has been further confused by the advent of Foundation degrees (which are not offered in Scotland).

The SFEFC (2004a) noted that:

“there are distinctive and evolving requirements for teachers in providing guidance, monitoring and feedback for learners who are learning off campus on flexible and distance learning programmes.”

Developing independent learners is thus a key issue for colleges to address if they are involved in such programmes.

As FE colleges play such a major role in post-16 education, it is timely that this investigation, funded by the North Forum, has undertaken an examination of what development of independent learning is taking place in FE Colleges.

The North Forum intended that the project would identify good practice in developing students' independent learning skills, consider the issue of SCQF level in relation to the development of independence and of core skills and whether the development of independence in learning would enhance colleges' capacity to support remote learners.

Given that context, the study set a number of specific aims which were to identify:

- why independent learning is being developed and delivered;
- whether and to what extent it can be developed at all levels and in all subjects;
- what barriers there are to its development including the issue of core skills development;
- how successful has it been; and
- to make recommendations about the development of independent learning.

In commenting on the specific aims the project also intended to meet some specific objectives outlined in the original guidance for bidders issued by the North Forum.

These objectives can be summarised as:

- examine how programmes are designed to support the development of independent learners
- examine how colleges progressively structure programmes to encourage independence
- examine how colleges deliver core skills within the programmes
- evaluate the extent to which Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and e-portfolios are used; and,
- report on good practice.

2. Independent learning

In a study more than 16 years ago, Jordan and Yeomans (1991) noted that there is no single definition of independent learning. They noted that different terms were used, sometimes interchangeably and listed independent study, contract learning, open learning, distance learning, supported self-study, flexible learning, experiential learning and self-managed learning as examples of those terms.

There still appears to be no single definition but independence in learning has also be attributed to e-learning and blended learning which should therefore be added to Jordan and Yeoman's (1991) list.

As a consequence it was decided to take a broad definition of independence in learning that would encompass all of the types of approach suggested by Jordan and Yeomans (1991) and would include the use of blended and e-learning.

As e-learning has had a considerable prominence in recent years (eg SFEFC, 2004b; SFEU, 2004; Timmins and Cai, 2005; BECTA, 2006; Sharpe et al 2006) it was decided that it would be made explicit that independent learning was not synonymous with e-learning and that the latter was only one of many applications of independence in learning.

All staff participants were sent background briefing notes about the project and those notes included the following statement about independent learning:

“With regard to the project, a wide definition of independence in learning has been adopted. It can range from distance learning, open learning, e-learning through to study packs but the underlying assumption is that students are required to take some responsibility for their own learning and that there is a reduction in class contact or at least a revision to the approach to teaching to take account of the greater student responsibility for their own learning.”

This statement was re-iterated at the start of each interview to ensure all participants were reminded of the broad definition being used.

3. Study design

3.1 Initial design

A number of possible approaches to the study were considered in the initial design phase. It was recognised that some of the information could be in the form of simple questions in which case the use of questionnaires would be appropriate.

The response rate to questionnaires is however typically relatively low and even when issued by significant national organisations the response rate is not much better (for example 27% for Golden et al 2006 who were undertaking research for NFER on behalf of DfES, or 31% for BECTA, 2006).

It was felt that it would be unlikely that a response of better than 15% would be obtained for a study such as this. In addition, it was felt that respondents would most likely be those who were very committed to independence in learning and as a result there would be a bias in the responses.

As well as wishing to avoid bias in the responses, the investigation wished to elicit information from a range of staff groups and from students. Ensuring that a questionnaire survey reached a sufficient sample of each group would also be very problematic, especially in the case of students from whom a very low response rate would be expected.

It was therefore decided that a number of colleges would be visited and that a range of staff would be interviewed. In the case of students, it was felt that the best approach would be through the use of focus groups which would provide an opportunity to meet a range of students without excessive use of interviewer time which it was felt should be directed towards interviewing college staff. In addition, the use of focus groups enabled the timetabling of meetings which facilitated the attendance by students.

3.2 Choice of sample colleges

While it would have been possible to include colleges throughout the United Kingdom, as noted earlier, the Scottish Further Education sector has a more clearly defined role than that elsewhere in the UK.

The first decision was therefore to limit the choice of colleges to those funded by the Scottish Funding Council.

Although the FE sector in Scotland has a more clearly defined role, there is a substantial range of college size and of the local communities they serve.

The simplest approach in terms of size is to use the SFC published data regarding the Weighted Student Unit of Measurement (WSUMs) allocation to each college. The SFC (2005) allocations show a huge range of WSUMs per college from 4,764 (Orkney College) to 142,714 (Aberdeen College; strictly James Watt College is slightly larger with a WSUMs allocation of 149,113 but as James Watt College is a college of further and higher education it was excluded from the survey).

With that range of size of college it is possible to classify colleges as large urban, medium sized urban/rural (some medium sized urban colleges also have a substantial rural catchment), and remote colleges.

In choosing the colleges to be included in the survey it was felt important that there was some representation from each of those latter three groups.

A number of colleges were contacted and 12 colleges were eventually included in the survey. These are listed in Table 1 and include four large urban colleges, five medium urban colleges and three remote colleges. It was felt that the choice of these colleges would ensure that any issues related to the development of independent learning and size of college would be identified.

Table 1 Participating colleges

Name	SFC WSUMs 2005-06	Type
Aberdeen	142,714	Large urban
Dundee	100,444	Large urban
Stevenson	84,689	Large urban
Lauder	84,569	Large urban
Banff and Buchan	36,665	Medium urban/rural
Dumfries	36,662	Medium urban/rural
Perth	31,553	Medium urban/rural
Cumbernauld	28,953	Medium urban/rural
Moray	24,951	Medium urban/rural
North Highland ¹	17,188	Remote
Lews Castle	8,432	Remote
Orkney	4,764	Remote

¹ The North Highland College receives an additional allocation of 3,750 WSUMs for provision in Argyll but that provision is delivered locally in Argyll.

The inclusion of Moray College in the medium urban group was taken for a number of reasons:

- a) Moray College is one of the three largest colleges within UHI Millennium Institute
- b) Elgin has a population of nearly 21,000 and Moray district a population of 86,940
- c) The population of the Shetland Islands, Orkney Islands and the Western Isles, plus the population of Thurso and Wick combined is less than the population of Moray District
- d) The North Highland College is based in Thurso, which has a population of 9,200 (less than half that of Elgin)

It would therefore appear that Moray College has more in common with colleges such as Banff and Buchan College (serving the Districts of Buchan and Banff and Buchan with a combined population of 74,653).

It is also of note that the higher education provision in the colleges that are partners in the UHI Millennium Institute (Moray, North Highland, Lews Castle and Orkney colleges) do not have higher education provision within their WSUMs allocations as their higher education funding comes through UHI Millennium Institute. Adding the higher education element (by the equivalent number of WSUMs) would increase the size of Moray College to similar to that of Cumbernauld College. This would put the difference in size between the smallest medium urban/rural college (either Moray including its HE by the equivalent in terms of WSUMs, or Cumbernauld) and the largest (Banff and Buchan, as measured by WSUMs) at less than 27%.

The North Highland College is classed as a remote college and even if the higher education component was added (at the equivalent of what it would be in terms of WSUMs), it would still be 35% smaller than the smallest college in the medium urban/rural college group (as measured by WSUMs).

The smallest of the large urban group of colleges is more than twice as large as the largest medium urban/rural college (as measured by WSUMs).

This selection of colleges therefore provides a useful sample within and across the size range of Scotland's colleges.

3.3 Interviewees

As noted earlier, it was decided that the methodological approach would include interviews conducted with a range of staff.

Although the largest group of staff to be interviewed would be the lecturing staff, it was felt important that opinions were also elicited from senior managers, who will be leading or at least supporting the development of independent learning.

It was also believed that it would be useful to interview a number of senior support staff as they may also have an important input into the development of independent learning.

These senior support staff could include librarians, learning technologists, IT staff or staff providing supervision within Learning Centres.

Within the lecturing staff, it was also decided that while the bulk of the interviews would be with those who have had some involvement in developing and/or delivering independence in learning, some interviews would be held with staff who were not involvement in developing or delivering independence in learning.

The design therefore included interviews with four groups of staff: senior managers, senior support staff, lecturers involved with independence in learning and lecturers with no involvement with independence in learning.

In addition, it was also thought that it would be helpful to elicit students' views on independence in learning and that this would be done through small focus groups to be held at the colleges.

The initial contact with the college was in most cases with the principal (in two cases it was with an assistant principal) who was asked whether the college would be prepared to be involved in the study.

As noted earlier, a clear statement was made about the definition of independence in learning as it was believed that given the encouragement to colleges to develop e-learning (see for example SFEU, 2004), it was important to clarify that although it was appropriate to include e-learning within the range of work that could be classified as independence in learning, the study was not solely concerned with e-learning. It was therefore made clear to colleges that the study was keen to learn of the successful development of any type of independence in learning.

In most cases, the college principal assigned the task of liaison to an assistant principal and those individuals were informed of the four groups of staff the study would like to interview. While ideally there would be at least one member of staff from each group interviewed at each college, this was not always possible (for example one college had a learning in teaching strategy that included independence in learning which all teaching staff had to work towards), but a reasonable sample was obtained for each of the four groups across the 12 colleges.

A total of 81 staff were interviewed across the 12 colleges. Although the number of teaching staff not involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning is quite low, their responses were quite similar which suggests that they did provide a fair sample of that group. However the study made no attempt to assess the proportions of teaching staff in each college who are and who are not involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning.

Table 2 Number of staff participants in each category

Senior Staff	Senior Support Staff	Teaching Staff Involved	Teaching Staff Not Involved
12	11	52	6

It was left to the colleges to select staff to be interviewed and it is accepted that there is the potential for bias in the college's selection. However, it was hoped that the existence of four different groups, would encourage colleges to try and select staff who would be interested to be involved with the study and who would provide a representative range of views. Colleges were also asked to select students who had experience of independent learning to take part in a focus group.

Not all colleges arranged student focus groups but a total of 13 groups were seen from 10 colleges, with a typical group size of five to six students.

The staff selected by the colleges covered a wide range of subjects and there was no clear difference between the subjects taught by those staff involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning as compared to those who were not involved.

The list of subjects included:

- a) Accounting
- b) Art and Design
- c) Beauty Therapy
- d) Business
- e) Child and Youth Studies including Childcare
- f) Computing and IT
- g) Construction including Painting and Decorating
- h) Engineering
- i) English and Communication
- j) Health and Social Care
- k) Land Use
- l) Management
- m) Mathematics
- n) Rural Studies
- o) Science
- p) Social Studies
- q) Sport
- r) Sustainable Development

3.4 Interview methodology and ethical considerations

Conducting interviews takes considerable skill, particularly interpersonal skills and it is important that the interviewer can maintain the interest of the interviewee and be adaptable to particular circumstances. A list of the skills required is given by Powney and Watts (1987).

There are a number of approaches which can be taken from highly structured interviews of the type used by market researchers to free ranging interviews. McDowell (2002) for example chose to use an open conversational style of interviewing while Barak (2004) and Sharpe et al (2006) used semi-structured interviews. Structured or semi-structured interviews will use a topic list, the former having a fairly prescriptive approach while the latter type of interview allows for greater discursive conversation while still keeping to a set of topics that are to be covered during the course of the interview.

For the purposes of this study it was believed that a semi-structured approach with a topic list would prove most useful. The topics would be posed as open questions to allow opportunities for the interviewees to discuss the issues concerned.

Taking notes of the conversation taking place during the course of the interview is difficult and therefore it was decided to adopt the approach of Sharpe et al (2006) in which the interviews were recorded and transcribed later. This ensures a complete record is kept of each interview and allows for transcribe points to be re-checked at a later date.

Recording of the interviews also allows a greater opportunity for the interviewer to be involved, to some extent, in the issue under discussion. This is something which is felt to be important for qualitative research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Woods, 1996).

However, recording of interviews does present potential ethical issues and therefore all participants were offered the opportunity to refuse to be recorded (only one person out of a total of 81 interviewees took up that opportunity). In addition, each person was informed that the recording would only be kept until the project had been completed at which time all the recording would be erased.

In addition, it was also made clear to all interviewees that at no stage would any individual be identified and neither would the individual college to which any anonymised response related be identified. The colleges were further informed that other than listing them as taking part in the study, all comments related to colleges would be anonymised.

It was noted that if there was a particular example of good practice that was noted, the college concerned might be contacted to ask whether it would like to be identified in that specific instance, but that the standard practice would be for all examples to be anonymous.

3.5 Interview topic list

In preparing the initial list of topics for discussion, it was recognised that it would be appropriate to have slightly different lists for each of the four groups (senior managers, lecturing staff involved in independent learning, senior support staff and lecturers not involved in independence in learning).

Similar to the approach taken by Sharpe et al (2006) the visit to the first of the colleges provided an opportunity to pilot the semi-structured interviews.

After evaluating the first set of interviews some minor changes to the set of topics for each group and the development of a larger set of more specific topics for which information would be obtained through the interviews. This was done as it was felt best that the open nature of the questions would elicit the information required but that in some instances further supplementary questions might be used.

The key issues of interest were:

- a) what were the drivers for developing independence in learning,
- b) was the development part of the college strategy,
- c) was induction/introduction to being an independent learner important,
- d) whether level of study or maturity of the students was an issue,
- e) what use was being made of external materials (paper or electronic materials),
- f) what barriers there were to developing independence in learning,
- g) what changes had been made to the delivery of the curriculum ,
- h) what advice would be offered about the development of independent learning,
- i) whether the development had reduced or changed the type of class contact,
- j) what support staff needed to assist in developing independent learning,
- k) whether e-learning was playing an important role and how it was being used,
- l) how students felt about being independent learners, and,
- m) whether it was felt to be worthwhile and would be recommended to others.

Core skills development was also an issue but it was felt that core skills issues would be picked up under topics (c), (f), (g) and (h).

The full sets of questions for each group of staff are given in Appendix 1 and the full list of specific topics in Appendix 2. The relationship between the full sets of questions, the specific topic list and the key issues is noted in Appendix 3. Appendix 3 shows that in number of instances more than one question and specific topic is related to an individual key issue. That was a deliberate part of the methodological approach as it was hoped that within each interview it would be possible to confirm the consistency of an individual's responses by returning to the same issue in separate questions.

As noted earlier, in addition to the interviews, focus groups were held with groups of students from the colleges. These focus groups typically lasted for one hour and no member of the college staff was present at the meetings. The colleges were asked to arrange for a group of students to act as a focus group and it was made clear that those students should have experienced some form of independence in learning during their time at the college.

The discussion in the focus groups was deliberately free ranging but the key issues which were raised included:

- how their courses were organised,
- what sort of independent work did they undertake,
- whether there was an induction/introduction on how to undertake such tasks,
- what tutor support was available for the independent learning,
- an estimate of the time spent on independent tasks,
- whether they enjoyed independent work,
- whether they used a VLE and if so for what, and,
- what use, if any, they made of e-discussion boards.

Focus groups were held at ten of the twelve colleges and at three colleges, meetings were held with two separate focus groups.

4. Interview responses

This section reviews the responses under each of the topics listed in Section 3.4 (a - m). The review concentrates on the responses from the lecturing staff involved in developing and/or delivering programmes that include elements of independence in learning. However, where appropriate responses from senior support staff and senior management staff will be included but more attention to those comments will be included in the following discussion section (Section 6) to highlight how they reinforce, add to, or contradict, responses from the lecturing staff.

In a similar way, responses from lecturing staff not involved in developing or delivering programmes that include elements of independence in learning will also be included in the discussion section (Section 6).

4.1 What were the drivers for developing independence in learning?

A number of themes emerge from the responses. Of note is that quite a number related to issues concerned with pedagogy. These included improving performance, increasing enjoyment and developing the students.

A number of staff noted that developing independence was important as it was a skill that employers were looking for and that it would prepare students for the transition to university.

In terms of performance one member of staff noted the aim was to ensure students would properly read study packs and actually do the learning activities while another noted that students learn better through independence learning rather than a didactic approach. Other staff made not dissimilar comments.

Another issue highlighted by a number of staff was the opportunity independence in learning gave to allow students to work at their own pace and also to assist them if they had missed sessions through illness.

It was also noted that students entering further education seemed to expect to be “spoon-fed” (a phrase used by a significant number of staff). One member of staff commented that despite having the message from schools that they were developing independence in learning, the students did not appear to have any such skills. That member of staff noted that it may be because the schools are teaching to assessment and as a result any real independence was not being developed.

In some cases staff recognised the need to develop more independence as a consequence of the geographical area they were trying to serve (this was not just the case in remote college class). This was also one of the drivers commonly noted by senior support staff.

An interesting observation was that only a few staff gave a management directive as the prime reason for the development of independence in learning. It therefore appears that independence in learning is being developed for what staff see as good educational reasons.

It is also of note that many of the senior managers also noted that although there was a college strategy to develop independence in learning, the prime driver for the development in their colleges was the educational needs of the students.

4.2 Was the development part of the college strategy?

Only a few staff did not consider that the development of independence in learning was not part of an overall strategic thrust within their colleges.

There was one instance in which a college senior manager did suggest the development of independence in learning was not an explicit college strategy, but despite that, some staff in that college believed that it was part of the strategy. There were also a very few staff in some other colleges who did not think the development of independence in learning was part of an overall college strategy, when a senior manager had made it clear that it was part of the strategic development of the college. Therefore while most teaching staff were aware of their college's strategy in this area, it would appear that some staff are not as well informed as they should be and there may be a need to reinforce the dissemination of college's strategic developments.

Senior support staff were all of the view that the development of independence in learning was part of the colleges' strategic development.

Only a very few staff expressed any reservations about the college strategy for developing independence in learning, and those that did indicated they felt the development was for economic reasons. One of those members of staff explicitly stated that there was a feeling that the college wished to reduce the number of lecturers.

It should be noted however, that in those few colleges where one member of staff had expressed reservations about the development of independence in learning, there were other staff who were positive about its benefits.

4.3 Was induction/introduction to being an independent learner important?

An induction to independence in learning was noted as being provided by the majority of lecturers. This fits with research such as that by Cukras (2005) who noted that students needed to be developed to become independent learners. More than twice as many staff provided an induction than those who stated that they did not, and of those who did the vast majority staged some of that induction over a period of time to ensure the development of independence in learning became embedded as part of the approach students were taking to their studies.

In some cases there was no formal induction to independence in learning but there was some staged development over time.

Again the issue of recent school leavers having limited abilities to be independent was raised and it was noted that independence had to be built up over time.

Another issue that was raised was that there can be insufficient screening of the candidates skills as an independent learner as it is important to identify those learners who will find it difficult to become independent.

One approach was that in the induction students were asked to think of their learning styles for discussion in tutorials. Students were then set tasks to help develop their skills according to their needs.

Students were for example pointed to things they can do in the self-access centre and are given guidance on where they can get information on communication (for example pronunciation and grammar), numeracy and developing ICT skills.

4.4 Whether level of study or maturity of the students was an issue?

About twice as many staff felt that the level of study was not an issue in whether students could be developed to be independent learners.

A number of staff noted that it was easier to develop HN level students to be independent, however, it was also noted that some HN students who come straight from school have had a poor experience there. Such students are not ready to be independent learners and require their ability to be independent to be developed.

Some staff commented that independence in learning should be fostered in all students, irrespective of level and one person even commented that it was also possible to develop it in younger children.

Although the majority of staff did not think level of study was an issue, close to three quarters felt that it was harder to develop independence in learning in school leavers rather than in more mature students. Some staff noted that it seemed necessary to “spoon feed” younger students.

Some staff did comment younger students did appear to find adapting to using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) easier than more mature students. It was noted that adults became concerned if they could not log on to the system immediately while the younger students were less worried by such technical hitches. However, the majority of staff felt that adults quickly became confident in using a VLE and some noted that once more mature students were confident they tended to be more thorough in their approach to the work.

4.5 What use was being made of external materials (paper or electronic materials)?

The vast majority of staff who were interviewed did indicate that they made use of externally developed materials to support the development and/or delivery of independent learning.

Colleges Open Learning Exchange Group (COLEG) materials were mentioned as being of some use by a large number of staff as were National Learning Network (NLN) materials. Some other externally developed teaching materials (in paper and electronic format) were also mentioned.

It was noted that the Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) materials were generally less useful than those produced by NLN as the LTS materials had a strong school focus and were therefore less useful in a further education context.

Some colleges used set textbooks and developed additional notes and some also developed activities on the VLE.

A number of staff commented that some COLEG materials needed to be adapted (which in some cases was difficult) and that some went out of date quickly (particularly computing).

Some materials were used as back-up notes, during class sessions as well as for independent work and whether used in class, or independently outside class, both externally developed materials and those developed in-house were used in both paper and electronic forms.

4.6 What barriers there were to developing independence in learning?

Staff issues were a concern for a number of respondents. Time for staff to develop independent learning and learning materials was an issue and in the case of e-learning it was noted that sometimes teaching staff were not the best people to produce them. It was noted that staff confidence is important as some staff find it difficult to give up control and there is a culture in Further Education that staff need to be in front of a class. One lecturer noted that the biggest issue was “buy-in” from staff.

Another point which was raised was the response of the students and it was important to ensure the students were motivated.

It was noted by some staff that certain students just wanted to be shown how to do things and did not wish to work independently. Students need to accept that the work is not all done in class and that activity outside class is part of the programme. This reinforced the issue about providing good induction and the development of skills for independence in learning.

It was also noted that for good students, being independent worked well, but that the weaker students needed additional support in order to be successful. Some staff commented that it was beneficial to put stronger students with weaker ones to work on some activities although it was noted that it was important to know the student group well as there could be personality clashes, something that was also true of group work.

One commonly reported barrier related to technology. A particular problem was students working at home as their PCs may not have the necessary software (eg MS Word or MS Excel).

Another issue was that in the case of those using a PC at their place of work some organisational firewalls made it difficult for students to access chat rooms and the college VLE (often public rather than private sector organisation firewalls). Adult students were also likely to be more frustrated if technology did not work first time.

Some technological issues related to induction as it was crucial that students were given an induction and that the induction was still available to those who had missed an induction session. A number of staff raised issues that might be summarised as being that it is important to ensure students have the skills and knowledge to do the things they are being asked to do independently.

4.7 What changes had been made to the delivery of the curriculum?

A number of staff noted that sessions were less structured with more student interaction and that there was less of the lecturer standing in front of the class. One lecturer suggested that even didactic sessions were not so much about passing information as being reflective and more interactive.

It would also appear that there was more group work being undertaken in programmes that had introduced independence in learning.

Variety in the range of activities was important as was the inclusion of self-reflection and formative assessment within the materials. Materials developed elsewhere (eg COLEG, NLN) were commonly used but these were reviewed and adapted if required before use.

Some staff noted they used shorter sessions with students then going to do directed work or to find information that was reviewed at the start of the next taught session.

One challenge for teaching staff was that in working independently, students individually or in groups, would be going at different paces. Some staff noted that it was therefore important to design, plan and structure the work well.

An interesting point made by some staff was that the use of on-line materials or materials on the VLE has meant that less paper is being used and that fewer handouts were being given but there were more worksheets.

Having materials on the VLE also meant students did not come to staff for copies of material if they had missed a session and that there was less opportunity for students to forget to bring materials to sessions.

One comment was that students can resist being independent and expect the tutor to do everything for them and give them handouts. One approach to overcoming this was to create some sort of teamwork early on. This work could be a game rather than a learning challenge but the students had work together and began think for themselves.

In the case of skills it was noted by some staff that the issue is how to get students up to speed although it was noted that there can be a similar issue with a traditional educational approach. Those students that need to have more skill development need require support and it was noted that it is important to recognise that need early enough.

4.8 What advice would be offered about the development of independent learning?

As noted before, many lecturers noted that preparing students though good induction was crucial to the successful development of independence in learning and that it was important not to expect students to be independent learners immediately. Some staff noted that it was important to make clear what was expected of the students from the start.

The importance of monitoring what students were doing was highlighted by many staff. In the case of group work such as problem-based learning, it was noted that some students could rely on others to do the work and it was important to check what they had done.

It was noted that it was important to set clear tasks, particularly when using a VLE and that students should be set tasks that allow for fairly frequent assessment to ensure progress is being checked.

A number of staff commented that it was important to recognise the length of time it takes to prepare materials for use on a VLE. One lecturer noted that material that took 10-15 hours to develop and was planned to last for three hours, was actually completed by the students in 50 minutes. It was also important to design self-reflection and formative assessment into independent learning and interactivity, particularly in the case of e-learning.

While fostering independence is important, it was noted that moving too fast from a supported environment can be a challenge as some students find the transition to being an independent learner difficult. It was suggested that independence should be introduced gradually with support from a member of staff.

Another approach was to try and encourage classes to learn from each other. The example was given of one group of mainly young girls who had left school (some having left school early). They were put into small groups and each group chose one area of the curriculum out of five to work on which they study and then report back to the whole group. That approach proved successful.

4.9 Whether the development had reduced or changed the type of class contact?

Opinions about whether there had been a reduction in class contact were divided, although a majority did believe that there had been some reduction. It should be noted that in the interviews with staff they were asked to make a judgement about the overall contact with the students rather than simply formal class contact.

This is important as students who are working on independent learning tasks may have less time in class but staff can expect more individual queries from students.

A few staff noted that there had been an overall erosion of class contact for all programmes, irrespective of whether they included independent learning. The development of independence in learning in a few cases was therefore viewed as a response to a cut in class contact hours rather than an outcome.

One person suggested that contact was less in programmes with significant amounts of independence in learning for groups with fewer than 20 students at which point there was little difference. The same person noted that for groups with more than 20 students there was likely to be an incremental increase in contact for each extra student.

This idea was raised in later interviews with other staff and there was some agreement that overall class contact may well be related to the size of the class group for those programmes that had a large component of independence in learning.

Programmes with little or no independence in learning would be allocated the same number and length of timetabled sessions largely irrespective of class size (there may be some variation in the time allocated for practical sessions, particularly if there was a constraint on the numbers in a practical class).

Quite a number of staff commented that there had been a change from whole class contact but that tutorial or one-to-one contact had increased and so there was no overall change.

4.10 What support staff needed to assist in developing independent learning?

Staff development was noted as being important by a number of staff and included being shown what had been achieved elsewhere (both within the college and in other colleges). Time was also cited as being a key asset particularly time needed to allow development of independent learning and learning materials.

With regard to e-learning, the need for access to a learning technologist to support the development of e-learning materials was frequently noted as being important.

4.11 Whether e-learning was playing an important role and how it was being used?

The use of VLE and of e-learning was important to many of the staff who took part in the interviews, with the vast majority of staff noting that they made use of a VLE.

The need to include interactivity in e-learning was suggested as being an important aspect of the design and some staff highlighted that materials in the VLE should not just be electronic notes.

The need for consistency in approach was noted by some staff as it was felt important that there should be a college standard to which materials are produced.

It was noted that it was not necessary to produce materials with all the possible "bells and whistles" but that they should be of a high standard and should be appropriate to the student group for which they were being designed.

More than half of the teaching staff involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning made use of e-discussion groups and virtually all of those individuals were monitoring, moderating and contributing to those discussion groups. It was noted that active involvement in e-discussion groups could be time consuming.

There was frequent reference to the use of electronic resources available both free (on the internet) and through subscription and of the use of interactive software. It was noted that if good resources were available they should be used, although perhaps adapted, rather than developing new resources from scratch.

What was of note was that although some staff had arranged for students to submit queries and material through the VLE, it was noted that some VLEs did not readily allow for such an arrangement to be set up.

Where communication could not easily be set up through the VLE and in a number of other cases (including some in which communication could have been through the VLE) students were encouraged to use personal staff email addresses for contacting the tutors.

Some staff noted that they had email protocols that required students to put a course code in the subject line and that students were informed of how quickly they should expect a response.

When questioned, a number of staff recognised that the use of their personal email address could pose problems as student course related emails may be initially missed if the individual was receiving a substantial number of emails and the use within a VLE or establishing a specific course email address would assist in course record keeping.

A majority of staff noted that individual learning plans were not used (although a higher proportion of senior managers were of the opinion that ILPs were being used) but these were generally paper based. This difference could have arisen as in some cases the responsibility for ILPs was with guidance staff.

Only a few staff noted that they were making use of e-portfolios at this stage but a number indicated that they expected to develop e-portfolios in the future.

4.12 How students felt about being independent learners?

The majority of staff noted that they felt the students really enjoyed being independent learners.

In some cases it was noted that the students were unsure or did not like it at first but that by end of the unit/module they were positive about the experience.

A few staff did note that there were some groups of students who did not like being independent and in other cases there was an uneven reaction with some students in a group finding independence rewarding while others in the same group disliked it. In those cases where there was a mixed reaction from the group, quite often staff noted that younger students straight from school were less likely to enjoy independent learning than adults who had returned to education.

It was also noted that of those students who did not enjoy independent learning, it was more often the weaker students who held that opinion.

4.13 Whether it was felt to be worthwhile and would be recommended to others?

Virtually all the staff involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning felt it was worthwhile (this was true for teaching staff, senior support staff and for senior managers).

Nearly all of the teaching staff noted that they intended to develop independence in learning across all of their teaching (if they had not done so already) and only one lecturer felt that there was an area of work in which independence in learning would not be developed.

Some staff did note that it was more difficult to develop independence in learning in practical work yet a number of staff working in engineering noted that they had students who were successfully using software independently to support their practical programmes.

5. Student Focus Groups

Groups of students who had experienced some independence in learning were selected by the colleges and met with an investigator during visits to the colleges. The students the colleges selected came from a wide variety of subjects and levels (typically SCQF levels 4 to 9) and were both full and part time.

The students were asked about under what circumstances they worked independently and for the majority it was on their own or in groups out of class time although there were some students whose independent work took place during class time. For those who worked outside class time all noted that there were able to contact their tutors while they were working independently (contact included face-to-face meetings, telephone contact and contact by e-mail).

There appeared to be a range of time spent on independent learning tasks from one to two hours per task up to more than 10 hours per week.

The amount of time appeared to be related to the individual programme and did not appear to be related to their subject although those students studying at HN level were more likely to be undertaking a greater amount of independent work.

Independent work included tasks in the library, on the internet, on a VLE and using specific software as well as short investigations and project work. Some work was done individually and some in groups.

A majority of students taking part in the focus groups indicated that they were using a VLE but only a few focus groups included students who were making use of an e-discussion board.

A majority of students had been given an induction to independent learning and were given guidance about what was expected of them in undertaking independent learning tasks. There was also general agreement that their tutors were available for consultation about their independent learning tasks outside class sessions.

The students were also asked whether they enjoyed their independent learning and whether they would have preferred to have had a class session instead.

In response there was a very clear majority who noted that they enjoyed the independent learning, although some students stated that there were unsure at first but were pleased they had done it after they had gained some experience of independent learning. A majority also expressed that they would not have preferred to have had a classroom based session instead, although a very few noted the opposite or noted that they had no preference.

Overall it appeared that the students were generally very satisfied with undertaking independent learning and a number specifically stated that they found the blended learning on their programmes to be a very good experience.

6. Discussion

The study set out to examine:

- why independent learning is being developed and delivered;
- whether it can be developed at all levels and in all subjects;
- what barriers there are to its development;
- how successful has it been; and also,
- to make recommendations about the development of independent learning.

As well as these general aims, the original project brief outline from the North Forum set out a number of objectives which can be summarised as:

- to examine how programmes are designed to support the development of independent learners;
- to examine how colleges progressively structure programmes to encourage independence;
- to examine how college deliver core skills within the programmes; to evaluate the extent to which Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and e-portfolios are used; and,
- to report on good practice.

6.1 Why is independent learning being developed?

The discussion in section 4 indicated that in general the drive towards developing independent learning has arisen from issues related to learning and teaching.

These issues included access and inclusion, to build more individualised programmes of study that allow students to work at their own pace, to assist in the transition from SCQF level 6 or below to HN and from HN to university, to develop the skills of students to learn independently and to help support students who have missed sessions through illness or absence. It is perhaps of note that the benefit of helping with missed sessions was identified by Golden et al 2006 as a minor impact of e-learning in FE but it was mentioned by a number of respondents in this study.

Another aspect of access and inclusion was that where class contact was reduced for units or modules that made use of an approach that required more independent learning, it was possible to offer optional units or modules or even in some cases whole programmes that would otherwise have to be withdrawn due to limited recruitment. Withdrawing a whole programme would limit choices for students who could not easily enrol at another college and would certainly limit access for many adult learners. While limiting option choices may be less serious, it may still have an impact, again especially for an adult learner who does not have the opportunity to take units at another college. It is of note that the inability to offer a full range of options was highlighted by a large urban college so it is not just an issue for the smaller colleges.

With regard to the question of transition between levels, as expected it was commonly noted that developing independence would benefit those moving from HN to university.

In addition however, it was interesting to note that a number of staff highlighted that if more independence was built into HNs, there was also a need to do so in lower level programmes to avoid a sharp contrast between such courses and an HN level course.

It was also noted that adults wishing to enrol on an HN programme could benefit from the opportunity to undertake one or more initial units at a lower level which were flexible and based on independent learning.

6.2 Can independence in learning be developed at all levels and in all subjects?

In terms of the level of study, there were examples given by participants from all levels of study and as noted about twice as many staff felt the level was not an issue as compared to those who did. As there was no indication that the issue of level was subject based it would appear any concerns about level are related to the personal experience of an individual.

What was clearer, was that maturity of the students was an issue to a majority of the lecturing staff who expressed a concern (roughly three times the number of those who stated maturity was not an issue), although as many staff expressed no particular opinion as opposed to those who explicitly stated it was a problem

6.3 What barriers are there to the development of independence in learning?

Quite a number of participants noted that staff reluctance to develop independent learning was a key issue. This was confirmed in the interviews with those staff who were not involved in developing independence in learning.

Their views were largely that it was not possible in their subjects or with their students but they did concede that it would be possible to develop independence in learning in their subjects. Although they claimed that their students would not be able to be independent there were students at similar levels in the same college who were undertaking independent learning tasks.

A number of staff involved and some staff not involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning noted that there was concern that independence in learning developments would threaten jobs. However no-one expressed the view that independence had resulted in any job losses and in fact in some cases the increased flexibility had maintained or increased recruitment and therefore had helped protect jobs.

It was clear however that there was varying practice across colleges about how class contact was evaluated for those involved in programmes with independent learning. Some colleges had given additional timetable allocations for initial development of programmes and some had provided additional staff development.

Time for development was certainly something that staff had noted was important but some staff also suggested that class contact had been maintained despite the move to more independent learning as it had offered the opportunity to enhance quality.

There was also the issue of the need to check and up-date web-based materials, as links could change and the volume of material increased all the time.

The need for staff development was also highlighted by a number of interviewees as being an important issue in relation to the development of independence in learning and it was also noted by staff that the availability of learning technologists provided helpful support in the case of e-learning.

One issue that was raised by a number of teaching staff was that there may be issues related to software on the PCs of students working at home (eg MS Works rather than MS Word or MS Excel). This could be overcome in some cases by use of external access to a VLE as long as the students had broadband access (the availability of broadband had been an issue but was less so now).

A number of staff highlighted the difficulty of developing independence in practical work (and fieldwork). However there were examples in engineering of interactive software being used to provide practical training and it was noted that the use of such software reduced the time required in practical sessions.

Some staff noted that group work presented problems on programmes on which students were based at home or at learning centres remote from the main campus. The use of video conferencing could overcome some of the issues but although all colleges had access to VC, only those in the UHI Millennium Institute were confident users

While some examples of independent learning were class or learner centre based, there were elements of e-learning in quite a number of the programmes in which the staff interviewed were involved. It was noted by a number of staff that it was important that e-learning materials (and any independent learning tasks whether e-learning or not) should have interactivity built-in and should not be just an electronic version of paper based notes.

Some of those staff also noted that it was important that e-learning materials were of a high quality as they would be compared with commercially produced learning materials.

6.4 How successful has independence in learning been?

There were a wide range of successes noted by staff. These successes included the sense of achievement students felt at the end of their unit/programme, that the standard of work tends to be very high if the students take to independence and web-based activities which appeared to work well.

It was also noted that students have stated that they feel they have learned the work more thoroughly and better than would have been the case with a traditional approach, that it increases flexibility even for college based students who can feel a standard three hour session is too long, and that students become quite proud of what they can do on their own.

Importantly, staff feel that students are more confident about going on to university and feedback from students who have gone on to university is that what they gained at college was of great help and put them ahead of other university students.

One member of staff noted that they have regular feedback that students from the college who have gone on to university are often in the top group in their university classes.

Other positive comments made by staff include that it keeps students engaged in their course, it enriches their experience and that it is a useful skill to develop regardless of what they go on to do. It was noted by one person that it allows students to shine in a way that would not happen with traditional didactic teaching.

An important point is that the students themselves seem to value being developed as independent learners with all of the students in the focus groups noting that they enjoyed the independent learning approach and nearly all stating that they preferred the approach to that in a traditional class-based system.

6.5 How are programmes designed to support the development of independent learners?

As noted earlier, the planning and design of programmes are important if the development of independent learning is to be successful. This was especially true in the case of the design of the materials used to support independent learning.

Good induction and clarifications of expectations was frequently cited as being an important part of the design of successful programmes and another frequent comment was along the lines that it is important that independent learning is not simply a pack of notes (whether paper-based or electronic).

The importance of having interactive elements within the independent learning activities was highlighted and there need to be frequent opportunities for self-reflection and self-assessment. The use of quizzes was mentioned as a useful tool in the design of independent learner materials and having a variety of tasks and activities was also suggested as being important.

It was suggested by a number of staff that independent learning provided opportunities to develop communication between students both for peer support and for group work. In some cases specially designed software can be useful (for example to support certain practical work) as can the use of video for demonstrations.

An interesting point that was raised was the danger of creating confusion in students if there is not a consistent approach to the inclusion of independent learning. The example was given of some units being presented by a very traditional approach while others incorporate independent learning or alternatively individual staff adopting a very traditional approach while others on the same programme made use of an independent learning approach.

It was also commonly noted that it was important there were frequent opportunities for feedback from tutors as it was important that students were not left to work on their own for long periods without feedback. While some students

might cope with that, many would lack confidence and as a result they may drop out of the programme. This was true for college-based programmes as well as distance learning or e-learning programmes.

What was clear from the responses it that there is no single design for independent learning whether related to the type of course or to its SCQF level.

However, there did appear to be some general principles which could be summarised as:

- ensure the programme is planned designed and structured in an appropriate way for the individual programme and level.
- good induction and clarification of expectations is important
- design materials to support independent learning carefully to include interactivity and frequent opportunities both self-assessment and feedback from tutors

6.6 How do colleges progressively structure programmes to encourage independence?

There was no consistent approach to how colleges progressively structured programmes to encourage learners to be independent.

Some staff noted that the level of study was not an issue in terms of including independent learning activities. Some staff suggested that it was more a question of the individual cohort of students and their motivation while others suggested it the real issue was about the design of appropriate high quality materials rather than the level of study. It was also noted by some that it was more an issue of the individual topic than the level.

What did emerge was that in general colleges recognised that at lower SCQF levels (4 to 6) there was a need for independent learning tasks to be more straightforward and that more early feedback was required. It was also noted that more support was needed for students on lower level programmes and that those students would need more guidance to be kept on track. Ensuring motivation was encouraged and maintained was another issue but it was recognised that this was also true for traditional didactic programmes.

6.7 How colleges deliver core skills within the programmes?

The level of core skills was recognised as an issue for all programmes, whether traditional or designed to develop more independence in learning.

Some staff did comment that without appropriate core skills, students would find it difficult to act as independent learners but that was not a commonly raised problem. In fact virtually no mention was made of core skills as a constraint by lecturers involved in developing and/or delivering independence in learning in response to the question about level of course or in either perceived or actual barrier to the development of independence in learning. Some of the staff not involved with independence in learning did suggest that core skills might be an issue.

There was however a range of practice about how core skills were being delivered.

In some cases additional support was given in class while in others there was core skills development in addition to class sessions.

One core skills lecturer noted that she had actually designed additional independent learning activities for her students as she did not feel she could deliver the curriculum in the class time that she had been allocated.

What appeared to be a useful approach was that a specific assessment of core skills was held at the start of the course and students were then directed to appropriate support as required.

Interestingly, a number of colleges had developed a core skills programme that were actually based on independent learning rather than through didactic sessions. Often these were through computer based activities in open learning centres where there was support for students when they required it, although that support may not be from a lecturer but from learning support workers.

The delivery of core skills through such open learning centres could also be made available for remote or distance learning students and support could be given either at a learning centre in their local area, or by telephone, email or even by VC.

6.8 To what extent are ILPs and e-portfolios used?

As noted in section 4 (k), a majority of staff were not making use of ILPs. In some cases staff noted that ILPs were used by guidance or for special needs but not by them as subject lecturing staff.

A high proportion of senior college staff held the opinion that ILPs were used systematically but that could be consistent with the teaching staff responses as the senior college staff did not differentiate between whether ILPs were operated by guidance or teaching staff.

There did not appear to be a consistent approach to the use of ILPs. More of those teaching staff who did have involvement in the use of ILPs, noted that the ILPs were course based than those who stated ILPs were specifically not related to the course, but the majority of staff made no significant comment about their use of ILPs.

With regard to e-portfolios, they do not appear to have been adopted to any great extent although a number of colleges noted that they were being developed or piloted.

6.9 Reporting on good practice.

A number of examples of good practice have been highlighted in previous sections. What is clear is that planning, design and structure are important as is the design of high quality materials which should include interactivity and opportunities for self-reflection and self assessment. Good practice also includes frequent tutor feedback on how students are progressing.

What was clear from the interviews was that while there are some general principles that can be drawn from the evidence of good practice that emerged from all of the interviews, the particular approach taken by any tutor was related to their particular student group, subject and level of study.

Some further notes of the types of approaches taken are given below and the general principles are incorporated into the recommendations in Section 7.

A number of interesting examples were given of how incorporating independence in learning into their programmes has proved beneficial.

One beauty therapy lecturer noted that 40-50% of practical is usually just explaining what is to be done so video demonstrations were developed that students used independently. Those videos reduced practical class time by close to one half.

In construction, one member of staff commented that practical videos were developed for plasterers and this development was seen by plumbing staff and students who requested that the same thing be developed for them. This highlights that sometimes it is important to expose students to what is available as they may well welcome the incorporation of some independent learning activities if they perceive them to be worthwhile.

There can be issues about the use of ICT. For example one lecturer noted that in construction (plumbing, bricklaying etc) students were found to not even making use of email. The response was to put more computers into workroom to provide more accessibility and to assign a new learning champion within that area. That individual set about showing students how to use email etc and the use of ICT increased greatly. This highlights that sometimes there are both accessibility issues in terms of access to resources but also the need to have champions to ensure that if resources are then put in place, the students are actually encouraged to make use of those resources.

Another successful approach used by a member of staff in Engineering was to use a textbook with CD that provides software and access to web site. The CD includes formative tests such as interactive quizzes, multiple choice, missing words etc. and can be set up to allow just one or more attempts at any test (currently the member of staff has it set up so that students have three attempts at questions and then they are barred).

Some staff noted that there are some very good commercially available learning materials. Computing was highlighted as an area where this was the case.

The use of quizzes and games were highlighted by a number of staff as a good way of getting students to both work independently and to become enthusiastic about their studies. As noted earlier, staff did comment that it is important to know the cohort as what works well one year may not work as well the next.

Another approach that was taken was to give students a few buzz words in groups which had to source material and then share it with other groups gaining group interaction. If it was apparent that the students were not initially on the right lines then some leading questions were given. In this case once the groups had found the information they were given learning packs which they then complete without the tutor being present.

A variant of this is that each team picks an envelope each of which has a different task which the group has to plan, deliver and report back.

A number of staff commented that students were very enthusiastic about using on-line assessments but also that there must be lots of opportunities for students to send in small assignments regularly. This applies to both formative and summative assessments.

Although e-learning developments can be difficult, there can be rewards in terms of educational outcomes. One biology tutor offered the example of a paper-based approach to providing education about blood-borne illnesses that was not as successful as had been hoped. The member of staff developed on-line work and had 100% pass rate which had never been achieved before. There was an issue with it however despite the success rate as the school-leavers loved the on-line course but adults with no IT skills hated it. The school leavers engaged with it and emailed tutor and each other while the adults did not and the school leavers asked why whole programme could not be like that. This highlights that it is important to be aware of the skills and learning styles of the cohort and that there may not be a single approach that works.

One science tutor noted that independence in learning was developed for delivering a chemistry course as the previous traditional approach had not been working. A similar concern about the traditional approach was noted by a mathematics tutor who developed a mathematics booklet and altered the teaching approach to match what was in the booklet.

With regard to mathematics, tutors noted that the ability to understand mathematics is poor and that electronic sites can actually be better. It was noted that students often learn how to do one approach but do not really understand the underlying concepts (it was noted that this may be true even at higher education level). It was commented that it may possibly be easier to get open learning students to understand mathematics as they have time to work at it.

It is useful to note that in the above cases, the traditional approach was less successful than providing courses that allowed students to learn independently.

One tutor also noted that the development of independence in learning can lead to students who become more engaged in their studies. The example was given of a class which knew what was planned and read up on work beforehand. The students then challenged tutor on various points in class which was more interesting for the tutor and helped the students in gaining a deeper understanding of the work.

One tutor noted that although the college had started an open and distance course around a residential school where the candidates were enrolled, registered on the VLE, issued with the necessary materials and given guidance on what it meant to become an independent learner, that in itself was not sufficient to ensure success. The tutor noted that the course team identified that there was insufficient screening of the candidates skills as an independent learner and therefore the team had not identified those learners who would find it difficult to become independent although they may be mature individuals but may have been out of learning for many years. On reflection it was felt the course would have benefited for having a pre-enrolment introductory session about independence in learning.

Finally it is perhaps worth noting the comment that one tutor made about developing independence in learning:

“It was something I wanted to do as I felt chalk and talk was boring for the students and I wanted to do something that got them doing activities, working in groups, doing experiments which would help them to find out their strengths and weaknesses.”

7 Concluding comments

The development of independence in learning was evident in some parts of all of the colleges involved in this study. In some cases the development was part of a clear college-wide strategy while in some cases it was more a result of the initiative of individual lecturers.

One of the most successful examples was in a college which had developed a very explicit pedagogical approach that included the development of independence in learning as a key element of its strategy. In that instance it was also made clear that the overall approach was one of blended learning but that developing independence in learning was a key element of the blend.

In all colleges, the development of independence in learning was in response to the perceived needs of the students and many staff highlighted that students at all levels benefited from being able to learn independently, irrespective of the level of their programmes.

Providing opportunities for students who could not readily come to the college campus was noted as being important in a number of cases, particularly in the case of those who were remote from the college. While this was an important driver in the case of programmes at remote colleges, it was also true in the case of some programmes at large urban colleges.

In the case of e-learning, the importance of having high quality materials was highlighted and it was noted that as much use as possible should be made of materials that are available through consortia or subscription and also of freely available materials on the web.

It was noted that it was crucial that such materials were carefully reviewed and where necessary adapted before use. In addition, in the case of web-based e-learning materials, because of the rate of change in the amount of and links to web-based materials there was an issue about what time was needed to review and update those materials.

Successful development of e-learning was aided by the availability of learning technologists who can support academic staff. This is a challenge for smaller colleges which may have less flexibility within their budgets but one smaller college had successfully developed a team of staff who supported academic staff in developing independent learning materials. COLEG has demonstrated that it is possible to develop materials as part of a consortium and perhaps it might be feasible for a group of colleges to develop shared learning technologist expertise.

The importance of developing students as independent learners was highlighted by a number of staff and even those staff not involved conceded that it could be developed.

It was also apparent that independence in learning could be developed at all levels although there was a general consensus that more support for learners was needed at lower levels.

Staff valued the benefits students gained from having some independence in their learning and felt that students had found it of value, particularly those who went on to HE. Importantly, the vast majority of the students themselves noted that they had not only benefited from undertaking independent learning but they had enjoyed the experience.

Developing independence in learning would therefore appear to be worthwhile for all levels of FE and that it would certainly assist in the transition from FE on to HE. It would also appear that there are no educational or other reasons why it should not be developed.

To conclude, this study presents a number of recommendations about the development of independence in learning and some practical steps that can be taken which it is hoped that colleges will find helpful.

The recommendations include some that address the issue of staff reluctance to develop independent learning which was noted as being a key issue (Section 6.3). However it was also noted that staff who were reluctant did concede that it would be possible to develop independence in learning in their subjects and although some staff did express concerns about potential job losses no actual job losses were identified. The recommendations that relate to staff reluctance to develop independence in learning are noted in Section 7.1, recommendations 3, 4 and 5 and also in Section 7.2 point 2 and 3.

7.1 Some recommendations:

1. Implement a clear college-wide pedagogical strategy that addresses why independence in learning is being developed.
2. Develop a staff development programme to support staff in developing independence in learning.
3. Ensure that the staff development programme addresses the reluctance of many staff to let go of teaching.
4. Put in place support for staff who are not, or who are reluctant to become involved in developing and/or delivering programmes that include independence in learning, as responses suggest that they generally admit that it would be possible to develop more independence in learning.
5. Encourage individuals to become champions who can help encourage other staff to become involved.
6. Examine how class contact can be managed to provide time for development of independence in learning within programmes.
7. Consider how class contact is measured and whether contact is kept at the same level once independence in learning is implemented, for example in order to enhance quality.
8. Develop some elements of independent learning at all levels of study
9. Implement the development of Independence in learning for students on courses at SCQF levels 4-6 as well as higher SCQF levels, as employers will expect students who have gained college qualifications to have the ability to learn on the job without much supervision.

10. Ensure a good induction programme that supports students to become independent learners is implemented for all programmes and it is better if their need to be independent is re-enforced over time.
11. Consider whether different induction is offered for adult learners that for 16-18 year olds coming directly from school.
12. Implement some additional support for students to become independent learners in the case of students studying on lower level courses (SCQF 4-6).
13. Consider individualising learning as independence is learning is enhanced if the opportunity to individualise learning is recognised.
14. If possible provide resource rooms for drop-in sessions with instructors/lecturers (not necessarily subject specialists) to help support independent learning.
15. Prepare student contracts to clarify expectations of what they have to do and what response (such as how quickly they should expect a reply to an e-mail) they can expect from tutors.
16. Implement a scheme to ensure student involvement in independent learning is monitored (ie whether they are actually accessing and using the materials – this can be done easily in most VLEs but also applies to paper-based activities) and whether they are enjoying what they are doing.
17. Ensure that resources are not wasted by operating one system with support materials for flexible/distance/open learning students but failing to make use of those materials in full-time classroom courses for the same (or similar) qualifications.
18. Make use of materials/software already developed through consortia (eg COLEG), which are freely available on the web, and consider using good commercial materials which are often of high quality.
19. Ensure materials are kept up-to date as in some subjects, some things can go out of date quickly (for example legal issues and software). When materials are being designed, thought should go into ensuring that there is a mechanism for updating quickly, perhaps by differentiating the generic from those parts that might be subject to frequent revision.
20. Establish the practice that all documents and e-learning materials have a note of the date they were last updated and for those dates to be published with lists of documents.
21. Design of programmes and materials carefully ensuring all issues are carefully thought through. Careful design is particularly important in the case of materials being placed on a VLE.
22. If possible appoint one or more learning technologists whose role is to assist staff in the design of learning materials, particularly e-learning materials.
23. Do not just use electronic notes. Independent learning is better supported by interactivity using software, quizzes, self-assessed questions. This can be interactive software (for example for automotive engineering) or materials designed through a package such as CourseGenie.
24. Ensure that materials on VLEs are of a consistent high quality and implement a college-wide standard of what is expected.
25. Monitor student involvement in e-discussion boards and moderate them to ensure that discussion is on track and not inappropriate, and ensure tutors contribute or comment to make sure that students know that tutors are observing their contributions and involvement.
26. When developing interactive software, commercially available software is generally better designed than in-house software, particularly for complex visual material (eg automotive/engineering/healthcare software).
27. A Content Management system can be useful and if possible it should be purchased at the same times as the VLE.

28. Recognise that e-learning has proved successful in a number of colleges at all levels (see 6.9 for some examples) and that its use can enhance learning as compared to a didactic approach.

7.2 Practical steps

1. Establish a clear college-wide pedagogical strategy that addresses why independence in learning is being developed.
2. Implement a staff development programme to:
 - a) explain the educational benefits of developing independent learners;
 - b) provide training for staff to assist them in developing independent learning and e-learning activities within their programmes;
 - c) provide mentors and additional support for those staff who express strong reluctance to embrace the development of independent learning.
3. Establish champions in a number of areas who will help promote and highlight the educational benefits of developing independent learning at all levels.
4. Ensure each programme implements a good induction scheme for students to support their development as independent learners.
5. If possible establish learning or resource centres with staff based there to support drop-in and timetabled sessions for students engaged on independent learning activities.
6. Implement student contracts to clarify expectations of what is expected of students and what they can expect from the staff and college.
7. Create one or more learning technologist posts to provide support to staff in developing independent and e-learning materials, particularly those to be used within a college VLE. This support can include reviewing and informing staff about externally produced learning materials that might be incorporated into college programmes. The learning technologist(s) can also help ensure that materials used within the college VLE are of a consistently high quality.
8. Review e-learning materials to ensure that they include interactivity and are not simply electronic versions of printed notes.
9. Ensure that e-discussion boards and use of e-learning materials are monitored to check that students are engaged on independent learning tasks.

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Appendix 1 Question list

Senior Manager – Question list

Before responding to the questions the senior manager was asked to explain their role within their college.

- a) Why was it decided to introduce independent learning to FE students?
- b) What areas of the curriculum were included and were there any areas for which independence in learning was not developed and if so why not?
- c) What were the drivers for developing independence in learning and was it seen as important for courses on campus, for outreach or off-campus learning centres or for both?
- d) Did the availability of COLEG materials play any role in what was developed?
- e) Was the decision to develop independence in learning part of a wider college plan to develop web-based learning, e-learning or open learning and if so what were the aims of the development and what support was provided for teaching staff?

This was followed by a supplementary question about whether the level of study or maturity of the students was an issue if those issues had not already been discussed.

- f) Was part of the aim of developing independence in learning to increase recruitment by making curriculum accessible to students studying at home or at learning centres?
- g) What barriers to developing independence in learning did you perceive would be an issue before you started?
- h) What actual barriers were encountered when implementing independence in learning?
- i) What lessons were learnt about how best to introduce independence in learning?
- j) What pitfalls would you advise others to avoid?
- k) What has been the student reaction to having more independence in learning?
- l) Do you feel the development has been worthwhile and do you intend to further develop independence in learning across all the college?
- m) Do you believe that the development of independence in learning has reduced the overall class contact for that area of the curriculum?

- n) What changes have taken place in the type of delivery of the curriculum in those subject areas which have developed independence in learning?

[This provided an opportunity to discuss what types of independent learning were being undertaken and if core skill development played an important role if they had not already been outlined in the responses to previous questions]

- o) Would you recommend developing independence in learning to other colleagues locally and across the sector?
- p) What use if any is made of Individual Learning Plans, e-portfolios and course based e-discussion groups or blogs.

[The opportunity was also taken to discuss the use of VLEs and of email if those had not been discussed previously.]

- q) Are there any other points you would like to raise?

Appendix 1 Question list (cont.)

Lecturer not involved in developing/delivering independence in learning

Before responding to the questions, the lecturer was asked to list their subject area(s) and any particular roles they undertook.

- a) Have you had any involvement in developing independence in learning for FE students and if so in what areas of the curriculum?
- b) Many colleagues have introduced independent learning into the FE curriculum so why have you decided to limit any such development?
- c) Are there any areas in the curriculum you teach that might be amenable to the development of independence in learning?
- d) Are there any areas of the curriculum that are totally unsuitable to allow the development of independence in learning?
- e) Are there any COLEG or other materials (eg NLN, LTS, Higher Skills, City and Guilds smart screen) developed for your subject area and has any use been made of them?
- f) What do you perceive as the barriers to developing independence in learning?
- g) In any areas where you have developed independence in learning what actual barriers were encountered?

[There was an opportunity here and in the previous question to discuss the issue of core skills.]

- h) How do you feel students would react if they were expected to become more independent in their learning?
- i) What do you feel you would need if you were to develop more independence in learning within the curriculum?
- j) What support do you feel students would need if they were expected to become more independent in their own learning?
- k) Anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 1 Question list (cont.)

Lecturer involved in developing/delivering independence in learning

Before responding to the questions, the lecturer was asked to list their subject area(s) and any particular roles they undertook.

- a) Have you been involved in developing or delivering programmes that have developed independence in learning?
- b) What made you decide to introduce independent learning to FE students?
- c) What areas of the curriculum did you include, was there any introduction to and/or staged development of independence in learning and were there any areas for which independence in learning was not developed and if so why not?

[This provided an opportunity to consider core skills development]

- d) Was the level of study a consideration in choosing whether there would be any development of independence in learning (eg more support needed for NQs)?

Supplementary: The issue of maturity of students was raised is not already discussed.

- e) Did you make any use of COLEG or other materials (eg NLN, LTS, Higher Skills, City and Guilds smart screen) as part of the development and is it useful to have access to such material?

Supplementary: the issue of interactive software, quizzes etc was raised if not already discussed.

- f) Were your areas of development of independence in learning part of a wider development of web-based learning, e-learning or open learning at the college and if so was specific college support to assist the development of independence in learning?
- g) What barriers to developing independence in learning did you perceive would be an issue before you started?
- h) What actual barriers did you encounter when you implemented independence in learning?
- i) What lessons did you learn about how best to introduce independence in learning and was specific monitoring of learning or interventions developed (such as of student e-discussion groups)?
- j) Do you believe that overall class contact has been reduced in those areas in which independence in learning has been developed?

- k) What changes did you make to how the curriculum was delivered in the areas in which independence in learning has been developed?

[The opportunity was taken to raise the issue of core skills if it had not been addressed in the answers to previous questions.]

- l) What pitfalls would you advise others to avoid?
- m) What worked well and what worked less well and was use made of e-discussion groups/Wikis/blogs and if so did you monitor/moderate/contribute?

Supplementary: The use of a VLE and email from students was raised if not already discussed.

- n) What has your perception been of the student reaction to having more independence in learning?

[It was noted that their response could draw on student surveys but academics often get informal feedback and therefore what was of concern was their belief about how students reacted to having more independence.]

- o) Do you feel the development has been worthwhile and do you intend to develop independence in learning across all your teaching and what support do staff need?
- p) Are there any areas of work in which you will not be developing independence in learning?
- q) Would you recommend developing independence in learning to other colleagues locally and across the sector and why would you make that recommendation? What support would staff need to implement such development?
- r) Was any use made of Individual Learning Plans and/or e-portfolios?
- Supplementary: If not raised under question (r) the use of a VLE and email from students was discussed
- s) Are there any issues not discussed that you would like to raise?

Appendix 1 Question list (cont.)

Senior Support Staff

Before responding to the questions, the member of staff was asked to note their particular role within the college.

- a) Why was it decided to introduce independent learning to FE students?
- b) What areas of the curriculum were included and were there any areas for which independence in learning was not developed and if so why not?
- c) Was developing independence in learning seen as important for courses on campus, for outreach or off-campus learning centres or for both?

The issue of induction was raised at this point

- d) Did the availability of COLEG/NLN etc materials play any role in what was developed?
- e) Was part of the aim of the development of independence in learning to improve recruitment, retention and/or access?
- f) Were there differences in the approach according to the level of the course or the types of students (school-leaver, adult returner)?
- g) Was the decision to develop independence in learning part of a wider college plan to develop web-based learning, e-learning or open learning?
- h) What support did you offer to subject specialists to assist them in developing independence in learners and in delivering programmes that required students to develop independence in learning?
- i) What barriers to developing independence in learning did you perceive would be an issue before you started?
- j) What actual barriers were encountered when implementing independence in learning?
- k) What lessons were learnt about how best to introduce independence in learning?
- l) What pitfalls would you advise others to avoid?
- m) What from your experience has been the student reaction to having more independence in learning?
- n) Do you feel the development has been worthwhile and do you intend to further develop independence in learning across the college?
- o) Do you believe that the development of independence in learning has reduced the overall class contact for that area of the curriculum?

- p) What changes have taken place in the type of delivery of the curriculum in those subject areas which have developed independence in learning (for example use of computers, VLE, dedicated file areas?)
- q) Would you recommend developing independence in learning to other colleagues locally and across the sector?
- r) Is any use made of Individual Learning Plans or e-portfolios and do you provide support for them?
- s) Is any use made of e-discussion groups, blogs or Wikis in any courses and do you provide support for them?

Appendix 2 Topic list

Senior Manager

1. Why was it decided to develop independence in learning?
2. Were some areas of curriculum chosen in preference to others?
3. What were the drivers for developing independence in learning?
4. Did the availability of COLEG etc materials play a role in what was developed?
5. Was the level of study an issue?
6. Was the maturity of the students an issue?
7. Was the development part of a college-wide strategy?
8. What support was provided for teaching staff to develop independent learning?
9. What were the aims of the development?
10. When you started, what barriers did you think you would encounter?
11. What actual barriers did you encounter?
12. What lessons were learnt about how best to introduce independent learning?
13. Did you encounter any pitfalls you would advise others to avoid?
14. What has been the student reaction to being more independent learners?
15. Has the development been worthwhile and will it be developed college-wide?
16. Has independent learning reduced overall class contact?
17. What changes have taken place in the type of delivery of the curriculum?
18. Would you recommend developing independence in learning to other colleges?
19. Do you use individual learning plans and are they related to course activity?
20. Is use made of e-portfolios?
21. Is use made of a VLE?
22. Do students use email to contact staff and is it separate from usual email?
23. Any other issues not previously discussed?

Appendix 2 Topic list (cont)

Teaching staff not involved in developing/delivering independence in learning

1. Are you involved in developing or delivering independent learning?
2. Why did you decide to limit such development?
3. Are there any areas of your subject which independence could be developed?
4. Are there any areas of your subject in which independence could not be developed?
5. Are there COLEG/NLN etc materials for your subject and have you used them?
6. What do you think are the barriers to developing independence in learning?
7. Have you encountered any such barriers in your work?
8. What do you think would be the student reaction to more independence in learning?
9. What support would you need if you were to develop more independence in learning?
10. What support would students need to become more independent learners?
11. Anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 2 Topic list (cont)

Teaching staff involved in developing/delivering independence in learning

1. Are you involved in developing or delivering independent learning?
2. Why was it introduced?
3. Were some areas of curriculum chosen in preference to others?
4. Was induction provided?
5. Was there any staged development of independence?
6. Was the level of study an issue?
7. Was the maturity of the students an issue?
8. Was use made of COLEG, NLN or other materials?
9. Was interactivity used (eg quizzes, projects etc) and was interactive software used?
10. Was the development part of a college-wide strategy?
11. What barriers did you anticipate occur?
12. What barriers did you actually encounter?
13. What lessons or advice would you give to others?
14. Has overall class contact has been reduced due to independent learning?
15. Was the delivery of curriculum changed and in what ways?
16. What pitfalls would you advise others to avoid?
17. Did anything work particularly well?
18. Did anything work less well?
19. Was use made of e-discussion groups?
20. If e-discussion groups used did you monitor/ moderate/contribute?
21. Was use made of blogs/ Wikis or other electronic media?
22. Was there a positive student reaction to being independent?
23. Do you feel developing independence in learning is worthwhile?
24. Will you develop independence in learning across all your teaching?
25. What support do staff need to develop independent learning?

26. Are there any areas in which independence will not be developed?
27. Would you recommend such development to other colleagues/colleges?
28. If you would recommend it why would you do so?
29. Was any use made of individual learning plans?
30. If so were ILPs linked to the unit/module/course activity?
31. Was use made of a VLE?
32. Was use made of e-portfolios?
33. Do students use email to contact you and is it an email within a VLE?
34. Any other issues not already discussed?

Appendix 2 Topic list (cont)

Senior Support staff

1. Why was it decided to introduce independence in learning?
2. Were some areas of curriculum chosen in preference to others?
3. Was induction provided?
4. Was there any staged development of independence?
5. Was use made of COLEG, NLN or other materials?
6. What were the drivers for developing independence in learning?
7. Was the level of study an issue?
8. Was the maturity of the students an issue?
9. Was the development part of a college-wide strategy?
10. What support did you offer to teaching staff?
11. What barriers did you anticipate would occur?
12. What barriers did you actually encounter?
13. What lessons or advice would you give to others?
14. What pitfalls would you advise others to avoid?
15. What was the student reaction to being more independent?
16. Do you feel developing independence in learning is worthwhile?
17. Has overall class contact has been reduced due to independent learning?
18. Was delivery of curriculum changed and in what ways?
19. Is a VLE used as part of the development?
20. Would you recommend such development to other colleagues/colleges?
21. Was any use made of individual learning plans?
22. If so were ILPs linked to the unit/module/course activity?
23. Was use made of e-discussion groups?
24. Was use made of blogs/ Wikis or other electronic media?
25. Any other issues not already discussed?

Appendix 3 Relationship of question and topic lists to key issues

Key Issue	Questions List				Topic List			
	SM	TI	TNI	SS	SM	TI	TNI	SS
a	a, c, e, f	f	a, b	a, c, e, g	1, 3, 9	2, 10	1, 2	1, 6, 9
b	a, c, e, f	f	a, b	a, c, e, g	1, 3, 9	2, 10	1, 2	1, 6, 9
c	n	c		h	2	4, 5		3, 4
d	n	d	b, g	f	5, 6	6, 7	2	7, 8
e	d	e	e	d	4	8, 9	5	5
f	g	g, h	c, d, f, g	i, j	7	11, 12,	3, 4, 6, 7	11, 12, 13, 14
g	h, i, j, n	l, k, l, m		k, p	12, 13	15		18
h	j, k, n	k, l, m		k	12, 13	13, 16, 17, 18		20
i	m	j			16	14, 15		
j	n	o	j	h	8	25	9, 10	10
k	p	m, r	j	h, p	20, 21, 22	29, 30, 31, 32		19, 21, 23, 24
l	l	n		m	14	22	8	15
m	l, o	o, p, q		n, q, r	15, 18	23, 24, 27, 28		20

SM Senior managers
 TI Teachers involved in developing/delivering independence in learning
 TNI Teachers not involved in independence in learning
 SS Senior support staff

Key Issues – see section 3.3

Questions – see Appendix 1

Topic List – see Appendix 2

**THE NORTH FORUM
FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

FE Transition Project Working Group

Creating Independent Learners in FE - Project specification

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Timescale and partners

This project is being commissioned by the North Forum for Widening Participation in Higher Education (The Forum). It has arisen out of meetings of 23 March (Aberdeen) and 4 July (Elgin). The participants are the FE College partners of the North Forum and the project is being commissioned on their behalf. It is anticipated that the project will run in the academic year 2005/06.

1.2 Need for the project

In essence the perceived need for the project is to evaluate how institutions can most effectively prepare students for subsequent levels of study and further study when in employment – the overarching premise being one of widening participation. It is suggested that most emphasis so far has been placed on the transition between FECs and HEIs, whereas there needs to be a consideration of how students may be supported to become more self-reliant as they progress through all Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Levels. The framework descriptors (SCQF) outline the general outcomes of learning under five broad headings:

- knowledge and understanding – mainly subject based
- practice - applied knowledge and understanding
- generic cognitive skills, e.g. evaluation, critical analysis
- communication, numeracy and IT skills
- autonomy, accountability and working with others.

It is suggested that ‘descriptors can provide useful reference points when designing programmes of learning’.¹ Thus at Level 2 it is expected that students should emerge with the skills to work on simple routine, familiar tasks under frequent and direct supervision whilst by Level 6 (prior to potential entry to HE) students should evidence the ability to ‘take responsibility for the carrying out of a range of activities where the overall goal is clear under non-directive supervision’.²

¹ <http://www.scqf.org.uk/downloads.asp>

² <http://www.scqf.org.uk/upload/downloads/FinalGridjune2001V2.doc>

This is not to suggest that the SCQF is any more than one important reference for this project but is important in indicating recognition of the fact that students should be encouraged to develop (and do) through all levels of study.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Aim

The overall aim of the project is to identify good practice in supporting students in FE to develop their skills as learners ('learning to learn') as they progress through SCQF Levels up to SCQF Level 6 ('FE/FE transition'). It is anticipated that the SCQF framework will provide a useful benchmark in deciding what levels of autonomy one might reasonably expect at each level. It is also suggested that the emphasis is likely be on core and transferable skills whereby the aim is to allow students to develop capacities, which allow them to learn in new situations and may be applied to a whole variety of working situations. Increasingly learning will not be constrained by time or place. An important sub-text in this respect is the aim to enhance the colleges' capacity to support remote learners

2.2 Objectives

There are 5 objectives. All of them are specific, measurable and achievable within project resources and timescale. The objectives are to:

- 2.2.1 Examine how partners design programmes to support the development of skills of independent study in students.
- 2.2.2 Examine how partners progressively structure programmes of study to encourage independence.
- 2.2.3 Examine how partners deliver core skills within programmes of study
- 2.2.4 Evaluate the extent to which partners use Individual Learning Plans (including any use of e-portfolios) in the learning process and as a record of that process.
- 2.2.5 To produce a report for the dissemination of 'good practice' amongst the constituent colleges.

3. OVERALL APPROACH

3.1 Strategy

A Project Management Group will be established for monitoring the progress of the project. The composition of this group will be decided by the FE Transition Project Steering Group. It is possible that the Project Management Group will also monitor the parallel project on transition from school to college.

The project will be led by a Project Manager who will work with representatives of each college in the North area.

3.2 Methodology

The Project Manager working through college Principals will engage with key staff in each partner as identified by the partner. It is likely that one of the staff from each partner will have a guidance background whilst the other will be involved in curriculum development and delivery.

It is suggested that the Project Manager will visit each partner in the North Forum FE/FE Transition Project for a day to interview staff and to consider relevant supporting documentation. This may allow the Project Manager to meet a broader range of staff beyond those identified specifically for the project. Further, it is suggested that for the second day all staff should be brought together to enable discussion and comparison of practice with a view to agreeing on the identification of good practice amongst the partners.

Following the completion of this work the Project Manager will produce a report for dissemination through partner colleges.

4. PROJECT OUTPUTS

4.1 Deliverables

The project deliverables will include:

- Good practice report
- A dissemination strategy for the completed report
- Materials and report to be posted on web sites as the project develops and on completion.

4.2 Project knowledge and other outputs

Project knowledge and other outputs will include:

- The project will allow for the development and evaluation of research methodology.
- The project should encourage closer collaboration between partners in the development of curriculum design.

5. PROJECT BUDGET

The maximum budget available for the project is a total of £20,000. This includes all pay and non pay costs associated with the delivery of the project. Any bids should give a clear, detailed breakdown of costs, split between pay and non pay.

This specification has been prepared for the North Forum by John Ellwood, Assistant Principal: Curriculum, Moray College, on behalf of the FE Transition Project Steering Group.

Alison Watson, Administrator
The North Forum for Widening Participation in Higher Education
22nd September 2005

Appendix 5 Shetland College bid specification submitted to North Forum

1. Project outcomes

The project will:

- a) identify good practice in developing independent learners
- b) prepare a set of example materials/activities for developing independent learners
- c) report on opportunities to extend good practice
- d) review the use of Individual Learning Plans (and e-portfolios) and their contribution to developing independent learners
- e) propose areas that can be developed to further support independence in learners

2. Methodology

The College will appoint a project manager who will lead the project

- 2.1 Initial identification of good practice will be based on
 - a) consultation with SFEU
 - b) desk research based on advice from SFEU
- 2.2 One outcome of the desk research will be to develop a set of interview questions will be developed to elicit key issues from Colleges that have been identified as having good practice (either from the consultation exercise with SFEU) or as a direct outcome of the desk research.
- 2.3 The desk research will aim to identify good practice in different subjects or disciplines and to provide an assessment of whether there are a somewhat different range of key issues for different subjects.
- 2.4 An interview schedule will be arranged with FE Colleges who have been identified as having examples of good practice. Interviews will be held with head of curriculum development or guidance as appropriate plus individual lecturers (preferably in different subjects) who are active in developing FE students as independent learners. A request will also be made for example materials that are used in developing independent learners.
- 2.5 The information from the interviews will not only form an important part of the report but will assist in developing questionnaires that can be sent to students in those FE Colleges who are undergoing or who have completed training to develop their independence as learners. A request will be made to the College to circulate the questionnaires and to return them to the investigator.
- 2.6 In addition, each College will be requested to provide contact details for a few students who can be part of a focus group discussion to be held at the College.

- 2.7 Colleges will also be asked to identify students who undertook development as independent learners and who have progressed on to HN or degree level work. Again a focus group discussion will be held with those students to determine whether they felt better prepared for advanced level work than those who entered directly onto an advanced programme.
- 2.8 A number of FE Colleges who are not involved in developing FE students as independent learners will be contacted and interviews will be held with the head of curriculum development, head of guidance and some subject leaders to discuss what barriers they see to developing FE students as independent learners.
- 2.9 A project report will be prepared highlighting key issues for successful development of independent learners in FE, what students have identified as important and what barriers to developing independent learners have been identified and how they have been overcome by good practice.
- 2.10 A project report launch event will be held to promote the use of the project outcomes by FE Colleges

Appendix 6 Project budget

Budget for the project £20,000

Original project costs submitted in bid

Project Manager	£15,000
Travel and subsistence	£ 3,000
Report production	£ 1,000
Administrative staff	£ 1,000

Project manager 75 days @ £200/day

Administrative staff 80 hours @£12/hour

Project Final Expenditure

Project Manager	£15,000
Travel and subsistence	£ 3,377
Report production	£ 874
Administrative staff	£ 749

Total £20,000

Travel and subsistence includes all flights, car hire, fuel, mileage, accommodation and other subsistence incurred in visiting the 12 colleges.

**THE NORTH FORUM
FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

MEMBERSHIP AS AT MARCH 2007

In alphabetical order of institution

Institution/Organisation	Representative
Aberdeen City Council	Pete Hamilton Community Learning and Development Manager
Aberdeen College	Rob Wallen (Vice Chair) Director of Learning and Teaching
Aberdeenshire Council	Anne Simpson Community Learning Manager
Argyll College	Michael Breslin, Director
ASPIRENorth	Janet Rougvie, Director
Banff & Buchan College	Paul Sherrington, Depute Principal
Careers Scotland (Highlands and Islands Enterprise Area) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise	Liz Galashan Head of Services to Individuals
Careers Scotland (SE Grampian)	Moira F. Whyte, Manager
Highland Theological College	Kevin Sinclair Learning Centre Development Manager
Highland Council	Julie Simmons Adult Literacy Strategy Officer
Inverness College	Donald Leitch, Acting Principal
LEAD Scotland	Sue Mitchell Regional Manager, North
Lews Castle College	Iain Macsween Section Manager, Gaelic, Communications, Arts and Languages
Lochaber College	Laurence Young, Chief Executive Officer
Moray College	Edna Cameron, Project Manager
Moray Council	Alexander Ross Learning and Teaching Officer
NAFC Marine Centre	Sue Smith Quality and Academic Manager
North Forum (observer status)	Alison Watson, Administrator
Orkney College	Bill Ross, Principal
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig	John Norman MacLeod, Head of Studies
Scottish Agricultural College	Suzanne Stockwell, Student Recruitment Officer
Scottish Funding Councils (observer status)	Margaret Dundas National Co-ordinator for Widening Participation
Scottish Funding Councils (observer status)	Dr John Kemp Assistant Director Learning Policy and Strategy
Shetland College	George Smith, Director
The North Highland College	Rosemary Thompson, Principal
The Open University in Scotland	Pete Cannell, Depute Director
The Robert Gordon University	Prof. John Harper Vice Principal, Faculty of Health & Social Care
UHI Millennium Institute	Iain Morrison (Vice Chair) Head of Lifelong Learning, Student Support and Development
University of Aberdeen	Julie McAndrews Director, Centre for Lifelong Learning
WEA	Alison Morrison, Tutor Organiser

