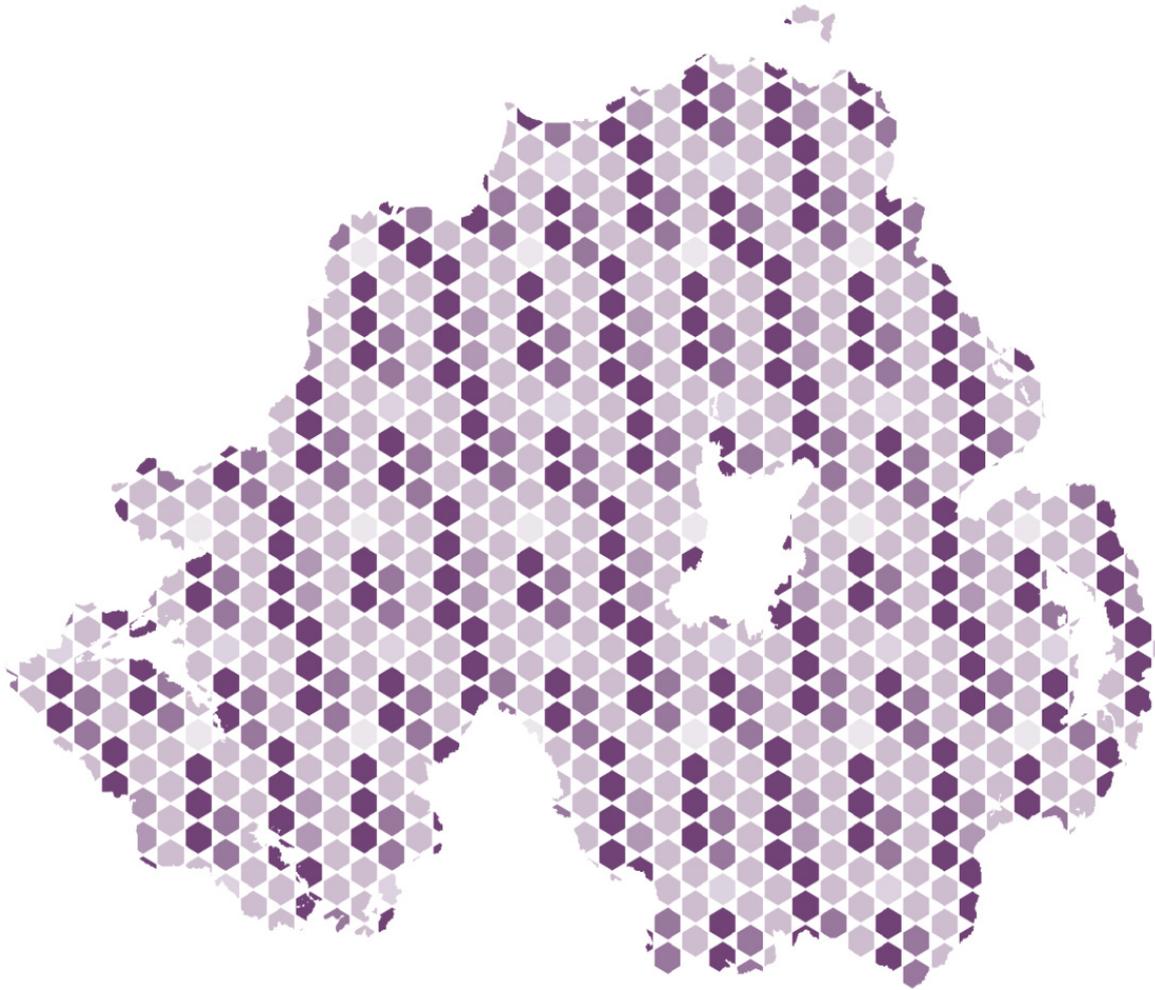


Further Education Evaluation



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Report of an Evaluation of the
Blended Learning Pilot in the
Further Education Colleges

November 2010-May 2011



Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

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CONTENTS

Section	Page
SECTION 1 - SUMMARY	
1. BACKGROUND TO THE PILOT PROJECT	1
2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PILOT PROJECT	1
3. PROVISION	2
4. THE EVALUATION	2
5. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS	2
SECTION 2: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION	
6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	4
7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	6
8. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	7
9. CONCLUSION	9
10. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	9
APPENDIX	

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

SECTION 1: SUMMARY

1. BACKGROUND TO THE PILOT PROJECT

1.1 In 2006, the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) developed a programme of work in response to the key outcomes of an e-learning consultation exercise carried out in the further education sector in Northern Ireland. The key target for phase one of the programme of work was for all six of the further education colleges to have achieved the Embedded Status of Demonstrating Transformation (DT) by September 2010 (subsequently amended to September 2011). Phase two of the programme contained two key targets, the roll-out of the Unique Learner Number (ULN) and the electronic Individual Learning Plan (e-ILP), to help ensure the further education sector was in a state of readiness for the implementation of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) from September 2010.

1.2 To support the implementation of the QCF, the further education sector indicated to the Department, in a paper submitted by the college directors in February 2009 that it was keen to provide more flexible provision for students through the delivery of unitised accredited qualifications in new and innovative ways. The paper outlined how colleges planned to use blended learning to support and enhance curriculum delivery.

1.3 Although the Department supported, in principle, the running of a limited number of courses under a blended learning pilot scheme, approval was not given due to a number of issues. These included areas for improvement identified in evaluations by the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate)¹ in 2009/10, which indicated that the sector was not fully ready to implement blended learning. The Department did decide, however, that a pilot programme should be introduced for the 2010/11 academic year, which would provide an opportunity to consider further the development and implementation of a more comprehensive blended learning policy for the 2011/12 academic year.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PILOT PROJECT

2.1 The key objectives of the project were to:

- implement a blended learning pilot in the further education colleges by September 2010;
- use the findings from the pilot to inform the way forward for a wider blended learning policy for the further education sector, for the 2011/12 academic year;
- test the current infrastructure across the further education colleges to ensure it was 'fit for purpose' to support a wider blended learning policy; and
- support specific aspects of the Vocational Qualifications (VQ) reform programme through the provision of appropriate infrastructure, with particular emphasis on the QCF strategic layer and the ULN.

¹ <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-further-education/surveys-evaluations-further-education-2010/a-technical-and-staff-survey-on-the-use-of-information-and-learning-technology-in-the-six-area-based-colleges-of-further-education.htm>

<http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-further-education/surveys-evaluations-further-education-2009/an-evaluation-of-the-strategic-and-operational-planning-for-the-use-of-information-and-learning-technology-in-the-southern-regional-college.htm>

3. PROVISION

3.1 The response from the six further education colleges to participate in the blended learning pilot was variable. One of the colleges did not submit a bid to participate at all and another college failed to enrol viable numbers of students to any of their planned pilot courses. The majority of the planned provision from the four remaining colleges was in higher education and essentially outside of the intended main scope of the pilot, although it was clear that the blended learning models developed by each of the colleges were also applicable to further education courses.

4. THE EVALUATION

4.1 The Department asked the Inspectorate to carry out an evaluation of the blended learning pilot in the four colleges. The terms of reference for the evaluation were to:

- evaluate the quality of the strategic planning, resourcing and management of the blended learning pilots across the colleges;
- evaluate the quality of the colleges' blended learning provision against the mandatory quality standards, as outlined by the Department in the blended learning interim guidelines for pilots; and
- identify examples of good practice and key areas for improvement in the ongoing development of a blended learning model for the further education sector.

4.2 The evaluation was carried out in two phases. Phase one took place during November and December 2010. Phase two was carried out in May 2011.

4.3 The evaluation methodology involved inspection teams, each consisting of three inspectors, visiting each of the colleges participating in the pilot. The inspectors scrutinised a total of 15 online courses across the participating colleges, in a range of professional and technical areas including: business, civil engineering, computing, electronic engineering, hospitality and tourism, law, music, photography, retail, sport, and university access.

4.4 Discussions were held with a range of senior management and operational staff across the colleges, including curriculum directors, quality managers, heads of school, information and learning technology (ILT) managers, client services and support managers, lecturers leading curriculum delivery, and students. The inspectors also participated in online discussions with some of the student groups.

4.5 The inspectors also reviewed appropriate supporting documentation including samples of the students' work, online collaboration activities, learning resources hosted on the colleges' virtual learning environments (VLE), student tracking and monitoring records, and other relevant documentation.

5. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 The quality of leadership and management of the provision inspected is very good across the participating colleges, effectively supporting the development and embedding of blended learning. Evidence of effective strategic and operational planning includes the selection of suitable pilot courses that are matched well to student demand and existing curriculum strengths, an appropriate investment in resources, the implementation of effective procedures to monitor the ongoing development of the pilot courses, and the appropriate pace of development of blended learning.

5.2 The lecturers involved in the blended learning pilot are highly committed and enthusiastic. They work very hard to adapt their teaching practices to meet the evolving demands of blended learning delivery, and to develop innovative learning and assessment resources, often in their own time.

5.3 There are very good arrangements in place across most of the colleges to provide appropriate technical support for lecturers delivering blended learning courses. In two of the colleges, the lecturers also receive very good specialist support to develop online learning resources. The lecturers in one college report that they have only limited access to specialist support staff.

5.4 Most of the blended learning courses are matched well to the individual needs of the students; they encourage flexible and independent learning, provide good opportunities for colleges to enhance their provision for economic engagement, and to widen access and increase participation, particularly on part-time further and higher education courses.

5.5 The students on the pilot courses are supported well by their lecturers. They display high levels of motivation and commitment, and achieve good standards of work resulting in good outcomes in most of the blended learning courses.

5.6 Two of the colleges have good self-evaluation arrangements in place, which have been used effectively to evaluate their blended learning pilot courses at key points, and to inform ongoing and effective improvement planning.

5.7 Across the colleges, lecturers report that they have an insufficient allocation of time to develop good quality blended learning resources. In addition, there is only limited sharing of good practice within the colleges, and insufficient collaborative development of online learning resources across the colleges

5.8 Staff development in most of the participating colleges is not focused sufficiently well on supporting lecturers to develop the enhanced information and communication technology (ICT) skills needed to produce high quality interactive online learning resources, or in extending their pedagogy in the use of technology to support and enhance the blended learning courses.

5.9 While the quality of the course information provided to the students and the arrangements for their pre-entry guidance are satisfactory, further work is required to improve the effectiveness and quality of the initial assessment and support arrangements to better prepare students across the colleges to undertake blended learning courses. In one of the colleges the students undertaking blended learning courses have insufficient access to appropriate Information and Learning Technology (ILT) and ICT resources.

5.10 In three of the colleges, there are only limited systems in place to track the attendance, participation and progress of students on blended learning courses, and the arrangements for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the blended learning pilot in two of the colleges is under-developed.

SECTION 2 - OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 Each of the colleges involved has adopted a different approach in selecting courses for the pilot, based on either the college's internal strategic priorities for blended learning, or to further develop existing best practice in the use of ILT within the college. These priorities determine the focus for the project in each college and appropriately inform the selection criteria which include; widening access, improving economic engagement, flexible delivery to meet students' needs, and embedding blended learning as an element of full-time course delivery.

6.2 Most colleges have not marketed blended learning courses effectively, leading to some proposed courses not starting due to low enrolments. This has reduced the overall number of pilot courses across the sector to 15, ten of which are in higher education. In the main, this reflects the limited inclusion by most colleges of blended learning as part of their ILT strategic and operational planning, as they progress towards achieving the Embedded Status of Demonstrating Transformation².

6.3 A common feature of the most successful projects, in two of the colleges, is the strong leadership demonstrated by senior curriculum managers. This is linked to a clear strategic vision for blended learning within their overall curriculum planning, and high levels of commitment by managers at all levels to support and drive the programme forward. The quality units in these colleges support the regular evaluation of the pilot courses, the outcomes of which inform key decisions made by senior managers to target improvements in the quality of provision.

6.4 Most of the colleges made good progress across the two phases of the evaluation. They were receptive and responsive to the interim findings provided by the Inspectorate and put in place appropriate actions to improve the quality of the pilot courses as they progressed. For example, one college implemented improved student tracking and auditing tools and another commissioned a project to develop, test and implement blended learning provision across the whole college. The timing of the second phase of the evaluation was too early in the college quality improvement cycle to pick up course team self-evaluations. Although evaluation models have been developed in some colleges, they vary in quality from very good to satisfactory. In the best practice, one college has effectively benchmarked outcomes on their blended learning pilot courses with the same courses delivered using traditional methods. This college also thoroughly analysed usage of the college Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in order to internally benchmark student access rates to the blended learning courses, compared with other college courses that were not part of the pilot.

6.5 The colleges report that the validation process in one university can lead to delays when planning changes to higher education courses, and that the university's demand for academic rigour limits innovation in the design of blended learning courses. This results in courses which are not always matched well enough to employer needs because of the lack of flexibility in the university's processes.

6.6 Foundation Degree Forward (FDF), through the key support of its local representative, played a pivotal role in the development of the foundation degree in retail which is offered across the colleges. A key feature of the success of this provision was in establishing, developing and maintaining contacts with employers and the Department. The FDF ceased to exist during the summer of 2011 and this poses a significant challenge and risk for the future development of the programme. There is now more onus on the lead

²Revised Demonstrating Transformation framework (2009) http://www.rsc-ni.ac.uk/sites/media/Media_173686.en.pdf

college to maintain this role in the same systematic manner, whilst also leading the consortium and seeking out new markets and resources. In addition, FDF will cease to host the electronic learning resources which were developed as part of the foundation degree programme. Although the hosting of the resources has been transferred to another provider, it is unclear at this stage what the implications will be for the programme.

6.7 Three of the participating colleges have very good resources to support the delivery of blended learning, including a well-established and comprehensive physical network infrastructure, a robust VLE platform, remote access for students from home to their files, and evolving tools for tracking and monitoring the students' learning. In contrast, in one college, resources are much too limited and there is evidence of lecturers, at times, purchasing their own ICT equipment to deliver their programme. In this college, it is inadequate that poor timetabling decisions result in blended learning pilot classes not having priority access to rooms with the necessary ILT equipment, including interactive whiteboards.

6.8 Almost all of the lecturers report that they received good initial technical training provided by the Regional Support Centre for Northern Ireland (RSCni) prior to the commencement of the pilot, and in most colleges this was supplemented with effective in-house technical training. While, most of the lecturers receive good ongoing technical support, there is no sector-wide professional development programme in place for lecturers prior to the commencement of the pilot, with a focus on the pedagogic aspects of online delivery. Consequently, just a few of the lecturers have the necessary skills and pedagogy to deliver the online learning element of the course effectively, which was particularly evident in the early stages of the pilot. Plans are in place to address this gap through the development of a continuous professional development (CPD) programme for lecturers based on the Level 4 Technology in Learning Delivery (TLD) qualification which is in the final stages of development. It is proposed that each of the six colleges will have a role in developing content for the new qualification, assisted by the RSCni, with initial plans to roll out the programme to lecturers delivering on blended learning courses from September 2011. At the time of the evaluation, most colleges were unclear about their role in the implementation of the new qualification, what the requirements would be for lecturers delivering on future blended courses, and how experienced practitioners' prior achievements in the use of technology enhanced learning would be recognised.

6.9 There is only limited collaboration between colleges to develop shared online learning resources and expertise, or to facilitate a common student agreement to widen access and increase participation across the sector. This, and the high cost of developing online resources, leads to a shortage of good quality interactive resources and online assessments for the blended learning courses.

6.10 Systems to audit student attendance and participation in the virtual learning element of pilot courses are evolving across the colleges, but remain for the most part at an early stage. The quality of the systems range from good to inadequate; they are mostly satisfactory. The best auditing models, with further development, could provide rigorous monitoring and tracking, built on existing technology and infrastructure, which all of the colleges now have in place. The auditing methods under development include:

- monitoring of student online activity during virtual sessions, such as the frequency of their access to VLE resources and contribution to online chat or discussion boards;
- measuring progress towards achieving qualification credits or the distance travelled in completing course guided learning hours; and

- splitting courses into elements of planned learning tasks each with milestones, and measuring student progress with online assessment tools.

7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

7.1 Most students on the pilot courses are highly motivated and enthusiastic about blended learning, particularly when it allows them to access courses that they could not otherwise complete in traditional attendance modes. The related benefits to students include flexible attendance patterns which match their personal learning style and allow them to maximise the use of their available learning time, and reduced costs due to less travel. There are, however, some barriers to learning, which include equality of access for students to ICT equipment and specialist software, limited ICT skills on entry to their programme, and the availability of fast broadband connections, particularly in rural areas. While most part-time students value the flexibility of blended learning, a significant minority of full-time students reported that they preferred to study in the college rather than from home, due to the good access to fast broadband, other learning resources and for social reasons. However, this is in the context that, for the majority of these full-time students, blended learning was not a high priority when they made their course selection.

7.2 In one college, a comparison has also been made between the overall performance of students on the blended learning courses, with other courses delivered using traditional methods. The metrics analysed include student access to resources on the VLE, attendance, retention and success rates. On every measure, the pilot courses performed exceptionally well, providing a clear and direct link between increased student performance and the good use of ILT to enhance and support learning. A further positive spin-off is that when the blended learning resources were made available to other students following the same courses but attending in a traditional mode, they also made extensive use of the online resources and there are early indications that student achievements for these cohorts have also improved. Other colleges also report positive outcomes, including improved attendance and enhanced levels of student motivation.

7.3 Almost all of the students participating on the blended learning pilots have developed enhanced ICT skills; this is particularly true for students enrolling on courses that would not normally make significant use of technology such as academic General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level (A-level) and creative arts subjects.

7.4 There is clear evidence that the standards of students' work have either been maintained at a very high level on the blended learning pilots or, in a significant minority of courses, have increased. The improvement in standards is in part due to the frequent and effective use of online formative assessments with good quality feedback provided promptly to students, and the high level of support they receive from their lecturers.

7.5 The blended learning courses which worked best in the pilot were those that could be delivered in modules and also when there was either an external summative assessment or some form of time-controlled test. Courses with high levels of practical content, or which are largely based on continuous assessment, were less successful, for example, engineering and construction courses. In addition, there is evidence of strong demand for blended learning in niche specialist areas or courses such as the GCE A-level in Law which are only available at one or a small number of colleges.

7.6 The evidence shows that some of the key factors in the success of blended learning include:

- the extent to which students have previously used technology to communicate, prior to starting their programme;
- how well social interaction has been developed within a class prior to the requirement to use distance collaboration and communication tools;
- the students' confidence, both in the use of technology and in their wider communication skills, which is particularly the case for adult returners; and
- the extent of the online pedagogic skills and experience of the lecturer in managing and guiding online communication and collaborative learning.

8. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

8.1 The quality of curriculum provision across the pilot courses ranges from very good to satisfactory, but is mainly good. The blended learning delivery systems developed are based either on a hybrid model where one or more units of a course are delivered using online learning approaches, or the whole course, generally part-time, is delivered in a completely blended model. Both have their merits and the choice depends on a number of factors including, the expertise of the lecturers, student demand, availability of resources, and the suitability of the course subject area and assessment requirements. Future developments being planned by the colleges include extending existing pilot provision into related areas and, in one college, plans for a large scale project to apply some aspect of blended learning in every course. One college has developed a set of standards to internally evaluate the suitability of courses for future development. These standards rate the use of ILT in existing courses on a number of criteria and at various levels, from basic through to gold. The highest rated courses include significant use of online collaboration tools such as Wikis, discussion forums, online assignment marking and report back tools.

8.2 Highly innovative delivery models have been developed for a minority of courses including:

- part-time courses with timetabled virtual sessions where the students work from home either every other week, or three weeks out of four;
- part-time courses delivered in the workplace and supported by online resources; and
- full-time courses with asynchronous virtual sessions which students can complete from home, or in-college making use of the Learning Resource Centre (LRC).

8.3 The quality of teaching and learning is mainly good or better in both face-to-face and virtual learning sessions. Most of the online sessions are well planned and most VLE courses are well structured, with good variety and quality of content. The innovative practice observed includes:

- the effective use of blogs in formative and summative assessment;
- good use of social networking tools for students to share ideas with each other and in one case to provide critical evaluation of each other's work;

- excellent use of synchronous chat communication to support distance learning elements of courses and to maintain social contact between students during periods of non-college attendance; and
- the development of interactive learning objects with built-in formative assessment for use on the VLE.

8.4 While good progress has been made, most lecturers are not currently taking advantage of the full range of available facilities in their college's VLE. In a small number of pilot courses, lecturers report that the VLE is overly restrictive and they have supplemented it with popular social networking and other communication tools. In addition, the use of multiple platforms and communication tools can lead to fragmented systems with multiple logins and limited tracking of student participation and progress.

8.5 Across the colleges, there is outstanding commitment from almost all of the lecturers to the development, implementation and delivery of blended learning courses. This is evidenced by the significant time they invest to develop their own specialist ICT skills and to produce good quality, varied and stimulating online content.

8.6 Students on most blended learning pilots make significant use of wireless access points when they are in college. Most colleges have good wireless network coverage for students, in addition to well-equipped LRCs which are also popular study areas for students on blended learning courses.

8.7 A range of formative assessment tools are used well in a majority of courses, including online quizzes, discussion forums and assignment tasks to evaluate the progress of individual students in their learning. A small number of courses use online grade books on the college VLE to keep students and lecturers informed of each individual students' progress and their use of online resources. The lack of integration between the electronic Individual Learning Plan (e-ILP) and other college systems including VLE grade books means that records have to be duplicated manually, resulting in additional work for lecturers, delays in transferring records and therefore limited use of the system. While a minority of courses have trialled the use of e-portfolios, a major limitation is the lack of acceptance of this type of evidence by awarding bodies, particularly higher education institutions, leading to a requirement for student's work to be provided in hard copy for final assessment and verification. A further constraint is the quality of tools available in college VLEs to mark student work online. As a consequence, the lecturers tend to make use of the "track changes" feature of their word processing software which results in edits and comments to the students' work appearing to be much worse than they actually are, which some students reported was de-motivating for them.

8.8 The quality of pre-entry guidance, student handbooks and student preparation for the online learning elements of the courses is mainly satisfactory, with a minority of students reporting that they were not well enough informed at the start of the course about the blended learning requirements. A challenge for the colleges is to develop good induction programmes for students who are not sufficiently competent in ICT on entry to their programme, and delivery models that do not add a significant additional burden to students on top of their core study requirements.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 The four participating colleges have made very good progress in developing and running blended learning courses. The approaches taken by each of the colleges are very different, but collectively the developments have moved the sector forward significantly in the application of technology to deliver flexible learning solutions to meet the needs of individual students. Key outcomes include evidence that the effective use of ILT does lead to improved learning outcomes, and that flexible blended learning courses can widen access and increase participation, particularly among adult students. It is also clear that the lecturers involved were very committed and improved quite considerably their online pedagogic skills.

10. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

10.1 The following are the main key areas for development to support further improvement of the programme:

- the allocation of sufficient time for lecturers to develop good quality blended learning resources;
- enhanced arrangements to facilitate the sharing of good practice and the collective development and sharing of online learning resources across the colleges;
- the need for more focused staff development for lecturers, particularly the development of enhanced ICT skills to support the production of high quality, interactive online learning resources, and the pedagogy of using technology to support and enhance blended learning courses;
- the revision and improvement of the quality of course information and arrangements for pre-entry guidance, initial assessment and support to prepare students to undertake a blended learning programme; and
- the development of improved systems to track the attendance, participation and progress of students on blended learning courses.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

The following are best practice examples identified by the Inspectorate during the evaluation across the participating colleges.

1. Effective Strategic Planning - Southern Regional College. Key aspects include:

- the Curriculum Director provided strong leadership and a clear strategic vision of how the pilot provision would develop. This included a specific objective for the pilot (widening access and increased participation) which was linked appropriately to the college's overall strategy;
- senior managers had good curriculum knowledge which they used well to plan and develop the programme;
- the Director had an in depth understanding of, and leadership role in, the development of a sector-wide professional development qualification in technology enhanced learning;
- good planning led to the college selecting an appropriate niche market. These curriculum areas were also known strengths for the college, in which they had a good track record, all of which minimised risk; and
- this strategic direction, supported by effective operational management, led to a strong commitment for the enhanced use of technology across the college, with blended learning featuring strongly in strategic and operation plans for ILT. The pilot also informed the college's thinking about infrastructure for the future (e.g. what should it look like; the role for social networking tools, personal and mobile device connectivity).

2. Quality Assurance model - Southern Regional College. Key aspects include:

- at the outset the college selected courses for the blended learning pilot which would run in parallel with traditionally taught courses with known outcomes. This allowed direct comparisons to be made between blended pilot courses and the same course delivered in a traditional way, and to benchmark against the wider college provision;
- the team, quality unit and senior managers reflected on and reviewed the pilot provision regularly, leading to ongoing amendments as the pilot progressed (e.g. VLE enhancements, decisions regarding induction and pre-entry guidance, which other subjects/courses to offer in the future);
- good opportunities were included for students to provide honest, objective feedback at key points;

- the course teams and the quality unit completed a very sophisticated analysis of the performance of the blended pilot courses including, student access to the VLE benchmarked against other blended and non-blended provision, ranking of the courses on the college's internal performance tables (this ranks each course based on attendance, retention, and achievement) and comparison between the same course delivered using a blended and non-blended method;
- the evaluations clearly showed the positive impact of the effective use of ILT leading to improved outcomes. Each of the blended learning pilot courses ranked highly on the colleges performance tables, had among the highest VLE usage in the college (significantly higher than most other courses), and the lecturers observed improved standards for the students on the non-blended learning courses who were also allowed to access the blended materials, as compared to previous students who did not have these resources; and
- the self-evaluation report feeds into the existing quality assurance system and is ongoing. Pilot teams have been provided with the opportunity to share experiences with each other and within their school to encourage others.

3. College infrastructure - North West Regional College. Key aspects include:

- very strong physical infrastructure, well informed on feedback from external audits. The team are well resourced with very good leadership from senior management. Significant features in place include; a portal for staff to access all their files remotely including e-registers, learning resources, and electronic individual student learning agreements (e-ISLAs);
- plans are in place to tackle performance issues of the VLE through the use of a dedicated development server to allow testing for additional features that are not available on the live server. This should help address issues such as the ease of use for online marking of course tasks, given the lack of user friendly tools currently on standard VLE platform;
- college has wireless facilities throughout all areas in main campuses; and
- plans are in place to extend further the deployment of open access computers in one campus through an extension of the learning resource centre.

4. Innovative learning resources - South West College. Key aspects include:

- a group of lecturers developed innovative, high quality online resources to support online delivery;
- the learning objects were used very effectively to provide a clear structure for the online delivery. The objects contained a wide range of innovative interactive content such as; presentations with embedded podcasts, video recordings of the lecturer explaining topics combined with screen recording to demonstrate the use of software, videos demonstrating the correct use of equipment and, in one, very effective formative assessment student learning was measured at appropriate stages, using a range of strategies such as multiple choice questions; and

- the learning objects enabled the students to progress through the resources, developing and consolidating their understanding or recapping on previous face-to-face learning, reinforcing difficult concepts and principles.

5. HND music production - North West Regional College. Key aspects include:

- highly innovative approaches have developed over the programme, a long thin unit, that offers the advantage of having enough time to change practice;
- students post blogs based on their experiences after setting up systems. This is part of the students' formative and summative assessment. For final assessment they submit five (500-700 word blogs) to the lecturer, although only three are required. Throughout the programme they submit these blogs and receive prompt feedback from the lecturer. However, for a group of 18 students, the workload for the lecturer is considerable; and
- strong cohesion was obvious in the group, with only one drop out from the class. High levels of collaboration were evident within the class and online. The students have set up on their own volition a Facebook page to share ideas between themselves, this has no lecturer access, and reflects the high levels of maturity and confidence in the group.

6. HND photography and A-levels in Business and Law - Southern Regional College. Key aspects include:

- effective use of the blended learning pilot to widen access and increase participation in part-time further and higher education courses by selecting courses with a known demand from students who cannot attend in a traditional mode, mainly due to their work commitments;
- the college successfully attracted students into learning that would not be there otherwise, by carefully planning the curriculum, support and delivery model to closely match the students' needs;
- the entire courses were delivered in a blended mode with actual physical attendance requirements varying from one week in four, to every other week. The courses had regular timetabled virtual sessions in the remaining weeks, in which the students were required to participate using both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools;
- students enrolled are from diverse backgrounds and a wide geographic area. Many are travelling past other colleges to attend their course as they could not commit to attending a regular course every week. In the case of the A-level courses, which required physical attendance one week in four, the students' reported that this flexibility in attendance more than compensated for the long travel distances; and
- each of the courses was well structured with all of the necessary learning materials available on the college's VLE. The courses were very well planned and included a wide range of learning and assessment materials. The synchronous chat communication tool was used very effectively to support the virtual sessions and was supplemented by email and other social networking applications.

7. HND Sports Science - Northern Regional College. Key aspects include:

- marking for improvement through regular feedback on tasks set;
- evidence of progression in skills and standards of work, for example, presentation of work and referencing material; and
- breaking down the work into bite-sized chunks offers more flexible delivery for the students.

8. Foundation degrees in Retail and Sport - Northern Regional College. Key aspects include:

- the implementation and delivery of an appropriate qualification to support and enhance the role of the work-based mentors on the Foundation Degree in Retail. This was in response to the interim findings of the pilot and the college have introduced a Chartered Management Institute (CMI) qualification at level 5 for work-based mentors who indicate that they require support. The college are funding the qualification at no cost to the mentors;
- the development of additional units in the Foundation Degree in Retail in order to widen access and to meet more fully the needs of the students and employers across the retail sector. Units in Distribution are being developed, with the approval of the University of Ulster, which will enable the college to meet the needs of a wider range of employers across the various retail sectors; and
- a good evaluation of the Nutrition unit, which was delivered through blended learning on the Foundation Degree in Sports, has been undertaken by the lecturer. This compares the outcomes for this unit with two units on the course that were taught in the traditional manner. The outcomes are very favourable. There is also good use of formative assessment in this unit to support the development of blended learning and track and monitor the progress of the students.

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