

**Open and
Distance
Learning**

NATIONAL
REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE

2000-01

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 024 7686 3000
Fax 024 7686 3100
Website www.fefc.ac.uk*

© FEFC 2000 You may photocopy this report and use extracts in promotional or other material provided quotes are accurate, and the findings are not misrepresented.

Contents

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
Definitions	3
Distance Learning	7
Background	7
Reason for studying by distance learning	9
Learning	13
Students' achievements	25
Support for students	29
Management	42
Quality assurance	48
Staffing and staff development	52
Open Learning	55
Development of open learning	55
Learning	59
Support for students	65
Management	69
Quality assurance	72
Staffing and staff development	74
Recommendations	76
Annex: Student questionnaire	

Summary

There is an increasing interest in using open and distance learning to encourage participation in education and training and to update and build upon the existing skills of learners. In a few colleges there is substantial commitment to the development of open and distance learning. The largest enrolments on distance learning courses are in book-keeping, security guarding and information technology (IT). Much IT is also offered through open learning. The provision of courses leading to professional qualifications through distance learning, in close collaboration with employers, is small but important. Many distance learning students are studying at foundation level. They are rarely receiving the level of support they need to be successful.

Distance learning is defined in many ways, but it is generally agreed to be learning which mainly takes place away from college premises, with students having access to tutorial support. Distance learning is often an effective means of meeting the needs of employers and employees. The paper-based materials used by distance learning students are generally well designed. Staff understand and follow quality assurance procedures. Most receive appropriate training to improve their IT skills. However, distance learning often fails to meet individuals' needs. In some instances, initial guidance is inadequate for ensuring that students make an informed choice of programme of study. Induction procedures are often unsatisfactory. Students' needs for additional learning support are neither identified nor met. Key skills are not developed effectively, assessed or accredited. Opportunities for personal support are few. The use of IT to support students' learning is underdeveloped. Achievement rates are very low. Retention rates are low, though hard to measure accurately because colleges are not always certain whether students are still active learners or have withdrawn from their courses. Quality assurance arrangements have failed to produce improvements in retention and achievement. There is inadequate use of target-setting and performance indicators. Links between strategic planning and the management of the curriculum are weak and curriculum management is poor. Colleges rarely have accurate information on the costs of distance learning.

Open learning is harder to define than distance learning. It covers the work which students undertake on their own researching topics in libraries or learning centres. It also covers more formal regimes under which students take courses or parts of courses, working on their own in open learning centres, using resources designed for the purpose. In either case, there is regular face-to-face contact with staff who provide the necessary support for learning. Students are usually given a time allocation per week or per term for attending the open learning centre. The centres are attractive, welcoming places in which to learn and they often have good IT facilities. The range of open learning provision is broad and studying by

open learning suits the needs of students who prefer a more flexible approach. Open learning offered in community venues is successful in attracting and retaining students, many of whom attain the qualification for which they are aiming. Most colleges offer open learning students a well-structured and effective induction programme. Learning materials are of good quality and are well designed. There are effective systems for monitoring students' progress and recording progress and achievement. IT training is especially successful. Many colleges have analysed the value for money aspects of providing this type of training. However, the overall costs of setting up and running open learning centres both within colleges and at community venues is rarely carefully analysed. The information provided to prospective students is not always of a good standard and some receive inadequate advice and guidance when selecting their programmes of study. The quality of tutorial support varies, with IT students often receiving the most effective support. Students' needs for additional learning support are not always met. Learning materials are not always matched to students' abilities. Colleges are slow to modify materials where common difficulties have been identified. Technology has not been used effectively to make learning materials more interactive.

Colleges should ensure that distance learning students receive effective guidance and support. They should: address the unacceptably low levels of retention and achievement, ensure that they meet the learning needs of students working in isolation and undertake a more rigorous analysis of the provision. In respect of open learning, colleges should: ensure that learning materials are suitable for individual students and that staff are deployed effectively to provide students with appropriate support for learning. The funding council should develop and publish benchmarks for distance learning and examine the impact of local priority policies on the development of distance learning by colleges.

Open and Distance Learning

Introduction

1 This report is based on evidence gathered by inspectors on visits to 50 colleges to evaluate their open and distance learning, and on evidence arising from the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) normal cycle of inspections in the academic year 1999-2000. A questionnaire was also sent to 1,400 distance learning students on a wide range of courses. The response rate was remarkably high. Over 800 students replied, despite the fact that many questionnaires, distributed via the colleges, did not reach them until after the closing date. Inspectors are exceptionally grateful to the large number of distance learning students who took the time and trouble not only to complete the questionnaire but, in most instances, to give full and detailed answers to the questions. The questionnaire is included as an annex to this report.

2 The survey was carried out at a time of rapid institutional and technical change. Significant initiatives included the establishment of the University for Industry (UFI) which will create a national system of electronic learning. The UFI was in its pilot stage at the time of the survey. Its work is, therefore, not considered in this report. At the time of the survey, however, much open and distance learning was starting to make the transition from paper-based resources to electronic resources. The impact of information technology (IT) on open and distance learning was not as substantial as inspectors might have predicted. One important finding of this survey is that students with few or no qualifications, or who have not studied for a long period of time, are not successful when studying through open and, in particular, distance learning. More thought will have to be given to how these methods of learning can be adapted to meet the needs of such students.

Definitions

3 There is no wholly agreed definition of open and distance learning. The terms 'distance', 'flexible' and 'open' learning are often used interchangeably. The Council's own definition of distance learning is given in Council Circular 99/01, *Tariff 1999-2000*, annex A.

[Courses] on which students study with specially prepared learning materials for their private study and are provided with a marking and comment service for their work which may be in electronic format or on paper. The programme should be accompanied by some counselling or tutorial support.

Many colleges use this definition. Other descriptions of distance learning used by colleges include:

'Delivering learning away from traditional learning environments in a flexible way...'

'... work for a course which is conducted primarily from home with only occasional visits to college premises to access tutorial support'

'...where face-to-face interaction is unlikely or impossible.'

4 The term 'flexible learning' is widely used to cover both distance and open learning. Colleges felt that the term emphasises the difference between these forms of learning and 'traditional' classroom-based learning.

5 Colleges visited during the survey all agreed that distance learning is learning undertaken by students who rarely, if ever, attend the college. Distance learning takes place outside the college, sometimes well away from the college's local area, which raises the question of whether a college engaged in distance learning is meeting the FEFC's priority that it serve its local community. As learning on one's own using computer-based resources (e-learning) grows, colleges' missions in relation to local communities may require review.

6 Open learning commands much less agreement. At its most diffuse it can mean no more than students' attendance at a library or learning centre to research topics while preparing assignments. In more formal sessions tutors are present who are able to provide subject advice or general advice on how to use the available information to advance their studies. Many open learning students follow learning packages with tutor support.

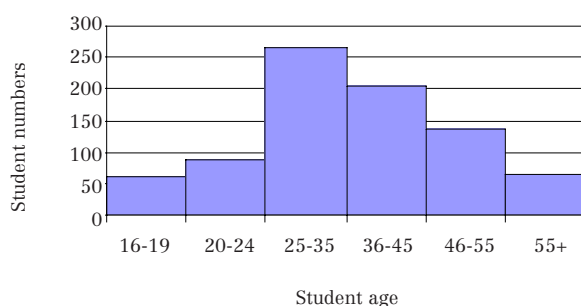
Distance Learning

Background

7 There were just under 300,000 enrolments on distance learning courses in 1998-99. A high proportion of colleges offer such courses but, in many, the provision is quite small. In all, 324 colleges offer distance learning courses. Of these, 55 have more than 1,000 distance learning enrolments, two have more than 20,000 enrolments and 126 have fewer than 100 enrolments. The largest enrolments by subject are in book-keeping, security guarding and IT. There are over 20,000 enrolments on book-keeping courses alone.

8 The majority of students who responded to the survey questionnaire were aged between 25 and 45 (figure 1). There were almost twice as many female respondents as male.

Figure 1. Age groups of respondents



Source: FEFC survey (817 respondents)

Reason for studying by distance learning

9 Students like to choose their own time to study. They often choose distance learning because it fits in with their work or domestic circumstances. Students include mothers with young children, people with aged parents, shift workers and people with mental health problems. Some students take distance learning courses because they suffer from agoraphobia. Others are in prison. A relatively new development has been the provision of distance learning for pupils who have withdrawn from schools. The reasons for choosing to study by distance learning and the percentage of respondents presenting these reasons are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for choosing distance learning

	% of responses
Able to choose own time to study	37
Able to fit study in with work	26
Only way to study this topic	7
Used distance learning previously	6
No course available locally	8
Family commitments	16

Source: FEFC survey

Number of responses = 1,523

Students' comments

'Distance learning is very easy...because you can study at your own pace. I have an autistic daughter and it is very difficult to go out because she is still at home. I would be very interested in other courses like childcare and psychology, which would help me a lot. But these courses are not available by distance learning.'

'I feel that as I do shiftwork I can fit my studying in around my varied start times. I have passed an ordinary national certificate on open learning and I failed the same course on block release. I find that as I can work at my own pace and there is no deadline for assessments, then I can revise in good time to prepare myself.'

10 Distance learning can be helpful in improving learning opportunities for students living in thinly populated areas. One college in the South West region serves an 800 square mile rural area where there is little public transport. Students preferred to study at home as it was both convenient and cut the cost of studying as no travel was needed.

11 Distance learning has been successfully developed to meet employers' and employees' needs to update skills or acquire professional qualifications relevant to their work. More than half of the respondents to the questionnaire were in full-time employment and 17% worked part time.

Good practice

One college works closely with an organisation that provides sheltered housing. Its workers are predominantly female and support clients in live-in settings in the community. Arranging cover for such workers to be away from their jobs is

difficult. Distance learning provides a solution to the need to train these staff with the minimum of disruption to their work.

12 One college's long-established distance learning unit is providing distance learning qualifications for corporate clients. Enrolments include 1,200 students on health and safety courses, 800 on courses for health and safety managers and 800 students on food hygiene courses. Another college supports employers in keeping their workforce up to date with changes in gas safety legislation through distance learning. A general further education college offers programmes in equine studies for workers in local stable yards to improve their skills and enable them to obtain nationally accredited qualifications. Another college has developed a wide range of distance learning programmes, which include projects to develop the IT skills of those in part-time or temporary employment and a separate national vocational qualification (NVQ) programme for those working in the 'events' industry. Distance learning is particularly valuable for members of the armed forces who may, for example, be ship based or temporarily posted overseas, often at short notice. Several colleges have developed courses to enable them to obtain qualifications in preparation for a return to civilian life. One college provides distance learning courses for a substantial number of students at a neighbouring military base.

Learning

13 Most distance learners are isolated and lack the mutual support which other students enjoy. The college tutor is their key contact and there is a blurring of the distinction between tutorial guidance and course-specific support. The quantity and quality of tutorial support varies between and within colleges. Most colleges describe the nature and extent of the support to which each student is entitled. This entitlement is most frequently linked to the

length of course, staff costs and the funding available, not to the needs of the students. At one college, tutors are allocated only one hour a week for every 10 students for telephone tutorials and, on a general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) English course, students are entitled to only six 30-minute tutorials a year. In contrast, one large college provides as much support as students require. The frequency of students' contacts with tutors is shown in table 2.

Student comment

'The tutor support is very poor on the business excellence model course. After three modules the feedback consisted of one line saying we were doing fine and should continue doing the same. In reality we felt we did not know if the work submitted was correct or met any standard.'

Good practice

In one college, the tutor contact time required has been identified for each distance learning course. The tutor time is based on the time given to other courses that have had good levels of retention and achievement in the past.

Table 2. Frequency of contact with tutor

<i>Frequency of contact with tutor</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
Weekly	13
Every two weeks	8
Monthly	23
When an assignment is completed	14
Only when there is a problem	42

Source: FEFC survey

Number of respondents = 716

14 Commonly, colleges do not take the initiative in contacting students. Many leave the student to make contact when they feel the need. Thus, students tend to see a tutorial as something which happens when they are having difficulty with their work rather than as part of a continuing dialogue which enables them to reach their full potential. A few students find telephone tutorials difficult.

Students' comments

'Although I am used to communicating by phone due to previous and current jobs, I do find it difficult to go through something I do not understand over the phone. I would like to be able to get face-to-face help with problems.'

'If I had a tutor that would phone me regularly to hear if I am getting along well that would be nice. However, I am doing well by myself – without the help of a tutor who hasn't bothered to ring.'

15 Some colleges with a substantial number of distance learning courses provide call centres which students can telephone. The centres have long opening hours, and provide technical and other kinds of support. In other colleges face-to-face tutorials are provided on request. The primary emphasis of tutorial support is specific to the course being studied, but, in practice, tutors deal with a wide range of questions. Students generally have a named tutor and, in many colleges, there are cover arrangements which operate when that tutor is not available.

Good practice

At one college, each student is allocated a tutor who contacts him or her within 10 days of enrolment. At their first meeting, the tutor and student discuss the programme and draw up a learning plan. Each student is given a log which provides information on the initial enquiry, tutorial dates, assignments and people to contact.

16 At most colleges, tutor support is provided by telephone, electronic mail or letter. In some cases, the support is on-line. Many colleges have set times, usually in the evening or on Saturday, when students can telephone for support. Others offer lengthy periods of time when tutors are available, to accommodate students on shift work. At one college, distance learning tutors are provided with mobile phones. When tutors are unavailable, students usually have to leave messages. Few colleges operate an alternative tutor service. Inspectors observed a telephone tutorial in which the tutor's supportive language, well-chosen leading questions and helpful responses to the student were particularly effective. One college has fast-vision video cameras that enable the tutor and student to communicate 'live'. It is also possible, using the computer, for the tutor to take over the students' work to illustrate how problems could be solved.

Student comment

'I have found my course to be excellent, very well organised. The tutor is readily available and very supportive. The college is confident enough to offer free repeat examinations should there be a problem with the first. I am halfway through the course now, and very pleased with it all so far.'

17 The learner is heavily reliant on the learning materials which form the main teaching medium. Inspectors did not find as many examples of learning using new technologies such as video or audio conference or virtual learning environments as might have been predicted. Most of the paper-based resources seen by inspectors were well designed and of good quality. With a few notable exceptions, however, the electronic materials were fairly unsophisticated. Whether paper-based or electronic, learning materials need to meet the needs of students working in isolation who do not have other students on hand to turn to for advice. It is vital that learning materials are conceptually sound, easy to use and attractive to the learner, and that, as far as possible, they anticipate and minimise learners' uncertainties.

18 In a number of colleges, the effectiveness of the resources is undermined by tutors' lack of expertise in referring to them. In some instances, tutors try to teach over the telephone as if they were teaching a class rather than concentrating on the materials with which the students are familiar. It is rare to find additional materials available to cover topics with which students are experiencing difficulties. In most instances, students are merely repeating exercises which they failed to understand the first time around. There is very little attempt within the materials to develop key skills.

19 The use of college intranets for learning at a distance is still at a relatively early stage. As some colleges are beginning to show, intranets have considerable potential to support distance learning since they provide access to such a rich mine of information. Intranets may also reduce the myriad of individual initiatives that have sometimes amounted to a re-invention of the wheel.

20 College policies on the use of home-produced or commercially published materials

vary. Some colleges have drawn up specifications for the production and evaluation of distance learning materials, though evaluations rarely include the examination of literacy and numeracy levels in the materials to ensure they are appropriate for the target group. In some instances, distance learning materials have been developed as part of the strategic partnerships which colleges have formed with companies, and teachers have been involved in evaluating and updating them. A number of colleges assess and test learning materials in the classroom before they are used with distance learners. The high cost of on-line materials appears to have limited the extent to which they are used for distance learning. One college uses the model adopted by software companies. It upgrades materials when there is demonstrated need, it provides upgrade support and carefully records who is using successive versions. In this college a programme team has to make a business case before learning materials are bought in. Updating is crucial. The best practice in keeping materials up to date is to be found in vocational areas. For example, on a gas safety course distance learners receive regular updates on changes in legislation, through a newsletter.

Student comment

'Most of the students on the course have great difficulty understanding what is wanted from the set assignments for each module. In fact with our results for module 4 we have received further instructions on how to understand module 5.'

21 The quality and frequency of feedback on students' work are important, both in building students' confidence and in ensuring that they make good progress. In practice, there are significant weaknesses in the quality and timeliness of feedback in many colleges.

Student comment

'Feedback on assessments has been very poor and not at all constructive. It is debatable whether or not the assessor has actually bothered to read the work submitted.'

Good practice

Learning packages are sent out every two weeks. They contain text-based learning materials, questions which enable students to assess their understanding and progress for themselves, and assignments for tutors to mark. Assignments are then returned to students with the next set of learning materials. Criteria for assessment are clear to tutors and students.

22 At one college, the head of school regularly monitors the quality of tutors' feedback to students in lieu of the classroom observation carried out on college-based courses. Such practice is not common. Even within the same college, students' experiences of feedback may differ significantly.

Students' comments

'My English course is very good with good communication through assignments with the tutor. The quality of the assignments is excellent, well printed. My tutor sends a page with it, where I can put comments on and when she sends it back she will also put comments about my work. I have been well informed of exam dates and each step of the course. Overall the English course is excellent. The mathematics course is very poor! Lack of communication with tutor, badly printed course material, no form to fill in with comments from me. The tutor returns my answer sheet with a few scribbled comments on the top.'

'The idea of distance learning through your employer is great. However, the success depends immensely on the calibre of your tutor. Colleagues on the same course, in different tutor groups received a much greater level of support and more constructive feedback. Considering the level of screening involved in applying for the course, it would be great to think the tutor was both supportive of your organisation and the students on the course.'

23 Most colleges set targets for the time within which students' work will be returned to them. These targets are not always met, however. For example, at one college, about one fifth of the assignments were not returned within the target time. Common practice in the colleges visited was for assignments to be marked and returned to students by post. In some cases, written comments were supplemented by feedback provided over the telephone on the tutor's, or more commonly the student's, initiative. Sometimes the college bears the cost of telephone calls, sometimes the student. On-line feedback is beginning to develop, but is not yet very common.

Good practice

At a college that supports navy personnel, tutors visit students on a two-monthly basis. Visits include travel to ships when they come into port anywhere in the United Kingdom. Each tutor keeps a record, updated monthly, tracking students' progress. It is fairly common practice for a response sheet to be sent out to students with their assignments. The responses are helpful in alerting the college to resource or time-management problems.

24 Students rarely use learning resources other than paper-based materials sent to them through the post. They are not encouraged, and

there are no strategies to enable them, to broaden their studies through the use of additional resources in the same way as students who are studying in a more traditional manner. It is not easy for distance learners to visit the college library or to take advantage of other college resources. Their reasons for not doing so included the opening times of libraries and learning resource centres or the distance they would have to travel to get to them. Those who were able to use the resources were generally satisfied with them. Not all distance learners were aware they could use the college's facilities. Some said they would find it more convenient to use the facilities at a different college, nearer to their home. The percentages of students using various college resources is shown in figure 2.

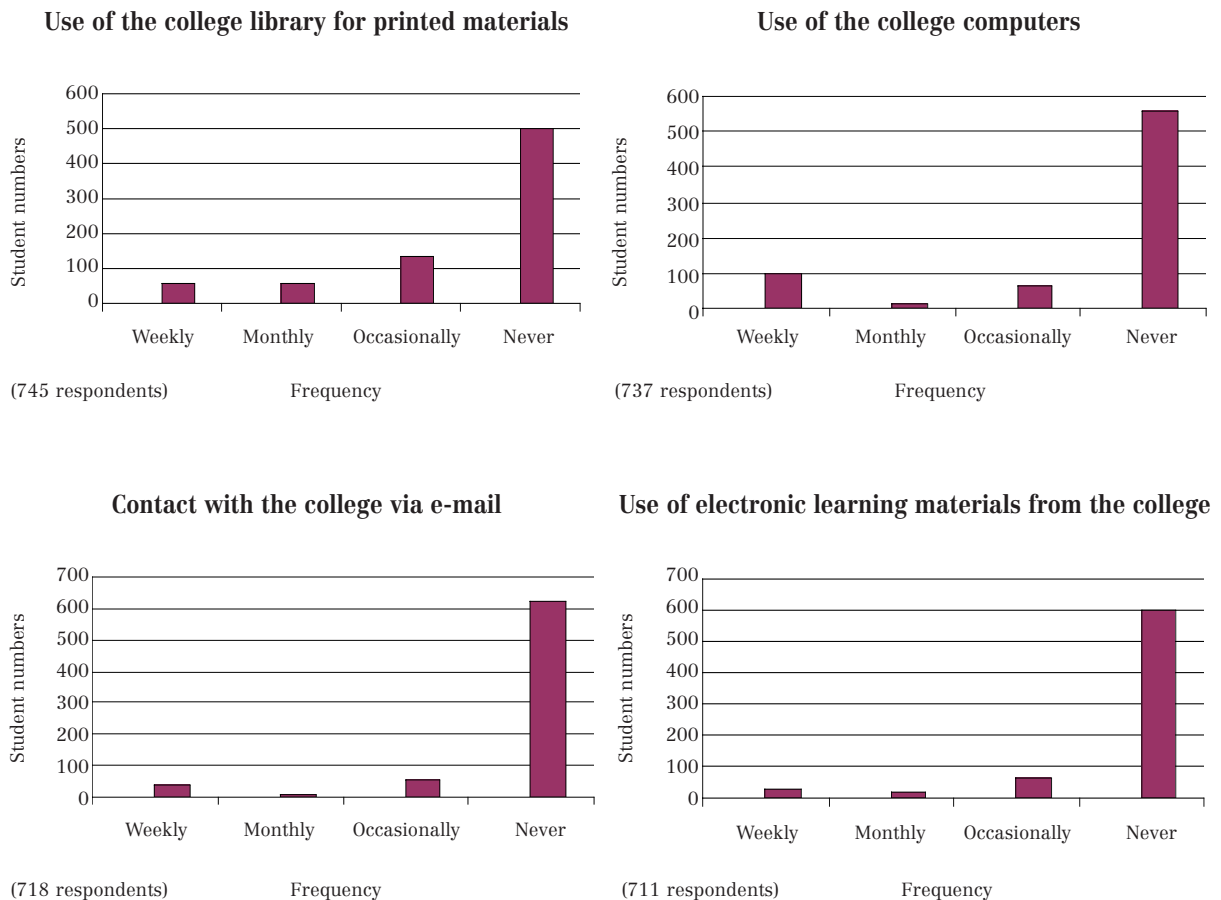
Student comment

'When we are studying such courses are we actually regarded as students – that is can we use college facilities in other areas? My course was through a college in the north east – I work in Kent and live in Hampshire.'

Students' achievements

25 The achievement rates for distance learners are usually presented as the percentage of students successfully completing the individual module or modules for which they were aiming. In the case of other learners, the achievement rate is the percentage of students achieving the full qualification. It might, therefore, be expected that the achievement rates of students studying by distance learning would be higher than those of other students. In fact, however, only 22% of the colleges offering distance learning courses had an achievement rate above 80% and 5% had an achievement rate below 20%. Only 27 courses have an achievement rate above 80%; 39 have achievement rates of less than 20%.

Figure 2. Use of college resources by students studying at a distance



Source: FEFC survey

26 Distance learners often take considerably longer to achieve their qualifications than other students. There are large numbers of distance learning students who are classified as continuing to study after the forecast date for finishing. For students who complete their courses, achievement rates are, at best, in line with national averages for all modes of study and frequently below them. Distance learning courses leading to a certificate in computer literacy and information technology have the same pass rate as that found for all modes of study. However, on security guarding courses,

which have the second-largest number of distance learning enrolments, the achievement rate by distance learning in 1998-99 was 16%, compared with 59% for all types of enrolment. One college failed to obtain a double-figure percentage achievement rate for the full qualification in book-keeping, for any of its distance learning cohorts over a two-year period. The distance learning pass rate for basic food hygiene qualifications is 10% below the national average for all modes of study and the pass rate for integrated business technology stage 2 is 5% below.

27 Academic courses also have low achievement rates. The achievement rate for general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) by distance learning is less than half that for all modes of study. Distance learning pass rates at GCE advanced supplementary (AS) are 12% below the average for all modes of study. The proportion of distance learning students achieving grade C or above at GCSE is 9% below the rate for all modes of study (table 3).

Table 3. Achievement rates by distance learning compared with achievement rates for all modes of study

<i>Qualification type</i>	<i>Distance learning achievement rate (%)</i>	<i>Achievement rate for all modes of study (%)</i>
GCE A level	35	77
GCE AS	46	58
GCSE (grade C or above)	33	42

Source: ISR

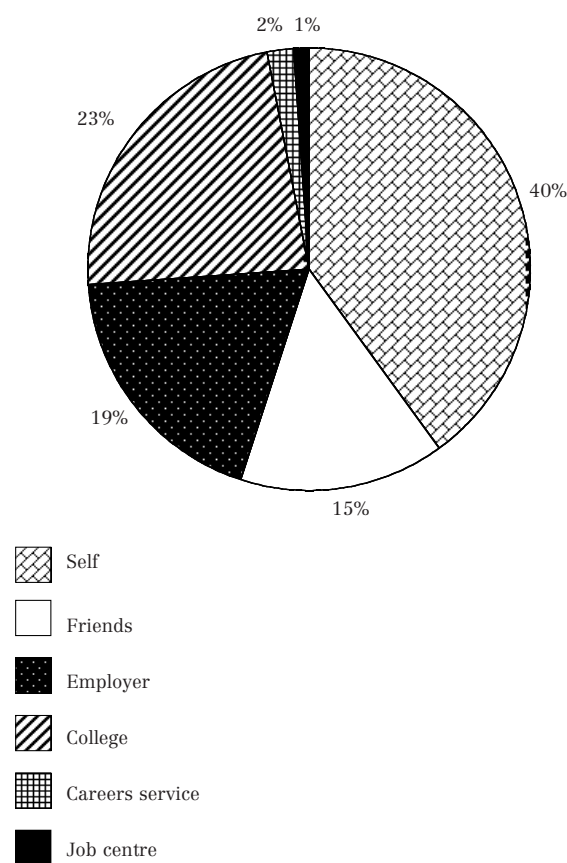
28 Retention rates can be misleading. Colleges find it difficult to ascertain whether or not students are still 'active'. Many students fail to complete assignments or to achieve any of their units, over considerable periods of time, yet colleges often make little effort to find out why. Even colleges that track the receipt of assignments carefully do not always make the link between a long period of inactivity and 'drop out'. There are also some inexplicable aspects of the college data. For example, the eleventh highest enrolling distance learning course in 1998-99 was an NVQ in serving bar food and drink, with nearly 3,000 students, but, according to the data received by the FEFC, all of the students had transferred to a new course. As a result, there were no retention or achievement figures for this course. On the data available, there were retention rates of 70% or above on courses leading to only 143 of the 2,742 qualifications available through distance learning.

Support for students

29 Colleges use a broad range of methods to inform potential students about the availability of distance learning courses. Pamphlets, prospectuses and other literature are distributed locally and copies lodged in public places such as community centres, libraries and post offices. Some colleges advertise in the local press. Some are beginning to use telemarketing. An increasing number of potential students are also obtaining information from college websites, particularly as they become more interactive and give more helpful and up-to-date information. A few colleges carefully monitor the number of visits sites receive. Word-of-mouth remains an important source of information. In some instances, students are guided towards distance learning when a college-based course fails to recruit enough students. Distance learning courses provided on-site by employers are often publicised by the

companies themselves. The ways in which respondents to the questionnaire used in the survey found out about distance learning courses are shown in figure 3.

Figure 3. Ways in which potential students learned about the availability of distance learning courses



30 The quality of the initial advice and guidance received by students varies considerably. Of the students surveyed, 42% said they had not received any guidance on the most appropriate course to study. Of those who said that they had, two-thirds attended personal interviews at which advice was provided by tutors. Almost all the students who received guidance said that it was helpful or very helpful. Only 5% said it was not very helpful or unhelpful.

31 Where practice is good, staff are well prepared to deal with initial enquiries about distance learning courses. They stress the high degree of personal motivation which students require if they are to succeed and draw attention to alternative study routes. In many instances, however, colleges place insufficient emphasis on the study skills required.

Student comment

'I wonder if there is some information on how to study. There must be some hints. I find it difficult to allocate time for study, no order, no control. In other words – what a mess!'

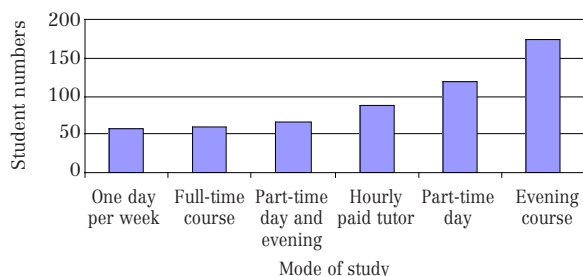
32 Many distance learning students receive inadequate information about alternative forms of study and about whether the qualification they are aiming for is suitable for their long-term goal. They are not always studying at the appropriate level. In one college, all students on a particular course enrolled at level 1 although it rapidly became obvious that many were capable of starting at a higher level.

Student comment

'As part of a large group for the same employer my course and units were selected by the college without individual consultation. In retrospect some units could have been chosen that better suited my job.'

33 Of the 826 students who answered the question about whether there had been discussion of alternative ways to study, before embarking on their course, 53% said they had not had such discussions with the college or its representative. Figure 4 shows the types of study that were discussed with the remaining students.

Figure 4. Alternative modes of study discussed with distance learners



Source: FEFC survey (388 respondents)

34 Effective guidance for students becomes a major problem when colleges employ private companies to enrol their students for them. It is difficult for the college to ensure that students receive comprehensive and impartial advice, especially when the person enrolling them is paid a commission for each enrolment.

35 Less than half the students surveyed had been shown examples of course materials before starting the course, to help them make up their minds about the suitability of the course and of this form of study. Most students who were able to look at learning materials before choosing their course found it helpful to do this.

Student comment

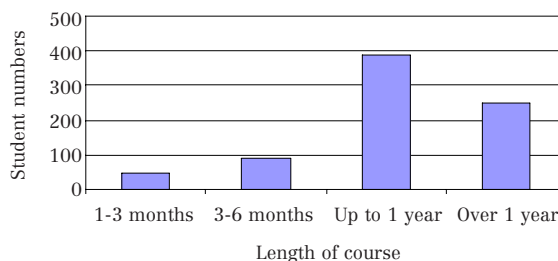
'I feel that I was given a hard sell for this course. The sales representative never mentioned the fact that I only had six days in which I could change my mind. By the time I looked at the course materials I realised it was totally inadequate. I found the course was a total sham and when I went through the desktop publishing element they recommended you did not need a computer. I feel I was robbed of £700 which I couldn't afford to lose.'

36 Many of the students embarking on distance learning courses lack formal qualifications and not enough thought has been given to identifying the support they will need. A few colleges carry out initial assessments of students to determine their learning needs and to see whether the courses they propose to study are suitable. One way in which colleges try to meet individual needs is by adjusting the length of study to suit the student. For example, at one college the students were given a choice of one year, 18 months or two years in which to achieve the same qualification and at another college, retention rates were improved, as a result of offering students the opportunity to extend the time taken to complete the college's standard one-year courses. The range of the predicted length of courses is shown in figure 5. Distance learning students often change the date by which they intend to complete their courses. This has made the colleges' and the FEFC's analysis of data on distance learners difficult. In some measure, it also reflects the inadequate guidance being given to students before starting their courses.

Good practice

A college with much experience of distance learning provides a special guidance interview for students who have not studied for 10 years or more to ascertain if distance learning is suitable for them.

Figure 5. Predicted length of courses



Source: FEFC survey (776 respondents)

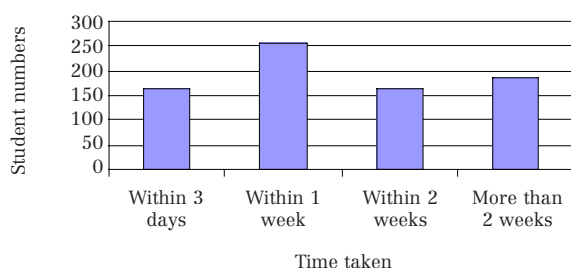
Good practice

One college undertakes a careful initial diagnosis of distance learning students' needs to ensure that they are entered on the right course. At another, there is a website which offers students the opportunity to assess their abilities for themselves, and to decide whether they are choosing the appropriate module for study.

37 Where colleges work in collaboration with industry to enable employees to acquire professional qualifications, students have to meet the requirements of relevant professional bodies. The college and the employers ensure, therefore, that the students have both the necessary qualifications and the motivation to study by distance learning. It is also important that the learning style preferred by the learner is well matched to the provision.

38 In some colleges, each distance learner receives an introductory pack which explains distance learning procedures. Generally, however, induction for distance learners is not as well planned nor as well organised as induction for college-based students. It is common practice for students to have an early 'taster' period before starting their formal course. Some new learners wait a considerable time after being accepted for a course to receive their initial information (figure 6).

Figure 6. Time taken to receive course information



Source: FEFC survey (765 respondents)

Student comment

I have applied to the college for GCSEs through distance learning, subjects include mathematics, English and business studies. Unfortunately, I have not yet received any response. The last time I contacted the college they told me that they have not yet received any information regarding the progress of this particular course and that as soon as they've accessed this information they would have contacted me, this was nearly three months ago and I am still waiting. I feel very disappointed, I could have applied for another course elsewhere and would have been well ahead.'

39 Even when students' learning support needs are identified they are not always met. This is a particularly important issue as so many distance learners are studying at foundation level. One college offers students a refund if it is later discovered that they need additional support to successfully complete the course for which the college has accepted them. One college has introduced elements of oral assessment to meet the needs of students with dyslexia. To study by distance learning can be difficult enough. Significant weaknesses in literacy and numeracy create an additional and daunting hurdle. Only one student, out of the 826 who responded to the survey, was receiving individual learning support on a regular basis.

40 Where students' needs for additional support have been identified, the support is usually provided through the tutorial system. Some students receive additional hours of tutorial support. Others are sent audiotapes. There are also examples of students with dyslexia being provided with personal computers. Tutors sometimes negotiate extra examination time for students who require it. Students on distance learning courses, however, generally receive less additional learning support than college-based students.

41 Personal support is also less effective. Many colleges have not given sufficient thought to the means of providing distance learners with advice on financial matters, personal counselling, or careers education and guidance. Distance learners often ‘take a course’ rather than plan a study route. Only a third of the students surveyed had received information about where they might progress after successfully completing their current course.

Good practice

Some employers provide distance learners with in-company mentors. The mentor’s role is to reduce the isolation of the learner, to give some support on curriculum matters and to liaise with the college. Mentors offer face-to-face contact, which is not readily available from college tutors.

Management

42 Many colleges have seen the development of distance learning as an important means of widening participation in further education. However, the focus has been on access to study not on how to ensure that students succeed in their studies and progress. Only a few of the colleges visited had made an explicit commitment to distance learning as part of their mission. The initial impetus for distance learning sometimes came from the need to secure more funding units. A few colleges are involved in distance learning because they believe that e-learning represents the way in which the market is moving. They predict that companies and individuals will use distance learning as the normal mode for updating and re-skilling. Even these colleges, however, have undertaken little research into distance learning, its appropriateness for learners, and forms and methods of learning at a distance which may better suit particular learners. They acknowledge that the lack of social interaction in learning could be a

disadvantage, particularly for those who are returning to learn.

43 Most colleges have not considered the strategic implications of the development of distance learning for the management of the curriculum. Nor have they given sufficient thought to the implications of distance learning for the relationship between the student and the college. The development of distance learning has usually taken place in a piecemeal fashion sometimes at the initiative of an individual or a small group, and has often been restricted to a few courses. Although colleges’ strategic plans and annual operating statements frequently refer to distance learning, few colleges have considered how distance learning relates to their overall strategy for the curriculum.

Good practice

The college has engaged in distance learning for many years, seeing this as a natural part of its provision. It conducts regular surveys of people living within the borough to ensure that it offers the courses and the modes of study which people need and want. Distance learning is integral to the college’s strategic objectives and forms an important part of its widening participation strategy.

44 The management of distance learning is weak. In some colleges, a particular department has responsibility for open and distance learning, in others there is a special unit which co-ordinates open and distance learning wherever it is located in the college. Distance learning tends to be managed either as a separate entity or as part of a more general management portfolio for external relations which includes, for example, franchising and business development. Links with curriculum areas can be tenuous, and there is little sharing of experience across distance learning provision and college-based provision. Some distance learning staff work

in isolation from their colleagues in the same curriculum area.

45 Colleges do not know the costs of distance learning because these are rarely disaggregated. Little or no account is often taken of the 'hidden' staff costs in producing learning materials. Notional allocations of tutors' time in making contact with students is sometimes substantially exceeded in practice. At the moment, it is impossible for most colleges to engage in any meaningful cost-benefit analysis.

46 Colleges have inadequate knowledge of students' progress on distance learning courses. Although log sheets are commonly used to record all contacts with tutors, the records focus more on the incidence of these contacts than their significance. Most logs record the grades which students achieve, but there is little evidence of the skills being developed, and rarely an individual action plan. Some know less about the students who seldom make contact though these may be the ones in most need of help and advice. Other colleges have set in place procedures to ensure that these students are contacted, so that the college can decide whether they are making progress without regular support, whether they need more support or whether they are still on the course. In practice, it is particularly difficult to establish whether or not students remain active. A few colleges continue to support students even after funding has been withdrawn. Even those colleges that assiduously log every contact with students, carry out little analysis of the data they are collecting.

Good practice

At one college a comprehensive tutor information pack carefully explains the difference between open and distance learning, full-time and part-time study. The staff development programme, which part-time staff are paid to attend, covers the development of schemes of work, effective

tutoring, improving learning materials, keeping learners on track, and designing electronic self-assessments.

47 Retention and achievement rates on distance learning courses often fall short of the targets which colleges have set. In some cases, there are no separate targets for distance learners, simply targets for the curriculum area as a whole. Many colleges are trying to compare retention and achievement rates for distance learners with those for other students. In practice, however, they find this difficult because of the lack of relevant benchmarks. Colleges have not been good at devising their own internal benchmarks; for example, comparing the performance of different groups of distance learners, or the performance of similar groups over time. Data are not always reliable, not least because of uncertainties about when a student finished a course.

Quality assurance

48 In most colleges, the quality assurance procedures applied to distance learning are the same as for other provision. Distance learning is included in course reviews. Staff evaluate the quality of teaching and learning, and analyse retention and achievement rates. On occasions, quality assurance procedures are more specific to distance learning with little connection to college-wide systems. For example, at one college, ISO 9000 is applied to distance learning and there are no systematic links with other aspects of the college's quality assurance system. Sometimes quality standards for on-line learning provide performance indicators for aspects of distance learning. Service standards applied to distance learning include the frequency of tutorial support and the time taken to mark and return students' assignments. Some colleges have obtained external kitemarks for open and distance learning, such as the kitemark awarded by the British Association for Open Learning.

49 Some self-assessment reports have a section devoted to distance learning but, in most cases, distance learning forms part of the assessment of a much wider area of work. There has been some observation and evaluation of the learning which takes place on distance learning courses. Observation has its limitations, however, because it is not possible to observe teacher and learner simultaneously, unless on-line. Some of the self-assessment reports, in the colleges surveyed, contained action plans aimed at improving the quality of distance learning.

50 The use of student questionnaires is widespread. Sometimes, questionnaires are addressed specifically at distance learning students but more often they are curriculum area questionnaires or college-wide questionnaires, which may not always take full account of the needs of the distance learner. In some colleges, there are also surveys conducted by telephone. Colleges rarely seek the views of those who have withdrawn from a course. In many cases, they also fail to respond effectively to information gathered from responses to questionnaires and surveys. Inspectors found the same issues and the same complaints reappearing regularly in analyses undertaken by colleges. They could not always find evidence of action by the colleges to address these issues.

51 Quality assurance systems have had little impact on student outcomes; particularly the length of time it takes students to achieve the qualifications for which they are aiming, and the poor retention and achievement rates. In many cases, the quality of the advice and guidance given to students before they enrol is also unsatisfactory despite the emphasis given to this in quality assurance procedures.

Staffing and staff development

52 Most of the staff who teach on distance learning courses also teach on college-based courses and many are part-time teachers. Staff need a great deal of training and support to

develop the skills necessary to work effectively with distance learners and the extent to which colleges ensure that they develop these skills varies greatly. There is some staff development for staff writing learning materials or converting existing materials for use on-line. In other respects, the emphasis of the training is on gaining familiarity with the learning pack rather than supporting students. In one college, staff marking distance learning assignments said that they had had an in-depth introduction to the material and felt that they had been very well supported. However, their training consisted only of a morning's session with a consultant. Generally there is not enough staff development which specifically addresses the needs of distance learners.

53 It is fairly common for colleges to hold regular meetings of small groups of staff to share good practice and some of these meetings involve those teaching on distance learning courses. The extent to which good practice in teaching at a distance is shared with other colleges is unclear. Some of the national organisations concerned with open and distance learning stage conferences and seminars and these have been useful in alerting staff to the various ways in which problems can be tackled. Few staff possess teaching qualifications related specifically to open or distance learning.

54 At many colleges, staff development has concentrated on improving the IT skills of staff to give them the confidence to deal with students who are using e-learning. One college has introduced some courses that focus on the design and development of on-line study materials. One Internet-based course leads to membership of the Institute of IT Training. Other useful examples of IT development activities include staff training for video conferences, the training of administrative staff in electronic mail support, and training for staff to develop specific distance learning materials.

Open Learning

Development of open learning

55 Most colleges have developed learning resources for full-time and part-time students on college-based courses, which are specifically designed to enable students to study effectively on their own. Estimates in several colleges indicate that 10% of students are involved in some form of open learning during their courses. In a number of colleges, the development of open learning followed from the college's involvement with the National Open College Network (NOCN) and the consequent requirement to develop well-structured learning materials to support NOCN programmes. In many colleges, learning support is provided in open learning centres in which students develop their numeracy and literacy skills using open learning resources. In several colleges, open learning has been developed to meet the training needs of specific commercial organisations or the specific needs of students, such as oil-rig workers. Open learning provision includes IT, business and management courses including accountancy, language programmes, engineering often from level 3 upwards, health and safety, basic education and GCSE and GCE A level courses.

56 Open learning centres are generally attractive places in which to study, and are often the result of considerable investment by colleges. They are used by all students on all modes of study. Most centres have good IT facilities and many colleges are developing intranets that provide access to learning materials on-line including video materials. In the best-resourced centres, relevant CD-ROMs and access to Internet sites supplement other learning materials. Occasionally, video-conferencing facilities at outreach centres allow direct contact with tutors. Some open learning centres have academic and/or support staff on hand to support students; others have not.

57 For many colleges, the major incentive to develop open learning has been the need to offer IT training for adults, in a flexible way, at a relatively low cost. Many students see IT training as a route back into work or the opportunity to update existing skills. Some colleges have developed open learning to allow them to continue to provide minority subjects. Others say it has been in response to the low levels of funding for some programmes of study. For example, a few colleges felt that the tariff arrangements did not provide enough guided learning hours on a number of programmes and that students required additional contact time, now provided through the learning centres. At one college, all course teams are required to deliver a proportion of the course through open learning and to produce the necessary learning materials. Open learning is not always the most appropriate method of learning for the topics selected and the quality of the learning materials is variable.

58 Open learning in IT is extensive. It is a suitable method of learning, and provides flexible access to education and training, for many students. Provision ranges from courses in computing specifically for women studying mainly at home, but attending tutorials and some practical sessions at the college, to a basic introduction to IT which is very widely offered. A centre at one college contains over 100 workstations, specifically for open learning. It is advertised independently of the college although it is on college premises and staffed by college employees. The centre provides a good adult environment which serves the needs of individuals and businesses.

Learning

59 As with distance learning, tutorial support is the mainstay of open learning. It varies in scope and quality and students' experiences of it differ considerably. The amount and type of tutorial support differs between colleges, the various programmes of study and the subjects

being studied. Students on practical courses, such as those relating to the development of IT skills, receive effective support from subject specialists.

Good practice

At one college, tutors are available in person or on-line through video-conferencing facilities. They are able to take over a student's terminal to demonstrate the practical skill or concept being developed. This quality of support is available to all students in all locations whether they work on the college campus or in community centres.

60 The most easily accessible subject-specific support is for students on IT courses. On other courses, arrangements are not always as good. Where there are subject-specific learning centres, students are generally able to obtain timely support. In other cases, subject support is available only at set times of the week.

61 At a number of colleges, subject support is separated from other tutorial support. In these cases, tutorials supplement the regular contact with staff in the learning centre and provide opportunities to discuss both personal and academic matters. In some colleges, tutorial support is provided effectively to small groups of students, with those requiring most attention being given additional individual support. Some colleges increase the flexibility of contact with tutors by enabling students to contact tutors through electronic mail or by telephone.

62 Although open learning students are usually entitled to the same additional learning support as other college students, their needs are not always identified or met effectively.

63 Students mainly use paper-based resources or 'electronic page turning' resources, where paper-based materials have been transferred to a computer programme, for their learning.

These resources are generally well structured and well presented. However, content is not always well matched to the ability of the student. Although care is taken to ensure that materials are at the appropriate level for the course, it is rare that the reading level of materials is assessed as being suitable for particular students. While many colleges asked students for feedback on learning materials, few took systematic note of the questions most frequently asked by students, in order to review and modify materials.

Good practice

In one college that developed its own materials, the focus was on the use of plain English, short sentences, effective use of diagrams and photographs, interaction with the students, questions to reinforce key points, and logically structured programmes.

64 There is little use of technology to make learning materials more interactive and more interesting to the learner. Computer-based learning packages take considerable time to develop and trial. For example, at one college a training package covering Association of Accounting Technicians programmes took 12 months to develop and evaluate. The use of computer-based interactive learning materials is generally still at an early stage of development on most courses. The conversion of existing materials to this format is expensive of time and is cost effective only where there is subsequently a high level of usage. On some programmes, automatic links to the Internet or intranet web pages allow students to review a wider range of learning material. A number of colleges, however, question the need to move to electronic interactive learning materials and the associated high costs when existing materials work effectively. The advantage of learning materials which are produced in-house is that the college can develop a house style with which

students are familiar and that the materials are easily altered without breaching copyright. A number of colleges, however, buy in all their open learning materials and, sometimes, the differing formats create difficulties for staff and students, particularly if they are involved with more than one course.

Support for students

65 The information on study by open learning which colleges provide is not always of a good standard. The best publicity material expressly identified the specific nature of open learning and stressed the importance of self-motivation and the development of study skills. A few students said they had obtained their information on courses through the college website.

66 Students need clear, honest advice and guidance on open learning. In some colleges, staff are trained to give initial guidance on the range of courses offered and other curriculum staff are drawn in to help advise students as and when necessary. In a number of colleges dealing with franchise partners, the advice being provided to students is inadequate to prepare them for the difficulties of study by open learning. Entry requirements for franchised open learning courses are generally the same as for the equivalent full-time or part-time courses running in the college. Some colleges indicated that there is more flexibility over entry requirements for foundation level programmes by open learning.

67 All students embarking on an open learning programme receive some form of induction. In most instances it is well structured and effective. Full-time students who receive additional learning support through open learning centres are generally inducted in the operational procedures of the centre and how to use the materials. In a minority of cases, students were obliged to book induction sessions rather than having the right to receive them. Induction generally emphasises the support

which the college provides. Many colleges provide comprehensive guides to the course and to study arrangements. Not all check that students understand the contents of the guides, however. At one college, all open learning students are given an in-depth induction which is specific to this form of learning. At another college every student attends an advice session in which the operation of each aspect of the programme is explained and learning support needs are identified. At some colleges, students are given an initial assessment, after which an individual learning programme is negotiated. Not all students have their learning support needs identified early in their course. For example, a college with large provision for open learning in IT conducts no assessment of additional learning needs at the beginning of students' programmes of study. Induction for students on franchised provision on employers' premises tends to be more informal. Often, there are no structured materials.

Good practice

In assessing its open learning provision, one college found that students who receive 'face-to-face' induction and are able to meet other students on the same programme of study make better progress than those who join later and do not have these opportunities.

68 Most colleges have recording and tracking systems which allow students' progress to be monitored effectively and their performance on assignments to be recorded. Some colleges continue to rely on paper systems, which generally means that only a few staff have knowledge of students' progress. Others have moved to electronic records that are more accessible to staff. Details recorded normally include times and dates of study, work completed and grades awarded, work in progress, and the study plans specific to each student.

Management

69 Open learning, offered in a range of locations in local communities, is frequently successful in attracting and retaining students. It makes a substantial contribution to colleges' missions to widen participation in further education. Initiatives to attract learners include open learning centres on company premises, the targeting of local business and franchise provision for IT. Local centres allow students to attend with little or no travel costs. 'Saturday colleges' increase the opportunity for students to gain access to learning.

70 Most colleges have estimates of the costs involved in providing open learning centres. However, many have difficulty in gathering the information necessary to make fully informed management decisions on the cost effectiveness of these centres and their value to the organisation. Often, colleges can only make estimates of the costs of developing learning materials, their overall use by students and the proportion of staff time used. A few colleges still do not monitor the extent to which students use open learning centres. Because colleges include different elements in their overall costings, sector comparisons are difficult to make.

71 Many colleges have developed successful centrally co-ordinated administrative systems to support the staff involved in open learning. Enquiries are recorded, initial advice is given on the courses available, records are kept of students' performance, and contact is maintained with students. Strong administrative systems also enable colleges to monitor retention and achievement rates for open learning students across the college. Effective co-ordination at senior management level is a factor in ensuring that high standards are maintained.

Quality assurance

72 In all the colleges visited, open learning staff were working within the college's quality assurance arrangements. In some colleges, the lack of good data on retention and achievement on open learning courses made the setting of targets difficult and, in a number of cases there were no retention and achievement targets. Few colleges set sufficiently challenging targets for open learning.

73 Feedback from students is generally seen to be a critical aspect of quality assurance for open learning. The use of questionnaires is widespread and colleges appear to act, where necessary, after analysing the responses. At one college, it was clear that students perceived additional learning support as a remedial activity for low achievers. The college, therefore, changed its systems and this led to a 20% improvement in the take-up of support and a subsequent increase in retention rates. The achievement of the British Association for Open Learning kitemark is a target for several colleges.

Staffing and staff development

74 In a few colleges, the level of staffing for open learning is inadequate in relation to the number of students present. A particular problem occurs when there is a high proportion of new students who often require high levels of support. Inspectors have found that where there are more than 18 students to one tutor the support is generally less than effective.

75 Staff development in colleges varies in its thoroughness. Many teachers have developed the necessary skills to support students studying by open learning, but often through trial and error rather than a structured staff development programme. While many colleges are aware of the need for staff development there remains a significant minority of colleges that provide little or no training to allow teachers to develop teaching methods appropriate for open learning.

Good practice

In one college, staff development activities for open learning tutors over the last 18 months have included sessions on effective tutoring, improving learning materials, keeping learners on track, designing self-assessment, and using electronic communications.

Recommendations

76 The recommendations of this national survey for colleges, the UfI and the funding council are:

Distance learning

For colleges to:

- ensure that distance learners receive guidance and support equivalent to that provided for college-based students
- address the unacceptably low levels of retention and achievement
- ensure that provision meets the needs of students working in isolation
- undertake more rigorous analysis of distance learning provision.

For UfI to:

- note the report and use it to inform planning.

For the funding council to:

- develop and publish benchmarks for distance learning
- examine the impact of local priority policies on the development of distance learning by colleges.

Open learning

For colleges to:

- ensure that learning materials are appropriate for students and that staff are deployed effectively to meet students' needs
- enable students to receive appropriate learning support.

Annex

Open and Distance Learning

Student questionnaire

Please indicate your response to each question with an X in the appropriate box.

General information about you:

Age group:	16-19 <input type="checkbox"/>	20-24 <input type="checkbox"/>	25-35 <input type="checkbox"/>	36-45 <input type="checkbox"/>	46-55 <input type="checkbox"/>	over 55 <input type="checkbox"/>
Gender:	F <input type="checkbox"/>	M <input type="checkbox"/>				
Employment:	Full-time <input type="checkbox"/>	Part-time <input type="checkbox"/>	Unemployed/retired <input type="checkbox"/>			

About the advice and guidance you received:

1 How did you discover that distance learning was a possible way to study?

Independently (on my own) <input type="checkbox"/>	Through friends <input type="checkbox"/>	Through employer <input type="checkbox"/>
Through college <input type="checkbox"/>	Through careers service <input type="checkbox"/>	Job centre <input type="checkbox"/>

2 How did you contact the college in the first instance?

Telephone <input type="checkbox"/>	E-mail <input type="checkbox"/>	Internet <input type="checkbox"/>	Letter <input type="checkbox"/>	In person <input type="checkbox"/>
------------------------------------	---------------------------------	-----------------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------------

3 What are your reasons for choosing supported distance learning for achieving your qualification? (choose all those that apply)

a. Choose own time to study so more convenient for me	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Only way to fit study into work pattern	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Only way to study this particular topic	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Used this method of study in the past	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. No course available locally	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Family commitments	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Other (please state) _____	

Please indicate your response to each question with X in the appropriate box.

4 Were any of the alternative ways to study discussed with you? (Choose all that apply)

- Full-time course Part-time during the day One day per week
Evening course Combination of part-time day and evening
Buy tutor time by the hour at a time that suits you

5 a Did you receive guidance on the most appropriate course to study?

Yes No

b If so was it by:

Telephone E-mail Internet Letter In person

c How helpful was the guidance?

Very helpful Helpful Not very helpful Unhelpful

6 a Were you shown examples of the course material you are going to use?

Yes No

b Was this helpful in making your decision to study?

Very helpful Helpful Not very helpful Unhelpful

7 How long before you received course information?

3 days 1 week 2 weeks Over 2 weeks

8 How long have you been told your course will take?

1 to 3 months 3 to 6 months Up to one year Over one year

Please indicate your response to each question with X in the appropriate box.

About your course

Name of course: _____

9 How long before receiving information about a named contact (tutor) after acceptance on the course (study programme)?

3 days 1 week 2 weeks Over 2 weeks

10 Which are the two most frequently used methods of contacting your tutor? (indicate with 1 for the most frequent and 2 for the next most frequent)

Telephone E-mail Internet Intranet
Letter In person Video conference

11 If the tutor is not available when contacted what alternative administrative support is offered to you?

Message taken Referred to another tutor Asked to call back
Told tutor will phone back None of the above

12 How frequently do you have contact with your tutor?

Weekly Every 2 weeks Monthly Only when I have a problem
When I have submitted an assignment/unit
Other: (Please state) _____

Please indicate your response to each question with X in the appropriate box.

13 a Are you in touch with other students studying the same course (programme)?

Yes No

b If you are in touch, how is this achieved (indicate using 1, 2, 3 etc for the main methods, most frequent first)

Telephone E-mail Chatline Letter

In person Video conference

Other: (Please state) _____

14 a How often do you use the following general college facilities?

Library (use printed material) Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

Computers for general use Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

Electronic mail Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

Internet for searches Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

Learning materials held electronically (including assignments, etc.) Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

Multimedia (use learning materials interactively) Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

b How easy is such access?

Very easy Easy Acceptable Difficult Very difficult

c If your response was difficult or very difficult, was this because:

Not a part of the contract? yes no

Distance from the college? yes no

Times of opening? yes no

Please indicate your response to each question with X in the appropriate box.

15 a Are you given opportunities to comment on the efficiency and effectiveness of the course (programme)?

Yes No

b Have you received feedback on the results?

Yes No

16 Have you found distance learning an effective way to learn?

Yes No

17 Would you choose a distance learning course again?

Yes No

18 a Are you intending to continue with any course (not necessarily by distance learning) after completing this course?

Yes No

b Have you received information on progression to other courses at the college or elsewhere?

Yes No

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. It forms a valuable contribution to this national survey that is identifying what students consider to be good practice in supporting their learning.

If you have other comments about any aspect of your course that you wish to make please use the space available on the next page.



Additional comments

A large empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for additional comments.

FEFC Inspection Report

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
© FEFC 2000

November 2000

Extracts from this publication may be reproduced for non-commercial, educational or training purposes on condition that the source is acknowledged and the findings are not misrepresented. This publication is available in an electronic form on the Council's website (www.fefc.ac.uk)

Further copies can be obtained by contacting
the communications team at:

The Further Education Funding Council

Cheylesmore House

Quinton Road

Coventry CV1 2WT

Telephone 024 7686 3265

Fax 024 7686 3025

E-mail fehcpubs.fefc.ac.uk