

International Centre for Learner Managed Learning (ICLML)
Middlesex University

University supported online learning for SMEs

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An evaluation of Superior Stella

An HE ESF Objective Three National Project

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CONTENTS

PART ONE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
PART TWO: THE SUPERIOR STELLA PROJECT	5
2.1 Background	5
2.2 Summary of the project	5
2.3 Focus of the evaluation	7
PART THREE: THE EVIDENCE	8
3.1 Sources of data	8
3.2 Pre and post surveys	8
3.3 Interviews and discussions	10
PART FOUR: DISCUSSION	20
4.1 The importance of pedagogy	20
4.2 Completion Rates	21
4.3 Support	23
4.4 Overall	24
PART FIVE: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	25
5.1 Specific recommendations	25
5.2 Overall recommendations	26
5.3 Further development	27
References	28
APPENDICES	29
Appendix A: Super Stella (2001) Executive Summary	29
Appendix B: Screen captures of the project hub.	31
Appendix C: The four Superior Stella modules	32

Acronym	Context in the report
CPD	Continuing professional development
HEC	Higher Education Capability
ICT	Information and communication technology
ISM	Institute of Supervision of Management
Lotus Notes	A commercial VLE
M	Manager (project partner)
ROTI	Return on time invested
S	Student (SME learner)
SME	Small and medium sized enterprise
SS1	Super Stella project (original)
SS2	Superior Stella project (current)
T	Tutor
VLE	Virtual learning environment
WebCT	A commercial VLE

PART ONE: Executive Summary

The Project

1. Superior Stella is an ESF funded project aimed at testing the continuing need for local support for web-based learners in SMEs and exploring ways in which this support might be effectively provided by higher education institutions.
2. Four university partners were established as cluster leaders, recruiting students from local SMEs to work on modules supported by themselves and by other partner universities.
3. A website was established to act as a marketing tool and a central hub for staff and student access to project information, learning resources and communication tools (Appendix B).
4. Modules were offered in administration for the graphic arts, marketing, cyber work and finance (Appendix C).
5. Recruitment of SMEs proved to be difficult, so a variety of strategies was used, resulting in staggered enrolments with knock-on problems for group discussions.
6. All recruits were provided with induction to key processes including the virtual learning environment, but because irregular enrolments ad hoc inductions were used.
7. At the time of writing, overall completions were low, averaging less than 30%.

The Research

- 2 Research data were collected from web surveys, interviews, group discussions and emails.
- 3 Feedback is discussed in the context of literature on online and SME pedagogy and e-learning completions, and the experience of the earlier Super Stella project (Appendix A).

The Issues

- *How can ICT overcome the barriers to the recruitment / induction of SMEs into the learning community?*

The experience shows that SME recruitment can be sporadic, not easily fitting into rigid university schedules. Induction activities and lively online discussions groups are crucial so they need to be planned and managed in ways that can accommodate this staggered flow of students and patterns of access. Even the best VLEs require a programme of familiarisation for both tutors and students. SME applicants are likely to have low confidence in this at the beginning. SME students have limited time, so unreliable systems quickly dampen motivation. SME patterns of study make it difficult to ensure effective online discussions and tutor availability when needed.

- *To what extent can local supervision by universities and university staff help overcome these barriers?*

Local support fails if there is not a clear and open communication system between the VLE administration, management, tutors and technical staff. Awareness of access to information must be highlighted.

- *Are university-provided on-line programmes in ICT, business development and supervisory training sufficiently attractive to help overcome the barriers?*

In general yes, but the evidence also suggests that the topics alone are not sufficient in themselves to attract and sustain interest. The pedagogical approach, one that enables participants to take ownership of the programme and relate it to their work-place needs, is as important, as is support.

- *What advice can be offered on how universities can use ICT to make a significant contribution to support and energise the small firm sector?*

Whilst many university subject areas are of general use to SMEs, conversion of campus based materials needs to be done specifically with SMEs in mind. Such conversions work best when they are personalised, adaptable by the student to personal and work circumstances, have clear protocols for tutorial support and access to support services, and lead to some form of recognition. ICT can make an effective contribution by focusing on the development of a culture of community of practice that builds confidence, critical mass of participation and mutual understanding of the different parties involved.

- *What can we learn from the completion rates on such programmes?*

We need to expect completion rates to be lower than those normally associated with campus programmes, partly because of the difficulties normally associated with SMEs but also because of the characteristics of e-learning in general. Higher Education Institutions should invest in developing a comprehensive 'attrition management' programme as outlined in Part Four.

- *Can Superior Stella programmes and activities be mainstreamed?*

The mainstreaming of online programmes for SMEs needs to accommodate the different patterns of SMEs and regular university tutors. Flexibility of time, place, content and style are major pluses for the SME but they present major difficulties for mainstream academics working on regular university schedules.

Conclusions

The positive and negative experiences of Superior Stella confirm the overall proposition that the key to successful HE interventions for SMEs is an effective local support service covering all aspects from first contacts, through induction, accessing materials, frequent help and feedback, accessible tutoring, peer networking and reward for effort. This confirmation is highlighted by the difficulties encountered.

- a) Future investment should focus on communities of practice of SMEs and Universities, and on appropriate pedagogical models.

PART TWO: The Superior Stella Project

2.1 Background

Superior Stella is an ESF funded project managed by Higher Education for Capability (HEC) on behalf of a partnership which includes Leeds Metropolitan University, Staffordshire University, Middlesex University and the London College of Printing assisted by Zennor Consulting and Futuretrend Technologies. Most of the partnership previously worked on Super Stella, an ADAPT project focused on the delivery of ICT based training to SMEs as a test bed for implementing the Ufl initiative. As a successor to Super Stella, Superior Stella aimed to test the importance of the Super Stella observation that there was a continuing need for local support for web-based learners in SMEs and to explore ways in which this support might be effectively provided by higher education institutions.

Super Stella, the earlier project, was concerned with the experience of online mentors for shop-floor or office supervisors in SMEs, and of work-place supervisors providing e-learning support for their supervisees. As far as possible the programme offered by Super Stella was related to the personal aspirations of employees to gain experience and professional qualifications likely to further their careers (ISM Certificate) and their effectiveness at work. Abacus, who provided the Super Stella mentoring service, had considerable experience of working outside education and providing mentoring programmes for employees in industry. The framework for the online interventions was provided under the auspices of the Institution of Supervision and Management, a body experienced at working with employees at the level of the target beneficiaries.

The challenge undertaken by the Superior Stella project was somewhat different from that of its predecessor, that is to explore the experience of SME employees taking e-learning programmes provided and supported by educational institutions. Taken together the two projects provide an interesting insight not only into e-learning as a suitable medium for SME development but also the different contexts in which learning support is provided.

2.2 Summary of the project

2.2.1 Initial aims

Superior Stella project set out to implement and evaluate a methodology for providing support for SME online learners on a collaborative basis, drawing on the commitment and expertise of Super Stella partners. The aim was to establish HE partners as cluster leaders, and that each partner would

- provide one item of learning materials aimed at supporting SMEs, viz:
 - Middlesex University on business audit and entrepreneurship development;
 - Leeds University on mentoring and human resource development;
 - Staffordshire University on ICT training and ICT & business development; and
 - London College of Printing on supervisory level management training for the creative industries.
- recruit 20 SME beneficiaries for all the learning opportunities - i.e. 5 for their own programme and 5 for each of the other 3 clusters.
- provide personal support and guidance for learners in their geographic area and teaching and assessment for all students studying their course.
- provide training for all support tutors as mentors.

The project also aimed to enable SME beneficiaries to log on to a host server for their online training at the institution providing their learning materials and to offer beneficiaries the opportunity to convert their learning into academic credit.

2.2.2 The actual project

The modules

In the event, the actual modules that were presented were slightly different from those originally planned, to take account of changed circumstances in the partner universities whilst remaining consistent with the interests of SMEs. The modules offered were:

- Administration for the graphic arts
- Marketing
- Cyber Work
- Finance

Each cluster planned to use generic tutors for overall support and subject specific tutors to deal specialist issues.

The website:

A key feature of the project was the creation of a dedicated website (www.superiorstella.org.uk) to serve as a marketing tool and, more significantly, as a central hub through which users could gain access to materials and support. In addition the site was used for the pre-survey of users and as a vehicle for user feedback. Screen images of the website are presented in Appendix B.

The site described the purpose of each project plus details of its aims, intended outcomes and contents. The details of the modules are presented in Appendix C.

As well as offering online resources, the site provided direct links to the partner's virtual learning environments (VLEs). A discussion board was provided to support communication, although it was not utilised.

Guest visitors liked the site. Here are some typical comments taken from the guest book form.

"A first class site. Would like to see curriculum of learning materials on offer."

"Superior Stella is a powerful tool that can enhance the learning experience."

"Superior Stella is a must for serious students! It's great to know that such web sites are available."

User feedback is presented in Part Three.

2.3 Focus of the evaluation

Whilst focusing on the specific experiences of the Superior Stella project, this evaluation also embraces those aspects of the earlier Superior Stella project on which the current project builds. Both projects were concerned with e-learning in an SME context and their collective experience gives useful insights into the wider picture. To help the reader, the two projects are referred to as SS1 (the earlier Super Stella project) and SS2, the current Superior Stella project.

2.3.1 Main questions

Overall the evaluation is concerned with learning more about the **pedagogical** aspects of providing effective e-learning interventions for SMEs and the extent to which e-learning adds to or overcomes traditional **barriers** to SMEs participating in the learning community.

Based on SS1 experience and the aims of the SS2 project, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

- How can ICT overcome the barriers to the recruitment / induction of SMEs into the learning community?
- To what extent can local supervision by universities and university staff help overcome these barriers?
- Are university-provided on-line programmes in ICT, business development and supervisory training sufficiently attractive to help overcome the barriers?
- What advice can be offered on how universities can use ICT to make a significant contribution to support and energise the small firm sector?
- What can we learn from the completion rates on such programmes?
- Can Superior Stella programmes and activities be mainstreamed?
- What other issues arise?

The evidence is summarised in Part Three and discussed in Part Four in the context of experience elsewhere.

PART THREE: The evidence

3.1 Sources of data

In preparing this evaluation, the authors have drawn on data collected from:

- observations of team and management meetings
- an online pre-survey of participants' backgrounds and expectations
- telephone interviews with students and tutors
- email correspondence with the partners
- group discussions at programme inductions
- end of project email survey of participants
- discussions with cluster managers and project administrators.

In addition, the authors have drawn on experience in the wider research literature on online learning in the SME work-place, pedagogical design issues and supervisory practice elsewhere and have participated in national and international workshops on issues relevant to the project.

A major difficulty encountered by the evaluation team was that cohort members enrolled at different times even when on the same programme and were often difficult to track down, reflecting the difficulties in recruiting from SMEs. Members of the same programme would be at different stages of individual progress, some at the beginning and others at later stages, making cohort feedback from group discussions difficult to achieve. Some participants were recruited towards the end of the project timetable and are still at the early stages of study. For these reasons a full set of follow-through research data for each and every participant does not exist. Instead, there are data drawn from 44% of the total constituency (i.e., $n = 35$), sufficient to give clear indications of the experience as a whole.

3.2 Pre and post surveys

The strategy for pre-survey data collection was to use paper-based surveys at the inductions and then transfer the information onto the 'private access' web form on the Superior Stella web site. A 'results page feature' was developed for the project to allow just-in-time access to survey progress and statistics from any web browser. (See Appendix B)

3.2.1 Results from the pre-survey

Geographical spread: The original plan of the project saw recruitment being evenly spread across the four partner clusters with 20 students from each. The aim was that each partner would have five local students and fifteen remote students. The final recruitment did not have such an even

geographical distribution. Of those who had completed the online survey at the time this report was compiled, 28% were from Staffordshire, 53% from Middlesex, with 9.5% each from Leeds and LCP.

Experience of the medium: The typical participant had more than three years of some kind of ICT experience (60%). A clear majority (88.57%) of the participants had fairly-high / high confidence levels in the use of 'office tools', word processing, spreadsheets, e-mail and the web. On the other side of the scale, almost all of the students had no experience of using online learning or commercial virtual learning environments (VLEs) and had low confidence or no expectations about using such systems.

Only about 20% of the students expressed a fairly high understanding of using features in a VLE such as: accessing content, self-assessment, reviewing materials, doing online tests, checking their progress, communicating with others online and gaining help or support. When prompted to anticipate their likely use for these features most of the students had no expectations.

A clear majority of respondents (up to 85%) did not have high expectations of the return on their time invested in using the VLEs features to support their learning experience (see end of project survey).

3.2.2 End-of-project e-mail survey

The end of project survey was completed via e-mail exchanges with participants to facilitate discursive comments.

Half of the respondents for the end-of project e-mail survey (n = 10) were geographically located in London (Middlesex cohort). The Staffordshire marketing course was done by 50% of the students participating in this summary, 20% were doing the Middlesex programme, 20% were with Leeds and 10% were with LCP.

a) **Induction:** Most of the people (60%) completing the end survey also did the pre-survey and were involved with their cohort's induction (70%). The induction strategies evolved over the time of the project. Initially, they were intended to be half-day, face-to-face events. Students were to be given the necessary enrolment forms, research surveys and instruction on the use of the virtual learning environment. Because of difficulties in recruitment and pressure on time (see later) this was changed into several variations:

- Face-to-face inductions for small groups or individuals,
- Inductions as one-to-one sessions in an hour,
- E-mail inductions with attached documents.

40% of the respondents to the end-survey had done their inductions individually with the tutor.

b) Dropout: 70% of those who completed the end survey had dropped out of the course before completion. Due to the late start of some participants, the exact percentage of drop out is uncertain at the time of writing for this report.

c) Perceived return on time investment (ROTI): Student assessments of the value of the time they spent on key processes at various stages of the programme were generally disappointing:

- With respect to the **induction** procedure 40% of the students had a fairly high return on the time they invested in preparation to study online.
- Half of the respondents felt they had a low-to-fairly low ROTI for learning how to **navigate** within their online learning system.
- As to using the **online learning materials** and content only 30% of the learners felt a fairly-high to high return on the time they spent working with it.

d) The use of the online learning tools: Since the courses offered in the project were not for academic credit, it is not a surprise to see that 70% of the respondents were unsure of the online assessment. However, since two of the four courses use a discussion-based curriculum design, it is a disappointment to see that 60 - 70% of the students responding to the survey said that using the online communication tools was unknown to them.

e) Recommendation of course to others: Only 30% of the respondents said they would recommend their course to others.

3.3 Interviews and discussions

Analyses of qualitative data collected from one to one interviews, group discussions and e-mail focus on a number of issues. Extracts are presented anonymously, though we identify whether the source is tutor (T), project manager (M) or student (S).

3.3.1 Flexibility

Although flexibility is normally seen as a strength in e-learning, in this project it became an issue for the management of programmes.

“This project falls down from the ‘free’ nature of cost. In some ways the design is too flexible (M).”

This will become more evident in the following discussion about the recruitment and induction procedures conducted in the project.

3.3.2 Models of student recruitment

Recruitment of SME employees to the programmes proved to be very difficult despite there being no fee to the student. Several techniques were used to meet the collective target of 80 students. One recruitment strategy used by two of the partners was to contact SME participants from previously funded research projects. This technique had a high return rate where the recruitment team has a large SME base to choose from. The downside of this approach was that the SMEs on the recruitment list became saturated from too many projects.

Another recruitment strategy was to enlist students who were registered at the partner academic institutions on courses similar to those offered by the project, and who were working in SMEs. This method did not seem to yield participants with as strong a commitment as those recruited directly from the companies.

A final strategy to get membership in the project was to invite personal contacts of the recruitment team who fitted the SME requirements. This approach had a good initial response rate, but was not seen by the recruitment staff as a long-term solution and had other pressures on managers:

"I was worried that they may not like the course I persuaded them to join (M)."

One of the outcomes of the different recruitment models used in this study was that different cohorts started at different times. In some cases, this caused students to have difficulty in logging into their virtual learning environments. Some recruiters felt that

"this makes the induction process embarrassing when you don't know if the students can log into the system (M)."

VARIABLE RECRUITMENT PATTERNS CONTRIBUTED TO A BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATION. SOME RECRUITERS SAID:

"DT (a partner recruiter) sent us only student phone numbers, but we could not get through (M)."

"It is important to have pre-set registration and induction dates. There was too much flexibility (M)."

To have a better number of participants, cluster leaders felt that, in an academic institution, it was important to have support from the marketing department but this was not always forthcoming. In some cases it was felt that

"project priority was an issue. Some may not have had the project as high as others (M)."

3.3.3 Recruitment of generic tutors

Generic tutors were the local partners' online support staff. Several issues emerged in the process of recruiting these members of the project team for a moveable programme with staggered intakes and variable rates of progress. Flexibility is OK for students but not for university staff:

“There were problems in keeping tutors on for the duration of the project since many of them were full-time lecturers with other commitments. We used appropriate people, but not enough were available for back-up (M).”

Each cluster partner had their own interpretation of the tutor’s role and protocols for responding to student queries. Though most used e-mail, one cluster resorted to mobile phones because of technical difficulties.

“We used mobile phones as a primary method of student contact since we have had problems with our e-mail system (M).”

Where modules were provided as an addition to previously timetabled activities, tutors expressed concern about the nature of their commitment and the extent of their responsibility to respond to their students.

“Would this be a 24/7 position (T)? “

3.3.4 Cost-free/non-accredited model

The project provided a no-fee course that neither was academically accredited nor led to professional certification. Students often started out with a strong motivation to enrol even though most of the students recruited joined because they were asked to do so by their employers or by the partner recruitment team. Many with high motivation at the outset wilted over time. There was a sense, by some students, that since there was no cost there was no real value to the course. One suggestion was to charge a ‘refundable deposit upon successful completion’.

3.3.5 Induction models

The project started off with an induction model built round face-to-face sessions lasting half a day. During that time registration, introduction to the virtual learning environment and the research survey were done. It was felt that with this induction model

“the induction would develop a group ethos and pave the way for online interaction (M).”

From this model a more concise induction evolved completed in one hour.

“This led to problems with the online group chat approach used in some of the courses (M).”

An online induction version was produced by one of the partners. Students received an email with induction instructions and several attachments to send back to the appropriate administrators.

“The weakness in this system was that we had no direct link to see who received the induction materials, as the registration and research forms were sent directly to the (host) office (M).”

One partner offered a possible solution from a different project.

“We do our inductions on Saturday mornings. Breakfast is offered and it is an open induction process (M).”

3.3.6 Local supervision

There were two types of online learner support in this project: generic tutors and subject expert tutors. Most of the project interaction was between students and generic tutors, with relatively little contact with the subject specialists. This section will discuss some of these issues.

The generic tutor's job was described as follows:

- Answers general, not specific questions,
- Can access all learning materials,
- Should be able to access answers to things they don't already know (i.e. – using the VLE),
- Has more of an administrative role,
- Should monitor student's involvement and progress in the course,
- Should border on being a student themselves,
- Should keep a record or log of events.

Not all of these tutor job descriptors was enabled in the course of the project. It was technically not possible for the tutors to have equal access to all materials since all partners did not activate their VLEs at the same time. Communications between the partners were, therefore, difficult and the cause of frustration for some of the cluster leaders and students.

"I sent emails and left messages on the phone, but still have not heard back from my tutor (S)."

This miscommunication also prevented the tutors from exchanging diaries or learning logs for comparison, although the online forms were available on the Superior Stella website. There was an interest expressed by tutors to have a mass meeting of all staff, but due to time constraints and conflicts in schedules this did not occur.

3.3.7 Generic tutor's impressions

Three issues were expressed at the start of the project by tutors in the hope of providing a good learning experience for their students. First, it was felt that learners should have ICT (information and communication technology) competence as a pre-requisite. The project pre-survey showed a strong level of experience and confidence in ICT skills, but not in the use of virtual learning environments. Next, tutors stressed that students need to express their questions clearly.

"People with weak communication skills will be weak with online chat (T)."

Lastly, because of the variable levels of inductions described in the previous section, it was difficult to ensure that all students had a clear idea of the role of the generic tutor.

"Students should have a clear understanding of the generic tutor's role at the start of the course (T)."

3.3.8 Generic tutor's concerns

At the start of the project, the generic tutors expressed an interest in a private online discussion area to share concerns and exchange experiences. This discussion board tool was offered on the Superior Stella website. Review of the utility showed little actual use by generic tutors. Technical

miscommunication, described earlier, may have been the problem. Details of the online discussion board, ID and password were either not fully disseminated to all staff or were not fully understood.

“As a late arriving tutor in the project, I was not informed (by our cluster leader) that we could contact other tutors (T).”

Initially, tutors hoped that experience in the project would add to their own skills and feed into their other work. Only one of the partner clusters expressed that this had been the case in the study.

“We will make some changes in the size of our curriculum for our next project, based on the feedback from Superior Stella students (M).”

3.3.9 Student response to tutor support

Students gave voice to a wide range of views on how they felt the generic tutors supported them. Some students did not contact the tutors at all, using others more immediately available help:

“My husband printed off the material and worked (independently) on the train (S).”

while others received a timely response –

“I got a response in 5 days – which was fine (S).”

Support and access to the system were sometimes issues:

“Assistance was available (from the recruiter), but access to the materials came much later (S).”

“No emails were sent to me at home, but they may be in the online system (S).”

In some cases, a local staff member offered support when the generic tutor was not available:

“I had no contact from my tutor, just a phone call from (M) who recruited me (S).”

Other students expressed a negative experience with their generic tutors.

“The worst part was to post things on the web (VLE discussion board) and you don’t get any feedback personally (S).”

“There was no tutor contact that I can recall (S).”

3.3.10 Issues related to HE tutors

The staff in this project felt that two procedures could help. First, tutors and students should have learning contracts, which make explicit the parameters of the tutor response. Second, guidelines for online communication should be provided at the start of the course recommendations.

Common protocols on tutor roles, communications and response rates proved difficult to implement since communication between the partners was not always co-ordinated. Participants had mixed responses. There were consequential difficulties in co-ordinating different functions. The key issues arising were access, content and support.

“The content would have been OK, but for non-existent mentoring (S).”

“I work with a local e-business agency. Since I never saw the programme, I can’t incorporate it into my business (S).”

"I asked for help, but could not re-enter the (VLE) site to receive a reply. I found support from and the running of the actual site to be a long winded and disjointed affair in seeking and receiving help (S)."

"I have a problem in so far as I am not always able to get into the web pages. I simply have to give up and come back later (S)."

In answer to the initial question, if Higher Education is an appropriate host to SME training projects, there were some firm responses, such as:

"The whole thing needs managing by someone from the business world. Academics are just not geared to undertake such a project (S)."

To counter this position another view was given.

"Organisations need expert tutors to expand the dissemination of e-content. The Superior Stella project is a test-bed to develop generic tutors (M)."

There was one important ethical concern raised in this study. As in similar research projects, all participant experiences in this report are cited anonymously. However, the issue of confidentiality was contentious in two key areas of the project. First, the tutors were asked by the researchers to keep a copy of all email correspondence with the students for analysis as part of the review of the effectiveness of on-line supervision. Since some partners saw this as an infringement of the privacy of the students it was decided that personal issues should be dealt with privately by telephone. Email was to be used strictly for course matters. Such access was still resisted as a departure from normal university practice. Second, concern for privacy was carried over to the public bulletin board discussion area of the virtual learning environment. The same protocols were suggested for this online communication media. It was noted that, *"according to UK law, companies are allowed to read their employee's email and files (M)."* A suggestion for future e-learning projects is to make explicit in the partnership agreement and student registration forms that this issue is a condition of participation in projects focused on tutor – student transactions.

3.3.11 Completions of the courses

There was a full range of degrees of completions. On the low extreme some students registered but never started.

"Some students come in and sign-up, but don't work. For example, the March and April students have not even logged into WebCT yet (T)."

Some students started but did none of the coursework.

" We had five people register for our course. I sent emails to them, but only one person replied (T)."

Others dropped out after a few weeks. Finally, a small percentage (less than 30%) of those surveyed successfully completed the online learning tasks.

A number of factors are cited as contributing to student drop out. Motivation was linked, in part, to recruitment strategy.

"I was asked to do this by work. I was not really interested (S)."

The student's preferred learning style enters into their motivation to complete the course.

"My (face-to-face) group induction was good. The tutor was good too, but the e-learning depends on your circumstances. I can do it better from a book (S)."

A key concern for SME learning is finding the time to do the course.

"I did not complete the course. I spoke to (the recruiter) about this. Online learning is not for me. I don't have time. I have two teenagers who want to use it (S)."

Support from the SME is always a critical factor.

"I can't do this at work (S)"

From a marketing point of view, some partners felt that the geographic diversity of the students may have been an attraction to recruitment.

"For marketing the project a mixed geographic cohort was a plus (M)."

Lack of certification in exchange for the effort was also a factor in drop out.

"I dropped out. I did submit some things to the discussion board, but there was no other interaction. My tutor contact was OK, but I'm too busy at work. Logging in to check discussions is time consuming. If it were a certified course, I'd have finished (S)."

3.3.12 Communications within the project

This project used a very complex communications and resources model. Each academic institution had its own existing recruitment and enrolment procedures, its own commercial virtual learning environment, (i.e. - Lotus Notes or WebCT), its own course curriculum and pedagogical design such as a small group discussion or individual content-driven models. Clusters were recruiting students to take modules in other universities. Co-ordination was therefore very difficult to achieve.

"In the Open University model there is administrative backup for registration, help and support."

"These are difficult to co-ordinate. We need an easy way to manage the systems to take a load off the projects."

"(M) has not decided on a strategy. Anything outside of the face-to-face model is a strain (T)?"

Project moderation guidelines were seen as an area of need. When a new student from a partner joined a course, tutors and peer students should be notified.

"We need to find out what hours students can meet and where they are geographically (M)."

Tutor guidelines were drafted for the project, but dissemination of information was another problem area. Two suggestions came out of discussions with tutors to improve project communication. In one cohort mobile phones were used as the primary means of communication between tutors and students.

“We need to have a note pad to record the time of the call, the name of the student, what was the call about and what action was taken. We do this with our Learndirect programme (M).”

Communication within the virtual learning environment was also seen as an issue. To increase the level of activity in online discussion areas these suggestions were made:

- Post a personal profile or CV,
- Insert a photo,
- Do an ‘ice breaker’ or ‘get-to-know-the-group’ activity (i.e. list your reason for doing the course, share some personal interests, etc.),
- Make submission to the discussion board part of the marking scheme,
- Synchronise the recruitment process with the discussion activity deadlines.

Tutors said, *“We are trying to encourage the student community to develop. We don’t want them to feel alone in the virtual learning environment (S).”*

3.3.13 Structure of programmes

A number of other issues related to the structure of the programme arose. These issues were access to support communication, developing a staggered cohort design and curriculum size and pedagogical designs. Possible solutions are offered from the project to problems that were encountered.

a) Access to VLE support. Communication within the virtual learning environment was a difficulty shared throughout all clusters.

“I couldn’t access the actual site without a great deal of struggling. When (T) facilitated access, I found it (the virtual learning environment) forbidding and impossible to navigate. I had no idea how to begin the course or how to access the course materials (S).”

Even the tutors shared this problem.

“We had problems logging into the partner VLEs. We were ignorant of their courses (T).”

Adapting the recruitment and induction strategy was seen as the way to deal with this issue.

“With different partners starting inductions at different times a concern was raised about having mutual starting times for the curriculum. This was a factor with modules with collaborative group activities. This was also a concern for students doing more than one course. It was suggested that these students should alternate module work as opposed to waiting to start the second module once the first was complete (T).”

b) Duration. Another issue arising from the study was the number of study hours required to complete the course.

“The length of the module is too long. Content should be ‘chunked’ into smaller sizes. It would be good if milestones were established to help with pacing (T).”

“One student said that she had to stop after five weeks. The current course runs 60 to 80 hours. Thirty hours seems more workable (T).”

c) Structure. Related to this problem was the course curriculum and pedagogical design for each cluster. Students had mixed feelings about the content structure.

"The induction was good to find out about the details, but the initial part of starting online had too much information. The first task was a bit much. Perhaps it could have been done during the induction? I would recommend this programme to others for the information, but not for the ease of use (S)."

But, access flexibility was seen as a plus.

"I'm doing two modules so far. To be honest, I do them at 6:00 am at home. I guess this shows that the time flexibility is useful (S)."

However, some students preferred a paper-based approach.

"Usually in a module you get a course book. It would have been good to have one main text that you could hold (S)."

d) Assessment was seen as a factor related to the low rate of completion.

"Because there was no assessment model, I think this became an issue. The structure of the material may be a problem. We could change the activities to not always give sample answers (T)."

"There was no distinctive qualification at the end of the course (S)."

e) Interaction A difference was noted in the online materials and the use of discussion activities.

"There are two approaches to online learning. One is to have online books; we wanted to have online interaction. I always envisaged an interactive topic supported by online communication tools. In our course we teach the tools we want to use. This was a mistake. It requires collaboration and co-operation between the students. It did not dawn on me that we would have a staggered, fragmented cohort. We wanted to encourage the students to interact between geographic locations. We may have lost students because of this (T)."

A student's experience validates the above tutor's fear.

"The best part of the course was the structure; simple and easy to use. The worst part was the lack of interaction with students. It was very time consuming and there was little or no discussion between the working groups. If this was different I may well recommend it to others because I had such high expectations. I have been unable to have a good crack at it (S)."

f) Administration and communications. Organisation, communication and timely responses were seen as key elements.

"About two months after my initial request to join my motivation slumped to around zero. It never really happened. It needs more organisation and a speedier response from co-ordinators (S)."

Tutors reflected a similar experience.

"I don't know about any of the other tutors. There does not seem to be a lot of project management (T)."

"There needs to be a project manager to monitor student and project progress (T)."

"I would have liked to have had a meeting with all of the tutors and this would have had the effect to bond the group (T)."

There were, in fact, regular meetings held throughout the UK at each partner cluster location. The difficulty, as with most projects, is to get everyone's diary clear to meet at once.

A central repository of partner data was seen as one solution towards improved communication.

"I don't want to nag. I was not the fastest of the mark. To be able to play my role properly, all of those involved need to be communicating in some ways. Specifically, we all need to know how to enrol students on each other's programmes. A central collection of this data could be circulated (M)."

As cited earlier in this report, the website has the potential to support this need. However, communication is, again, a crucial factor. If people do not know about the utility in the website, it will not be used, much like the tutors' discussion board facility.

Perhaps academic institutions are not best equipped to deal with the management constraints as evidenced by these comments:

"When one tutor pulled out of the project, we had to adapt (M)."

"As a tutor, I felt a vacuum. Only two weeks ago we knew that the class was going. Doing the project during the university assessment period is a big issue. I will have to balance my marking with my tutor's role (T)"

PART FOUR: Discussion

Feedback from participants in the Superior Stella (SS2) project is discussed in the context of experience from its predecessor Super Stella (SS1) and wider experience of e-learning for SMEs.

4.1 The importance of pedagogy

The evidence from both the SS1 and SS2 projects highlights the importance of getting the right pedagogical model for SME learners. Hitherto, much of the hype about the efficacy of e-learning in the work-place has focused on claims of cost efficiency. Brandon Hall's US study of e-learning benchmarks in 10 major companies reveals '*massive results*' (e.g. IBM saving \$200m in one year) by reducing time spent in formal training and increased scale. Leck and Graham (2002) justify e-learning because it '*reduces training time, travel and accommodation costs*' and, according to Murray, J, Carson, T and Henderson G, 2002 give you '*more for your money*', resulting in e-learning plans '*being driven by financial, customer and internal metrics*' (Grant, 2002).

Assumed cost benefits no doubt led US industry analysts to predict, according to Ericsson Online (2003), that the e-learning industry in the US alone would '*grow to \$15 billion as soon as the year 2005.*' Confidence about the efficacy of e-learning for industry has encouraged the EU and its member states to invest in e-learning solutions for in-house skills development. It is not surprising that SMEs have been included in these public investment programmes since features of e-learning – just-in-time, delivery to the work-place, flexibility in time and content, personalisation – appear to address some of the reasons why small enterprises are unable to participate fully in conventional skills development activity.

The challenge, as highlighted by the SS2 experience, is to '*produce viable e-learning systems that are based on sound pedagogy which enable students to undertake valid study programmes that lead to accepted qualifications*' (Ericsson Online, 2003). Thomas Reed and Laura M. Francis (2001), describing American optimism about e-learning for industry observed '*e-learning continues to struggle, often offering weak interactivity and failing to engage learners*', a clear indication that the pedagogical models being used were inadequate for the need.

Others on this side of the Atlantic have taken up the issue of online pedagogy for SMEs. In a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts, Stephenson (2002) argued that e-learning at work depended upon a pedagogical approach that gave participants a sense of ownership of the process and palpable personal and employer benefit from its achievement. More recently (2003), the EU funded Knownet

expert seminars on e-learning for SMEs (The Knownet Expert Seminar March 2003, <http://learning.ericsson.net/socrates/product1.shtml/>) brought together twenty-five leading academics and researchers to share their experience of e-learning for SMEs. The challenge, they argued, was to create “*cultures of Learning*” *within and between SMEs*’ in which e-learning could flourish. They observed that it was difficult to ‘*introduce e-learning from outside the culture of the local and regional SMEs*’, particularly from universities who were ‘*coming in from the outside*’ and who found it difficult to ‘*relate to the culture of the target groups*’ and ‘*understand the needs and concerns of SMEs*’. The seminars concluded ‘*It was not enough just to adapt learning materials for use in SMEs. We need to adapt the entire learning environment and the learning models we deploy*’.

The Knownet seminars’ recipe for effective e-learning for SMEs was to focus on:

- b) cultures of Learning involving all stakeholders;
- c) organisational development as a motivator for employer support
- d) support networks within local communities of practice
- e) work based learning rather than distance learning courses
- f) informal processes of learning
- g) SME employees as providers (or senders) of knowledge and on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the SME employees themselves.
- h) the skills and culture of on-going, continuous self-evaluation based on communities of practice.

It was, of course, outside the scope of the SS2 project to influence the communities of practice within which the programmes were set. However, the project provides strong evidence of the difficulties that arise when replicating HE online delivery and supervisory models for SME development.

4.2 Completion Rates

At first sight SS2 completion rates look very low. But they need to be examined in the context of experience elsewhere. There is plenty of evidence in Part Three that the barriers in the way of SME participation in e-learning are consistent with those identified in SS1. These include the nature of SMEs themselves (size, priority given to production, lack of time allocation for training, lack of access to PCs and a general lack of support for learning) and the *viability of groups* (the difficulty of securing sufficient numbers of participants to sustain support groups).

But there is another factor at work. E-learning itself is a factor. There is accumulating evidence that ‘*e-Learning requires a higher degree of self-motivation, self-directed learning, and greater persistence and commitment from the learner*’ (Martinez, 2003). In an online survey of on-line

training instructors in the USA Curtis Bonk (Bonk 2002) discovered that only 2% of programmes had a 100% completion rate and more than half of the instructors (54%) had completion rates lower than 70%. As many as 22% of instructors had fewer than 1 in 4 completing their programmes. Bonk cites lack of time and incentives as the two main reasons. Relatively low completion rates, it appears, may be a feature of current experience of e-learning in general.

However, SS2 completions are at the lowest end of the USA range for e-learning at work in general. Many of the instructors in the Bonk survey were working on in-house programmes where 'SME problems' would be less apparent. The issue is whether the SS2 position at the bottom end of the Bonk scale can be explained in terms of the project's emphasis on SMEs. Low completions on SS1 and SS2, each of which was exclusively for SMEs, suggest that the SME focus in itself may have been a major factor. But it may not be the only factor. SS1 had low completion rates but only in parts. Two of the clusters had completions of over 80% whilst in London completions were only 40%. Even SS1's low figure for London was well above SS2's achievement of less than 30% completions.

It is therefore worth exploring the differences between the programmes that were offered to SMEs by SS1 and SS2. The SS1 mentoring programme chimed more closely with the pedagogical stance recommended for SMEs in section 4.1 above. Its aim was to help work-based supervisors to become better at supervising their supervisees, and to gain a relevant professional certificate (ISM). The style was one that helped the client take responsibility for the programme's direction. Assessment was directly related to real tasks at work. The SME itself was an indirect beneficiary and therefore more likely to provide support in the work-place. Tuition was provided by people with personal experience of the work-place and of tutoring people at work. There were close links between the cluster leaders and participating SMEs. In some cases, teams of employees participated together and supported each other. All training mentors attended a full day of face to face induction into the nature of the programme, the virtual learning environment and how to get the most out of the programme.

The variation in completion rates within SS1 reflected the extent to which the above description was true. In London, for instance, where completions were lowest, the style of delivery was more akin to a traditional learning centre classroom; many beneficiaries were recruited directly by the learning centre, not via their employers.

The SS2 provision was closest to the London version of SS1 yet still experienced a lower completion rate. SS2 was built round modules developed and designed by the participating universities. Inductions into procedures, processes and systems were varied in quality with many

participants in some of the clusters receiving induction by e-mail. Recruitment to the university modules via SMEs proved to be very difficult. As a consequence, many participants were recruited directly by the project administrators, not via SME networks. The content of the programmes was relevant to SMEs in a general sense, i.e. useful skills and knowledge, but not capable of being personalised for the direct benefit of each participant and their organisation. Tutors' work patterns owed more to the rhythms of university life than to the reality of working in SMEs.

It is reasonable to conclude from comparisons between SS1, SS2 and experience elsewhere that key reasons for the low completion rate for SS2 were three-fold: e-learning in general, the difficulties of engaging SMEs in learning, and the cultural differences between universities and SMEs.

4.3 Support

Support for online learning is a complex matter, particularly if attempting to replicate the level of support available on campus. Torstein Rekkedal and Svein Qvist-Eriksen (2003) for instance, describe the scope given to student support by NKI Distance Education, (NKI Fjernundervisningen, Norway's foremost provider in this field), as covering four fields, based on Aoki and Pogroszewski's model: (1998):

Administration:

- Marketing and sales staff, course co-ordinators, counsellors, advisors, office staff
- Local administration (study organisation, employer, local office)

Faculty:

- Senior faculty and internal academic staff, external and internal tutors
- Local teachers

Fellow students:

- Students in same course, in other courses and classmates in local learning groups

Employer, family and colleagues:

- Not usually included in analyses of educational systems, but may be seen as (the most) important support system for online distance students.

The support provided by SS2 touched only lightly on the first three of these and was focused very much on content, an item excluded from the NKI model. For SMEs, support from employers in terms of prioritising study, provision of time and equipment is crucial. Provision for support from fellow students was built into the learning environment, but because of the low numbers and the varied pattern and stages of enrolment it proved difficult to sustain viable supporting groups. Much of the evidence presented in Part Three testifies to the difficulties encountered in all of these areas.

Martinez, writing for American Universities where retention rates on e-learning distance education programmes are a major issue, argues strongly for institutions to invest time and resources in 'attrition management' covering all aspects impinging on students' experience:

“• Business or academic strategy and change vision • Organization principles, needs, resources, and priorities • Individual and team needs • Stakeholders goals, priorities and needs • Key processes, interactions, and activities • Key programs, facilities, and resources • Measures and accountability” (Martinez, 2003).

4.4 Overall

It is clear from the evidence presented in Part Three that SS2 was trying to accomplish too much in too short a time. As the overall project manager observed in Part Three: SS2 was trying to “create a 'mini-E-university for SMEs”:

“In the Open University model there is administration backup for registration, help and support. These are difficult to co-ordinate. We need an easy way to manage these systems that takes the load off those providing the service on offer from the project”

The evidence from the Superior Stella project confirms the importance of getting the support model right. The model needs to accommodate the practical, cultural and pedagogical demands of SMEs, e-learning and universities. The model would also need to be consistent with the Kownet advice on e-learning in SMEs and the NKI support model for distance learning institutions. It also needs to plan for and provide a system of 'attrition management' from the outset (Martinez, 2003).

PART FIVE: Summary and recommendations

5.1 Specific recommendations

A number of useful recommendations emerged from the feedback from participants presented in Part Three of this report. They are summarised in Table 1.

Table One: Suggestions from participants

Problem:	Solution
Different cohort start times – problems with VLE discussion curriculum	Cohere recruits via open group face to face inductions (e.g.. Sat. breakfast) that are pre-set at regular times convenient for SME participants.
Cost free / no accreditation or CPD	Change model to a ' <i>refundable deposit upon successful completion</i> ' with the option to add certification.
Miscommunication: have a mass meeting of all project staff	Offer online access to frequent staff and management meetings via web or telephone conferencing.
Privacy of online tutor/student communication in the context of research into effectiveness of online supervision.	A suggestion for future e-learning projects is to make explicit in the partnership agreement and student registration forms that this issue is a condition of participation.
Drop out	Smaller units of learning material; better protocols for contacting tutors and for tutor response rates; more reliable access to resources and dialogue.
Dissemination of guidelines and information	Have a central administrator link to the project web-site with an email and phone master contact list. Establish a protocol for recording, dissemination and receipt of materials and details of student registration for access by all project staff.
Getting the students to communicate online	Post a personal profile or CV, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Insert a photo, ➤ Do an 'ice breaker' or get-to-know-the-group activity (i.e. list your reason for doing the course, share some personal interests, etc.), ➤ Make submission to the discussion board part of the marking scheme, ➤ Synchronise the recruitment process with the discussion activity deadlines.
Number of study hours to complete course	Chunk into smaller learning units with a maximum of 30hrs or 5 weeks.
Finding time to do the learning	Getting support from the employer and family.

5.2 Overall recommendations

So what have we learnt about the questions asked at the beginning of this report? Table Two presents recommendations from the experience as a whole, in the context of a brief review of some of experience elsewhere (as reviewed in Part Four).

Table Two: Overall recommendations

Overall Questions	Experience of the project and elsewhere
How can ICT overcome the barriers to the recruitment / induction of SMEs into the learning community?	<p>The experience shows that SME recruitment can be sporadic, not easily fitting into rigid university schedules. Induction activities and lively online discussions groups are crucial so they need to be planned and managed in ways that can accommodate this staggered flow of students and patterns of access.</p> <p>Even the best VLEs require a programme of familiarisation for both tutors and students. SME applicants are likely to have low confidence in this at the beginning.</p> <p>SME students have limited time, so unreliable systems quickly dampen motivation.</p> <p>SME patterns of study make it difficult to ensure effective online discussions and tutor availability when needed.</p>
To what extent can local supervision by universities and university staff help overcome these barriers?	Local support fails if there is not a clear and open communication system between the VLE administration, management, tutors and technical staff. Awareness of access to information must be highlighted.
Are university-provided on-line programmes in ICT, business development and supervisory training sufficiently attractive to help overcome the barriers?	In general yes, but the evidence also suggests that the topics alone are not sufficient in themselves to attract and sustain interest. The pedagogical approach, one that enables participants to take ownership of the programme and relate it to their work-place needs, is as important, as is support.
What advice can be offered on how universities can use ICT to make a significant contribution to support and energise the small firm sector?	<p>Whilst many university subject areas are of general use to SMEs, conversion of campus based materials needs to be done specifically with SMEs in mind. Such conversions work best when they are personalised, adaptable by the student to personal and work circumstances, have clear protocols for tutorial support and access to support services, and lead to some form of recognition.</p> <p>ICT can make an effective contribution by focusing on the development of a culture of community of practice that builds confidence, critical mass of participation and mutual understanding of the different parties involved.</p>

Table 2 continued

Overall Questions	Experience of the project and elsewhere
What can we learn from the completion rates on such programmes?	<p>We need to expect completion rates to be lower than those normally associated with campus programmes, partly because of the difficulties normally associated with SMEs but also because of the characteristics of e-learning in general.</p> <p>Higher Education Institutions should invest in developing a comprehensive 'attrition management' programme as outlined in Part Four.</p>
Can Superior Stella programmes and activities be mainstreamed?	The mainstreaming of online programmes for SMEs needs to accommodate the different patterns of SMEs and regular university tutors. Flexibility of time, place, content and style are major pluses for the SME but they present major difficulties for mainstream academics working on regular university schedules.

5.3 Further development

The positive and negative experiences of Superior Stella confirm the overall proposition that the key to successful HE interventions for SMEs is an effective local support service covering all aspects from first contacts, through induction, accessing materials, frequent help and feedback, accessible tutoring, peer networking and reward for effort. This confirmation is highlighted by the difficulties encountered.

It is recommended that priority for any future development funding in this area should be given to:

- the building of effective local and regional communities of practice involving SMEs and universities, and the development of an overall integrated management system capable of sustaining students on SME - university programmes; and
- the design and development of personalised self-managed e-learning environments based on a pedagogy that enables SME participants to make effective use of university support and materials for their own benefit and that of their organisation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Super Stella (2001) Executive Summary

1. Super Stella was a project sponsored by the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of its 1998 ADAPT-Ufl initiative.
2. The primary aim of Super Stella was to test the effectiveness of online learning as a medium for the development of work-based supervisors in SMEs.
3. Four regional clusters were established in London, Staffordshire, Wales and Yorkshire. Each cluster was responsible for recruiting SMEs into the scheme.
4. The Super Stella model was to provide online mentor training for supervisors who in turn, as part of their training, provided mentor support for mentees developing skills relevant to the work-place. The assumption was that ICT would be able to provide the flexibility to engage employees of SMEs in training and development activities.
5. Online mentor training was provided by Abacus, an established supplier of training leading to the Certificate and membership of the Institute of Supervision and Management (ISM). Mentee learning materials in ICT, customer care, basic skills and health and safety were provided by OCR, NEC and CDSM. Some mentees in Wales focused on learning through work itself.
6. Overall 260 people registered. Of those who completed survey forms (163), 21% were mentors and 79% were mentees. Most recruits were aged 25 - 49, white and male. The pattern of recruitment varied across the clusters according to size of SME and local attitudes to training, as did the pattern of support from the clusters. In London, for instance, the preponderance of micro SMEs required adjustment of the mentor / mentee model to an artificial grouping of people drawn from different companies and using more traditional off-site training for mentees.
7. Drop out levels averaged about 20% but there was wide variation across the clusters. London, for instance, had a very high dropout of mentors (60%).
8. The evaluation used a pre-project survey and a post-conference survey. The post -project survey was conducted by telephone (57% of the total survey taking part). Personal experiences of 32 participants were explored through in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted in the work-place.
9. The qualitative review in Part Three of this report explored many of the **obstacles to online learning** in the SME workplace and their impact on the effectiveness of the project e.g. :
 - nature of SMEs - e.g. size, preference given to production, lack of time allocation for training, lack of access to PCs and a general lack of support for learning;
 - dissonance between participants' initial expectations of a traditional training experience and the self-managed learning style associated with mentoring and online learning (overcome by more careful briefing and induction);
 - the difficulty of securing sufficient numbers of participants from the same SME to sustain a smooth mentor / mentee relationship.
10. However, despite the frustrations and early dropouts, the qualitative evaluation discovered many examples of improved attitudes to learning and mentor behaviour directly attributed to the Super Stella experience (sections 3.6.3 and 3.6.4). **The benefits included:**
 - those successful on the mentor programme continued to learn IT and other skills online;
 - mentors modified their behaviour towards colleagues for the better;

- transfer of the newly acquired skills to enhance company activity or to improve personal performance.
- 11 Overall the project concludes that the Super Stella proposition that online learning can be an effective medium for the development of supervisors in SMEs is proven, but comparison of success stories with the many more frustrating experiences suggests that **ICT works as a medium for SME mentor training when...**
- mentors and mentees have a normal work-based relationship;
 - participants are willing and able to (learn to) use IT in work and for learning;
 - the employer provides resources, time and opportunity for use of PCs for learning and networking;
 - participants have a strong personal interest for themselves and their work;
 - the culture supports, recognises and facilitates learning as a benefit for the company, and sees a key role for mentoring;
 - the company encourages participants to take responsibility for learning and the support of others;
 - the company allows participants to continue to practice their new skills and to adapt personal and working practice.
- 12 Analyses of the learning experiences of the mentors further suggests that **mentor programmes for SMEs are likely to be successful when they are**
- i) flexible in pace and duration;
 - j) carefully introduced in face-to face induction sessions which are sensitive to the different pedagogical expectations of the participants;
 - k) sensitive to participants' unexpected pressures on time and resources;
 - l) fully explained in advance of initial induction in terms of practical requirements, mode of study and expected outcomes;
 - m) supported by proactive, attentive and sensitive online tutors;
 - n) open to 'successful withdrawal' without completion of the certification;
 - o) negotiated between the supplier and the client via *bona fide* intermediaries;
 - p) conducted in-house, where natural working links between mentors and mentees, or between peer mentors, are possible.

Ufl and other organisations seeking to provide specialist work-based learning in SMEs may need to ensure their practices and overall style are similar to those mentioned above.

Appendix B: Screen captures of the project hub.

See www.superiorstella.org.uk for pages.

Screen 1: The online features contained on the site are a list of project partners, a password protected resource area, new learner interest, a guest log for visitor comments and a central link to the partner cluster's virtual learning environments.

Screen 2: Web survey form

The online survey was done in conjunction with a paper-based survey done at the face-to-face induction. The project evaluation team entered the data after each induction so that it could be updated remotely.

Screen 3: Web survey results form

An innovative online survey system was developed as part of the research in this project. Current statistical data could be summarised via the web for individual summaries of overall graphical reports.

Screen 4: Resources

Tutors were able to access an online discussion area via password protection. Online documents were also available for download to facilitate tutor support.

Screen 5: Staffordshire University VLE

The Staffordshire virtual learning environment used Lotus Notes Learning Space as the commercial software. Leeds and Staffordshire used a discussion-based pedagogical approach.

Screen 6: Middlesex University VLE

Middlesex University, London College of Printing and Leeds all used WebCT as the commercial VLE software environment. LCP and M.U. chose a content-driven pedagogical methodology.

Appendix C: The four Superior Stella modules

Here is the text used on the web-site to describe the four programmes on offer.

Administration for the Graphic Arts

AIM

This course will enable you to manage the creative process. It focuses on general business awareness and understanding skills. It will enable you to understand and carry out the principle functions of administration and management. It will help you to develop good research and writing skills.

Course Objectives

On successful completion of this course, students should be able to be competent & confident in:

8. Writing and communication skills
9. Numerical skills
10. Basic statistics and coding structure
11. Managing financial information
12. Marketing and consumer behaviour
13. Managing information technology

So, what's the catch?

Well, there isn't one. This programme is supported by the European Social Fund, which is meeting some of the costs. We need to collect some information about you for record purposes and we will ask you to answer some questions and participate in our evaluation.

Marketing

Aims

The module aims to give an understanding of what marketing is, and how relevant it is to all aspects of business. The module will give an introduction to the core principles of marketing, and help learners to appreciate that effective marketing is critical in addressing competitive advantage. As well as gaining skills in the above you will have a general knowledge and understanding of marketing information necessary for higher education and to be employed in the printing industry.

Course will include:

- Marketing or Selling?
- The Customer is King
- Dealing with different Customers
- Market Segmentation
- Targeting & Positioning
- Knowing Customers Market Knowledge
- Marketing Research Methods
- The Marketing Mix Products, Pricing & Selling
- The Service element in Marketing
- Promotion, Distribution
- Do we need a 'marketing department'?
- Planning Marketing Activities
- In touch with the Marketing Environment

Cyber work

AIM

Communication methods are changing. This course will provide opportunity to investigate approaches to compute-mediated-communication which students can apply in their workplaces. Levels of communication will be explored using technologies to help communicate person to person, with work groups to teams, within and between organisations and communities. Students will be able to explore technologies and approaches and suggest appropriate approaches to adopt for their own workplaces and colleagues.

Course objectives

At the end of the course the student will be able to:

- Confidently use a range of text based computer mediated-communication tools including email and computer mediated conferencing;
- Demonstrate effective communication skills using computer-mediated communication, including conference facilitation and management techniques;
- Participate Effectively in on line group working and learning situations;
- Apply theoretical concepts to the understanding of specific situations, contexts and technologies.

Making the Most of Finance

Aim

This course is designed to make the financial side of your business more meaningful. No matter what your expertise, your company/business will not succeed unless you are able to understand all the financial aspects involved. Once you have completed the unit you will be able to make much more sense of your accountant's work and you will ensure that your investment in your company is working most efficiently for you.

Course will include:

- Accounting techniques and skills
- Management accounts
- Raising finance sources, markets and intermediaries
- Asset Management
- Capital management
- Accounting issues

This programme will not teach you bookkeeping but it will make the management of your company's finance more meaningful.