

**Paper for the American Education Research Association San Diego, 2004**

**An Initial Evaluation of Participant Experiences of Ufi/learndirect's  
Online Learning through Work programme Leading to Full University  
Qualifications**

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## **1 The study**

This study is the first stage of an evaluation of the Ufi/Learndirect Learning through Work programme, referred to throughout as LtW. LtW is an innovative approach to providing online opportunities for people at work to gain formal university qualifications through work itself. The study draws on two data-sets: a) monitoring statistics collected by online survey and; b) analyses of data on personal experiences of the programme secured through in-depth personal interviews of participants.

Following a grounded theory approach, analyses of both data-sets are used to generate propositions about the nature of learner-centred online work-based learning emerging from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin, 1997). These propositions are discussed briefly in the context of wider debates on the nature of e-learning and work-based learning. The report ends with recommendations for further rounds of data-gathering from which the emergent propositions can be tested with a view to the development of theory and deeper understanding about online learning in the work-place as a whole.

We are publishing the outcomes of this preliminary stage as part of a grounded theory strategy of securing expert comments and responses on the legitimacy of the emergent propositions and the appropriateness of the proposed follow-up activities. Comments from readers will therefore be welcomed. Please use the contact details above.

## **2 The context**

Work-based learning and online learning are separate areas of expertise and debate in their own right. Each has a wealth of published literature<sup>1</sup>. The body of material about the two fields overlapping in the same learning process is growing quickly. Cairns & Stephenson (2002) and

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of informal learning through work, with its focus on tacit knowledge, experiential learning and communities of practice, is well argued elsewhere, typically in Boud & Solomon (2001), Boud & Middleton (2003), Stephenson & Critten (2003), Cairns & Stephenson (2002) and Cunningham et al (2000) and is not reprised here; similarly reviews of on-line learning can be found in Coomey & Stephenson (2001) and Collis & van der Wende (2002).

Stephenson (2003) presented reviews of these fields to the 2002 and 2003 AERA annual meetings respectively. Both can be found at <http://www.iclml.com>.

**Learning through work.** Drawing on Seagraves *et al* (1996) and others, Cairns & Stephenson distinguished between learning *at*, *for* and *through* work. Learning *about*, and *for* work, they argued, is usually associated with institutionally based learners on sandwich programmes or, increasingly, in modularized work experience schemes. Learning *at* work such as distance learning packages and in-house training programmes, they continued, in effect brings the classroom into the workplace. Learning through work, they concluded, was more akin to Moore's argument (1999) that "learning" in the workplace will only take place when the learner actually engages with the knowledge base and people in the workplace. 'Every time people engage with work-related problems, take on new challenges, adapt to new technologies, accommodate new administrative and managerial regimes or respond to market changes they have opportunities for significant learning. Such learning through work is often tacit, without awareness or recognition (Polanyi, 1967), and is highly personal to the individual or group, requires individual attention and relates directly to the employer's circumstances. It does not easily fit into classroom based activity.

A learning programme that is explicitly based on learning through work would be one that aims to: a) help people articulate their learning from previous work experience and plan ways of making learning from current and projected work activities explicit and; b) make it possible for such learners secure formal recognition for the achievement of that learning,

**Work-related online learning** has attracted a lot of attention in recent years, often associated with corporate cost savings achieved by substituting online instruction for face to face training. High attrition rates, however, have been a feature of much online work-based instruction. Bonk (2001) discovered that 22% of trainers had completion rates of less than 1 in 4. Only 50% of trainers claimed that more than 70% of online learners successfully completed and a mere 2% claimed 100% completion.

Part of the answer to this disappointing picture lies in the way online learning is actually used in the work-place. Coomey & Stephenson (2001) found that most examples of e-learning described in the research literature were within a pedagogical culture in which the instructor determined both the content and the process in which learning was expected to take place. Learning through work, as described above, requires the opposite, a pedagogical paradigm in which the learner has control of both the content and the process.

Online learning in the workplace, it seems, needs to be more explicitly related to what people are actually doing at work. As early as 1998, Reeve *et al* argued that the communication potential offered by WWW-based learning resources could be a significant boon to work-based learning because it may '*enable us to release the learning potential of the workplace more effectively* (p.18)'.

Brink et al's 2002 evaluation of IT in small companies showed '*the importance of providing learning that is relevant to how people can do their jobs more effectively.*' More recently, Martinez (2003) found that key factors in helping persistence and retention are '*an individual's independence, goal orientation, and (internal) locus of control.*'

Based on his systematic review of research into online work-based learning (2003), Stephenson argued that an effective approach would be one that:

- recognises the centrality of the learner as the initiator, controller and beneficiary of the learning that takes place;
- is consistent with informal patterns of learning through work;
- helps the learner to clarify learning needs;
- helps the learner to formulate plans and learning goals relevant to greater effectiveness at work;
- is relevant to longer term personal development, with scope for strategic aims, and development of personal portfolios;
- engages with company / employer needs;
- links to internal and external networks of peers, fellow specialists and expertise relevant to goals;
- facilitates sharing, recording and accessing experience for future benefit;
- gives easy and just-in-time access to personalised specialist material in response to need;
- is available when and where the learner needs it;
- has built-in opportunities for recognition of achievement, including enhanced qualifications or credit for new learning;
- is integrated within a comprehensive management culture of learning and support throughout the organisation.

The LtW programme at the focus of this study is a response to that challenge. Information on the programme is viewable at <http://www.learndirect-ltw.co.uk>.

### 3 The Ufi/learndirect LtW programme

Ufi Ltd was established to take forward the UK government's concept of a University for Industry. The brief was to exploit new technology to raise individual employability and corporate competitiveness. Through its brand 'learndirect', Ufi Ltd offers around 500 different learning packages, many of them 'bite-sized', the majority delivered and supported online. Learning is accessed via more than 2000 learning venues sited in a wide range of institutions and 'lifestyle' locations across England, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as being available from home or the workplace via the Internet.

Ufi/learndirect's LtW programme is one of its most innovative programmes. It is a **partnership** between Ufi/learndirect and universities that enables people at work to develop an online learning contract that addresses their developmental needs in the context of their work. Ufi/learndirect provides the online services and facilities, while the universities provide online support, quality

assurance and the award of qualifications for successful completion. Whilst some individual universities offer a tailored work-based learning programme none use an on-line learning contract development framework; this makes LtW unique within the UK. Qualifications available through LtW range from undergraduate certificates, diplomas and honours degrees, to postgraduate certificates, diplomas and masters degrees. Currently eight UK universities are taking part with other universities negotiating to join the scheme.

Each individual learner's programme and resulting qualification is negotiated online with the university of their choice – in some cases the award title itself can be negotiated on an individual basis. LtW may also be used by groups (or cohorts) of learners. In these cases a part of the programme can be designed for the sponsoring organisation (usually an employer) but there is always an element negotiated by the learner. By drawing on work-based projects, the awards are particularly relevant to individuals and companies (including small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) for whom absence from the workplace for study purposes is inappropriate.

There are three stages to the LtW process:

1. **Exploration** – a free initial interactive online package designed to inform, provide diagnostic feedback and assist the learner in making a decision on the suitability of the scheme for them. Learners wishing to join the scheme submit an online application to their chosen university.
2. **Design** – all learners must use this facility to negotiate a learning contract leading to a particular award. The learning contract must specify an individualised programme, its associated aims and components and the award sought. Learners negotiate their intended learning outcomes, the evidence they intend to produce and the assessment criteria to be used. The online Design Package contains many levels of help including downloadable expert advice on key processes and detailed help on the criteria relevant to different levels of award. Users have access to support from their university either via online dialogue facilities, private e-mail or telephone.
3. **Implementation and assessment** - learners undertake the programme supported by their tutor(s) and complete the agreed activities and present evidence for assessment.

The programme's online infrastructure means that learners may choose whichever university best suits their needs, and need not visit the campus unless they wish to do so. Ufi/learndirect provides each learner with a printed handbook on the full procedures plus a printed guide to using the web-based facilities.

## 4 The response

Following a 'soft' launch of the programme (i.e. no major publicity campaign) in Spring 2001, more than 14000 have registered for the online Exploration Package (EP) which is free of charge. Of

these, 1093 (59% of them female and 41% male) have had their online applications accepted by one of the eight participating universities. Most, 62%, have been accepted for undergraduate programmes and 38% for postgraduate. The learners range in age from 21 to over 65 – the mean age being 32.

Students are from a variety of occupational backgrounds – from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. The public/private sector split is around 65/35%. Roles are also diverse and there is currently greatest representation from the following areas: management and administration, education and training, technical/IT, self employed, health and social care, and engineering. 59% of the learners are part of company schemes. The rest are wholly individual. All programmes have a negotiated element and usually a final individualised project.

### **Online survey of applicants**

From 13 November 2001 all applicants to LtW were presented with a ‘pop-up’ survey immediately after electronically submitting their application, with a 24% response rate (261 out of 1087). A revised more user-friendly survey was introduced on 1 September 2003 yielding a higher response rate (38% of applicants). The second survey asked applicants about their work situation – 90% were employed and 10% self-employed. 60% of respondents worked in large organisations (more than 250 employees) and 40% in small or medium sized enterprises. Respondents were also asked about their existing qualifications. 40% held qualifications equivalent to university entrance level or above and 9% had no formal qualifications at all.

Overall satisfaction levels with the Exploratory Package (EP) were high. Over 89% of respondents rated the EP as good, very good or excellent. 10% stated that they thought the package was fair and 0.5% rated the EP as poor. Over 86% said they would be happy to recommend LtW to a colleague or friend. To a great extent the EP seems to be meeting its objectives successfully, with 84% of respondents feeling that they had access to enough information about LtW to make a decision about its appropriateness for them. 86% felt that the site was user friendly – access, design, interaction and navigation were rated similarly. In terms of the content of the EP around 86% felt that the material was clear, concise, coherent and pitched at the right level.

**Usage.** 85% of applicants said they spent 1 to 4 hours using the exploration stage prior to applying and most accessed the EP from home (52%, and 46% from work). After using the EP 90% of applicants said that they felt comfortable with the idea of developing their own learning contract, 7% didn’t know and 3% didn’t feel comfortable about this. This suggests that the EP is effective in ‘filtering out’ people for whom negotiated work based learning would be inappropriate.

**Awareness and choice** Over 84% of applicants were attracted to LtW because of the convenience and flexibility of the programme. Other attractions were the ability to take into consideration

people's existing experience and the opportunity to work towards a qualification at their own pace. Significantly almost half of applicants (46%) had direct contact with their chosen HEI – by telephone, e-mail, post or face-to-face - prior to applying. 97% of those who made contact were satisfied with the interaction.

**ICT skills** When asked to rate their level of computer skills, 50% described their skills as intermediate and 40% as advanced. Only a small number (10%) of LtW applicants described their ICT skills as 'basic', and the majority had access to the web both at home and at their place of work and regularly used computers at both locations. In addition, above half had previously participated in computer-based learning prior to their involvement with LtW.

**Employers** Perhaps not surprisingly, given the nature of the LtW model and the level of individuals who had found out about LtW through their employer, 93% of applicants to LtW said that their employer had supported their decision to obtain an HE qualification. In the first survey 54.5% of applicants reported that they were receiving funding (whole or partial course fees) from their employer. By the later survey this figure had increased to 67%. The figures for other kinds of support were similarly high and showed a corresponding increase between the two survey periods. The second survey found that 73% were able to use a work-based PC, 66% expected to receive general support and guidance from their employer, 51% were to have time off to study and 44% were anticipating access to a work-based mentor.

**User progression** Because there are no defined starting dates nor common schedules for individual programmes, it is difficult to give a snap-shot of user progression. However, the University of Derby, the first to register learners, has the largest number of participants who have progressed through the full programme. 91% of their LtW learners (672) have negotiated learning contracts to date. They report that of those 672, 13.4% have withdrawn, 19% have so far achieved their University qualification, and 67.4% are still working through their programmes.

## 5 The experience

The aim of the analysis of a selection of personal case histories is to go deeper than the survey and gain some insight into the actual processes involved in online learning through work from the participants' perspective. So far we have completed a first round of 16 exploratory interviews and are able to report the tentative propositions that are beginning to emerge. These propositions will be explored further in subsequent rounds of interviews, followed by more routine surveys of candidate experience based on the propositions that survive the second round of analyses. We present here a report of propositions emerging from the first round.

The researchers have had significant roles in the development and management of the LtW programme, though neither has had any educational involvement with participants. To minimise the

impact of researcher bias, a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 and Strauss & Corbin, 1997) has been used to elicit propositions based on analyses of the primary data. Propositions about the nature of participant experience are based on a detailed analysis of the full data from the cases. Drawing on aspects of appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney 1999) and learning histories (Kleiner & Roth 1997), the interviews were open-ended with a minimum structure which was largely chronological, encouraging respondents to unravel their own experiences of why and how they applied, what happened during the programme, and what has happened since. Interviews took place in locations chosen by the respondents, usually in their place of work. The sample used for this preliminary study was an opportunity sample based on people's 'distance travelled' on the programme as well as their availability and willingness to be seen.

In the opportunity sample women were over-represented compared with the constituency as a whole (75% compared with 59% overall) and postgraduate programmes under-represented (31% compared with 38% overall). The average age of the sample is 40 compared with 32 for the total group. This bias reflects the nature of the early intake which had a high proportion of people working in nursing and related services. Second stage interviews will be conducted with groups that balance the spread of respondents. The sample does not include those who applied and did not proceed. This drop-out group will be the subject of a further and different kind of study.

### **Analyses of individual cases**

Each interview was recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy. Each individual statement was coded into three broad categories: reasons for engagement, experience of the programme and perceived impact, if any. This preliminary coding emerged from the data and was cross-checked by both researchers. Subsequent coding identified further sub-categories which were sorted across all respondents to identify responses in common and unique experiences.

### **The review of statements made by participants**

The report that follows consists of accounts of the three stages compiled from *categories* that emerged from the full data during the analyses. Particularly apposite statements are presented verbatim. Unless otherwise stated, all statements in the review are supported by at least six of the respondents.

### **Reasons for joining the programme**

Participants chose the online LtW programme for three main groups of reasons: personal interest, the distinctive nature of Learning through Work, and the relevance of the programme to their own work situation.

## Personal reasons in a working context

All 16 interviewees referred to strong personal reasons for joining the programme. 12 of the 16 were explicitly looking for **career** development. Of these, 11 needed a degree to proceed to higher levels of work. For some this was expressed in general terms such as '*with an eye on career development*', '*ambition*' and '*planning ahead*'. For most, personal career advancement was seen in the context of their present employment, for instance '*taking me forward in the company*'.

For 10 of the 16, taking a higher education qualification later in life was **a catching up exercise**, making good an earlier deficit. For one, catching up was a personal matter - '*father and nine siblings all had high qualification*'. – but for others formal educational qualifications had lagged behind their current professional or vocational status leaving them feeling exposed:

*My qualifications weren't matching what I was doing I haven't got the qualification to back it up.*

Taking a higher qualification was a way of demonstrating to themselves that they would be seen by others and themselves **as being up to the challenge** of working at that level – '*just to show yourself that you can really do it*'. In these cases, the *credibility of the award*, and the University making the award is a crucial factor. For six of the 16, the challenge of **personal development through learning** was an attraction in itself:

*I started to think more about my development and that was when I started to think that I really would like to do a degree.*

*...it's just having that confidence, you know, and wanting to just show yourself that you can do it really...*

## Learner managed Learning through Work as an attraction.

The ability to plan your own programme according to your work was an explicit attraction for 12 of the 16 interviewees. Regular part-time or full-time courses would mean loss of income. For almost half of the sample (7), an important attraction was the opportunity it offered to plan the programme to avoid clashes with family and other personal circumstances:

*I have got a family at home so it isn't always feasible to do that if you have to go outside of work and go there in the evenings on a regular basis, it is not practicable.*

LtW was seen as **more flexible and less restrictive** than other UK distance learning HE programmes such as those offered by the Open University, as was the use of alternatives to formal examinations that could be built round actual work rather than an academic curriculum. One was attracted by the programme's self-help culture which was seen as comparable to community development programmes. Five of the 16 were attracted by the **opportunity to tailor the programme** around their own interests and needs:

*At the Open University you're restricted to course modules that they have produced. Here you have the opportunity to produce a course module which is more geared to what you're actually involved in.*

**Integration of learning with work** The biggest personal attraction of the Learning through Work programme (12 out of the 16), however, was the extent to which participants could personally design the shape, content and pace of the programme to fit personal challenges and responsibilities of the work-place. This was seen as crucial for employees of small and medium sized organisations and the self-employed where the option of leaving work to participate in external activities was very restricted. For some, there was no alternative way of engaging in higher education. For others, conventional programmes were rejected because much of their content was perceived to be irrelevant to the issues they faced:

*Here you have the opportunity to produce a course module which is more geared to what you're actually involved in.*

Learning through Work is seen as an excellent opportunity for people in specialist fields for which no convenient and conventional course has been devised:

*There's no alternative for someone like me in my field, at work.*

Everything in the programme could be related to the participants' distinctive areas of work, thereby fitting in with employer interests. Three intertwined benefits were identified: taking yourself forward in your studies inevitably means taking yourself forward in your work as well – a mix of work and study for personal advancement – and you can keep on working at the same time. Employer support, including payment of fees, was therefore not difficult to negotiate:

*...part of the reason why they're sponsoring me is because they see that it actually fits with the work I do here and whatever I do will actually be of benefit, not only to me, but also to the company.*

*...the big plus again was the fact that it wasn't going to involve a lot of time out of the company...*

*I couldn't think of anything better or any better way of actually getting a degree if that is your focus, than actually doing it when you can do it based around your area of work if you want to do something which is work related then it is brilliant.*

## Experience of the programme

When describing their experience of the programme, the respondents chose to focus on its flexibility, the ownership and control given to the learner, the website, the materials provided, support available and interaction with work.

**Flexibility** 14 of the 16 spoke warmly of the advantages offered by the flexibility of learning through work. Nine elaborated on the extent to which they could manage their own time and schedules according to changing work situations or priorities. It was even possible to change the content according to changes at work:

*...can be flexible enough to look at changing the module really, if you wanted to do that. Because I set this up a year ago and you know, things do change for people, so I think that's quite important that you can do that really...*

*I've even changed part of the programme because my job's changed.*

Seven liked the opportunity to pace the schedule of work to take account of work priorities:

*...you can do it as quickly or as slowly as you want to do it. So it really is in tune with, you know, coping with other things in your life.*

### **The LtW process.**

14 of the 16 spoke in positive terms about the LtW process. 11 made particular reference to the extent to which they were **in control**, with a sense of ownership and responsibility for what they were doing:

*I was actually able to own it and say yes, I've decided to do that.*

*...if you do a course at the university or something, you get the handbook and it's actually got all the objectives written out for you. But you don't necessarily own that...*

*...it was the satisfaction of having put the programme together and I think also there was a sense of owning the programme...*

Five of the 16 made particular reference to the opportunities to **reflect on their learning** and the availability of credit for that process, including accreditation of prior experience and learning (**APEL**)

*... you look at where you are today and where you have come from, how you have got to where you are today and where you want to go and how you are going to get there so it is this sort of natural progression of where you have been and where you are going to.*

*I actually APELled practically the whole of level one and produced a document which is about four inches thick with reflective essays of how I did it and how I had developed the skills that I had got, whether it was through hands on learning, going on courses and various things and providing the evidence to show that I have actually done it and that I am still using those skills in everyday work life.*

The LtW programme requires all participants to use the LtW website to apply for a place and to negotiate a programme. Most respondents found the LtW website 'very helpful' in their learning through work. The internet enabled many to access the main LtW site and its various help facilities at work, when they needed to, or to do so at home if they preferred. It gave them a choice of location. Only one learner managed to get by without using it because most of her studies were linked to in-house modules. Computer novices soon became regular users – 'once you get used to it and work your way around it, it's second nature.' For one enthusiast:

*My laptop here which goes everywhere with me now it has everything on it. I have access to the internet to do research so it worked perfectly for me.*

The **LtW website** was a major resource for as many as 13 of the respondents in the sample. The case studies of other students' work, the quick help pages on all aspects of the process, the expert advice pages taking people more into the programme and the more technically oriented level indicators were helpful when putting programmes together:

*The expert help gives a list of how to produce your evidence and then your contract, you know, reflection and time management. All the bits that help you sort of studying. It's good. The website is full of information and help.*

Some found the materials and services of value in the initial stages only. Later on, specialist examples and support materials related to one's own study would be more useful. The same is true

of the online discussion facilities which few tried more than two or three times. The online dialogue facility was more useful in that it facilitated what for most participants was the most helpful interactive service in the programme, exchanges between student and university tutor. Nine of the respondents used the paper-based Handbook, mainly as a helpful reference and as a back-up for the assistance that was on the website.

**Support** A major theme in the transcripts is the good quality of support from tutors (mentioned by fifteen participants (94%). 10 were impressed by the fact that assistance was readily available at the time it was needed, mainly in response to e-mail queries and through the LtW website dialogue facility. In some cases university tutors were able to make workplace visits or occasionally receive participants on campus:

*Support? Very good, yeah, excellent. I mean, whenever I've needed help I can e-mail or just phone her and we can talk about and sort it out.*

*I used to e-mail him perhaps every week or so because when you first start doing this it is writing in academic speak (which) is so different to how you normally conduct your life.*

Just-in-time support is an important feature:

*I think if you don't have somebody who you sort of get hold of easily and talk to, it could be very frustrating.*

Tutors were helpful when they enabled students to think things through, get a feel of what is appropriate and focus their ideas and plans:

*They are like a sounding board aren't they? Sometimes you think 'God this is going to sound absolutely stupid' and they will say to you 'no, no, no dear you have got some good points in there'.*

There was almost universal praise for the quality and availability of this service – often described as 'excellent', 'fantastic' or just 'really good' indicating how vital personal support is for helping people at work get to grips with the higher education culture and its expectations without detracting from their work-based agenda.

Six of the 16 refer to using **peer support**, either via work-based learners in the same work-place, informal external networks, work-place mentors and buddies or occasional on-campus meetings. Sharing common difficulties and ways forward with fellow learners is cited as an advantage:

*...it was nice to be able to share those experiences with those people.*

Virtual peer support is possible on the programme via the website and the internet but nine of the sample would like to have an occasional **face-to-face contact** with others, as an additional support rather than a substitute:

*It would be useful from time to time to meet with other people face to face – just for contact – but I would want to continue as I am, apart from that. A socially friendly campus programme would not offer the same flexibility or be as useful, but some occasional human contact would be fine.*

**Relevance to work** All sixteen respondents refer to the programme's relevance to their work as a major plus. 15 of the 16 make specific reference to payoffs for their on-going work and their employer as well as benefits for themselves e.g.:

*...it was great how I could create a project that would benefit me and my work...*

and

*If you pick a module around your work, it helps you to focus on what you're doing as well. And it helps you to pull it together and when I've actually written up some of the things that I've done, in my mind it's pulled together.*

*...it's all relevant and that a lot of what I'm doing is based on what I'm actually doing here on a day to day basis and therefore it's sort of getting value for money if you like.*

*Everything is related to my own work. It directly feeds into my work. The work is improving as a consequence. Everything arises from my work and feeds back into it.*

Not surprisingly, in view of these experiences, more than half of the respondents referred to receiving support from their employer, e.g.:

*I paid my own fees for the first half but my employer has paid the rest, since he realised how useful the programme was to his business. He saw a clear return on investment.*

Work-based projects that focused on real issues in the work-place often draw fellow workers into the activity thereby spreading its influence to more employees:

*I can't do it by myself without bringing everybody on board,*

## **IMPACT**

### **On themselves:**

When talking about the impact of their experience of LtW, 13 of the 16 spoke positively about the effect on themselves personally. Not surprisingly, in view of the extent to which responsibility for the design and completion of the programme was largely down to themselves, many spoke about feeling *a great sense of achievement*:

*...it was the satisfaction of having put the programme together and I think also there was a sense of owning the programme, because again it was something that was relevant to you and you'd put together...*

*And I feel a massive sense of achievement with what I've done...*

*...when you get your first sort of slip back from the university saying you've completed your year learning contract, and you see those credits, that was absolutely fantastic.*

This feeling of personal achievement was associated by eight of the sample with a sense of formal *recognition of their ability*, particularly where previous qualifications were lower than the level of work being undertaken:

*I know I'm doing a good job now whereas before it was quite embarrassing talking about Outdoor Education to university professors and people doing degrees in Outdoor Education.*

*People are not interested in the fact that you have been doing this for 8 years now, they are where is your degree, where is your qualification?*

13 of the 16 referred to experiencing advancements in their personal skills and qualities as a result of their programmes. For several it has raised their **self-esteem** – ‘you feel more valued in yourself really’, or greatly increased their **confidence** in their ability. A range of personal skills and qualities are mentioned in this context, such as greater **self-discipline**, being ‘*broadened as a person*’, **greater insight and understanding**, an increased interest in continuing **personal learning and development** by progressing to higher levels of education (e.g. on to a Masters), and better interpersonal skills:

*It has helped me develop as a person, to have a better understanding of how other people work and interact and whatever, and how I myself interact with others.*

### **Impact on work**

14 of the 16 spoke of how the experience has had positive effects on their work. 10 reported how the programme had helped them improve their **effectiveness in the workplace**. For example:

*I now appreciate the value of Health & Safety and am more aware of equal opportunities issues.*

*In terms of dealing with clients it has benefited me quite a lot.*

*There are areas of my work that I wanted to explore and that have subsequently actually helped me be better, I think personally, at my job.*

Immediate benefit has been most obvious in those cases where the Learning through Work project itself was something that was directly relevant to the job in hand:

*I've also done a medication workbook to help with student nurses who come on the ward, or to new staff.*

*If you take on a project that is going to look at a specific item within an area of your work because you don't think that it is working as well as it should do.... things do run better because of what you've done.*

Seven reported how their participation in the programme has had positive effects on colleagues and their employers including improved internal networking and external contacts, better company / service relationships with clients, and the spread of interest in learning amongst employees and enrolment on LtW programmes.

### **Overall**

All respondents have a **positive attitude** to the experience as a whole. Some use flamboyant language such as ‘*fantastic*’, ‘*fabulous*’ and ‘*terrific*’. Most have recommended the programme to colleagues. A small number of respondents (three), however, add **caveats** to their general approval of the programme, suggesting that the LtW approach is not necessarily relevant to everyone:

*You very much have got to be your own motivator and your own driver and set your own goals and guidelines and be quite strict and stick to those.*

*It seems to be most appropriate for people who are high on experimentation and experiencing.*

*I think you would have to know that is the method in which you want to learn. I don't think it suits everybody and I think you have to be prepared for the fact that it's not going to be the classroom sort of situation.*

## 6 Implications

Because of the limitations of the sample on which the above analyses of personal experiences were based, we are unable to reach firm conclusions or formulate ultimate truths about the nature of online learning through work. However, consistent with the principles of grounded theory we are able to identify emerging trends that can form the basis of further investigations en route to the generation of theory of online learning through work based on real experiences. With that in mind, there are some useful propositions emerging from the data that warrant further testing with a larger group of participants.

1. It is possible for people at work to put together with appropriate support from expert tutors unique programmes of study built around their everyday work, leading to university qualifications.
2. Attrition rates can be kept relatively low if people can shape the focus and direction of their programme to reflect their work situation and personal aspirations.
3. People with strong personal motivation who are aware of the nature and demands of the programme can make good progress.
4. Universities are able to integrate their own quality assurance procedures with those of the LtW web-site and recruit students to a wide variety of academic areas of study.
5. It is possible to design, build and sustain interactive websites, capable of helping individual people at work put together unique quality-assured personalised programmes at university level wholly on-line.
6. People from a wide variety of working backgrounds, varied educational experience and familiarity with the internet are able to make productive use of such facilities.
7. Online learning through work programmes work effectively when personal support by process experts is readily available on a just-in-time basis by email or specialist dialogue box.
8. Learning through work websites are effective when they provide users with easy on-line access on a just-in-time basis to downloadable expert advice on key processes and case studies of how others have used the service.
9. Online learning through work attracts and caters effectively for people who would not otherwise be able to engage in higher education because of pressure of work and/or family commitments.
10. Online learning through work enables individuals and groups to advance themselves personally, improve their working practice and benefit their employers through the same process, without time off work.
11. A wide variety of people at work are capable of, and benefit from, managing their own learning at university level.

If they survive critical scrutiny and triangulation with other relevant data, the above emerging propositions have significant implications for our understanding of the role of the internet for work-based learning leading to qualifications. The propositions appear to lend support to the conclusions in the reviews of research on e-learning and work-based learning presented to the 2003 AERA meeting (Stephenson 2003) that, to be consistent with how learning occurs at work, on-line learning would need to be:

- personalised,
- managed by the user,
- relevant to the user's everyday work and aspirations,
- supported by the employer,
- linked to just-in-time specialist material and
- fully supported within a healthy learning milieu.

## **7 Next stage**

Following debates about the possible relevance of the emergent propositions, further case studies from a wider selection of users will be completed to test the emergent propositions. With a larger number of cases it will also be possible to explore differences, if any, between the experiences of individual learners and the experiences of members of company cohorts. As propositions become amended and more refined, additional online surveys capable of generating regular reports can be structured around those propositions, and probe more deeply into key processes involved in programme planning such as setting learning objectives consistent with the chosen topic, using the level indicators for the target award, the relationship between work and study. These surveys should be conducted at key stages of the process – e.g. on being accepted for a place, on registration of a learning contract, and completion of the programme.

Discussions with key stakeholders (including the universities, employers and business intermediaries) will take place alongside these further data collection activities. These discussions will help to complete the picture in terms of the review of the emergent propositions; checking out the extent to which they fit with the stakeholders' experience of the programme.

It will then be possible to test the experience of the Ufi/learndirect LtW scheme with similar experience elsewhere and engage in debate with the field as a whole leading eventually to the formulation of theory about the nature of online learning at work that is grounded in reality.

## **8 Conclusion**

This report of the initial stages of a major evaluation of the Ufi Learning through Work programme, based on a systematic survey of more than 1000 participants followed by 16 in-depth interviews, gives sufficient confidence for further research to be undertaken to test the proposition that:

learning through work can be significantly enhanced for the benefit of learners and employers, and retention rates can be significantly improved, by a well-planned interactive website with personal support that:

- provides opportunity for potential users to explore the service's features and their readiness to take part;
- helps people at work articulate their personal ambitions and needs;
- directly responds to people's personal aspirations and circumstances at work;
- offers a range of easily accessible online specialist advice, at different levels, on all key educational processes involved;
- helps participants value and build on their previous experience and explore the learning potential in their working circumstances;
- allows participants to exploit a wide range of learning resources from personal, professional and employer networks and from the work activity itself;
- provides just-in-time specialist advice from their university partner by e-mail, phone or dialogue facilities;
- enables users to build their own programmes leading to quality assured university qualifications.

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