STUDENT LEARNING IN SCOTTISH FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

A REPORT FOR SFEFC BY HMIE

FEBRUARY 2004

Foreword by Her Majesty's Senior Chief Inspector

This report has been prepared by HM Inspectorate of Education as part of our work on behalf of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC).

The report summarises and evaluates key findings by HMIE on learning, teaching and student achievement in further education (FE) colleges during the period 2000-2003. Through educational and psychological research we are gaining better insights into the nature of learning. Important challenges exist, however, in separating real advances in our knowledge from more ephemeral theories which lack a firm grounding. The report invites the FE sector to reflect on some recurring themes from recent literature on education theory and important messages about successful learning from current practice within the sector. It is hoped that it will generate constructive debate on how to achieve the best balance for students' experiences. Central to the debate will be how teaching approaches and learning opportunities can best be organised to enable learners to maximise their progress and achieve their potential.

Colleges and other stakeholders in the sector should build on strengths identified and address the main points for action, with a view to progressing the Scottish Executive's Lifelong Learning Strategy. The recurring themes highlighted in the report should also have resonance for other sectors of education.

GHC Donaldson
HM Senior Chief Inspector

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1   Background and rationale

1.1   The Scottish Executive's lifelong learning strategy, articulated in *Life Through Learning, Learning Through Life* (2003) emphasises effective learning as the key to bridging the opportunities, skills and productivity gaps that characterise Scotland's current social and economic environment. From a further education (FE) perspective, these gaps have become more apparent in recent years for a number of reasons.

1.2   By expanding the range and volume of provision and widening opportunities for access, FE colleges have increased participation, particularly by adults and young people who might have been excluded in the past. These learners have various goals that encompass personal development and fulfilment, progression to higher levels of education and entry into the employment market.

1.3   To meet the needs of this wide range of learners, FE college managers and staff have rightly given emphasis to some key issues. They have invested considerable time and resources in devising programmes to meet learner and employer needs and enhancing systems for guidance and learner support. They have reflected on many crucial aspects of programme management and delivery, including the teaching and learning process and assessment methods. Much effort has also been directed towards evaluating readily measurable outputs, most notably student retention and attainment rates. The SFEFC/HMIE quality framework, used widely by colleges for self-evaluation in addition to being the basis for external quality assessment, has provided a focus for these activities.

1.4   Overall, FE colleges have been highly effective in ensuring that the Ministerial commitment at the launch of the Scottish Wider Access Programme initiative in the late-1980s has been honoured. A wide range of learners is participating in FE and is receiving sympathetic and helpful guidance and support. In 2002-03, the number of enrolments in Scottish colleges was 514,877.

1.5   Over the period since FE colleges became incorporated institutions in 1993, the sector has placed relatively less emphasis on another important issue, ***how students learn***. This key aspect of the learning process has received less attention than, for example, teaching methods or teaching and learning resources. This position is perhaps understandable. Many of the existing studies of learning theory have focused on learning in schools, universities or other higher education institutions rather than on FE. The perceived need for a rigorous exploration of how FE students learn, and what in particular makes for effective learning among the large number of disparate learners with diverse needs in this sector, is a relatively recent imperative.

1.6   The increasing availability of new technology is another factor that is creating interest in how students learn. Advances in the provision of ICT and the availability of learning materials in a variety of media challenge colleges to extend learning opportunities and to develop new approaches and processes.

1.7   This report has been commissioned by SFEFC to encourage colleges to reflect on what they provide to their learners, paying attention in particular to the nature of student learning and how the learning environment can be enhanced.

The report:

- considers the two quality elements *Teaching and Learning Process* and *Student Achievement* within the SFEFC/HMIE quality framework by way of background and context
- identifies some important messages for FE colleges contained in recent literature and research on student learning
- evaluates the current state of learning in FE colleges by reference to HMIE findings in the current review cycle (2000-01 to 2003-04), staff and student views, sector initiatives, and developments in technology-supported learning
- picks up some important messages from a recent FE sector initiative
- makes an initial contribution to the proposed development of an improved framework for evaluating teaching and learning that would place greater emphasis on learning and focus more on the learner than its predecessor.

1.8   In preparing this report, HMIE have undertaken a literature review covering the work listed in Appendix 1, analysed subject review findings for the current cycle, including in-depth analysis of the findings in 11 colleges, visited a further five colleges to explore learners' views, and drawn on a SFEFC-funded collaborative project in which four colleges focused on learning and achievement.

1.9   The report concentrates on student learning in terms of both *process* and *outcomes*. It draws not just on the HMIE experience in the FE college sector, but on thinking pertinent to all sectors of education, and on students' views. However, it does not deal with the wide range of social or financial factors, largely outwith the influence of FE colleges, that may impact on the effectiveness of student learning.

2   The context - evaluating learning, teaching and student achievement in the SFEFC/HMIE Quality Framework

The framework

2.1   The SFEFC/HMIE review framework, *Specification for the Review of Standards and Quality in Further Education* was published in July 2001. Reviews of each institution are undertaken in two parts. The first part is a subject review and the second a college review. The review framework sets out the structure for both. Of the nine quality elements in the subject review two in particular focus on issues directly relevant to student learning. They are A5, *Teaching and Learning Process* and A7, *Student Achievement*. As shown below, each element is underpinned by key quality indicators which provide the basis for self-evaluation and external assessment.

Quality Element	Quality Indicator
A5 *Teaching and Learning Process*	A5.1 The context for learning
	A5.2 Standards set by lecturers
	A5.3 Planning for learning and teaching
	A5.4 The teaching process
	A5.5 The learning process
A7 *Student Achievement*	A7.1 Student achievement in coursework
	A7.2 Student attainment in award-bearing programmes

2.2   The framework recognises clearly the crucial need for FE staff to create an appropriate environment for the sector's learners, set appropriate standards and plan their own contributions, while paying attention to the learning process. It also takes into account the sector's complex client group by identifying *attainment*, which relates specifically to formal qualifications, as just one dimension of *achievement*, which extends also to other, less formal outcomes.

Graded evaluations by HMIE over the current review cycle

2.3   During the academic years 2000-2001 to 2002-2003 HMIE teams comprising HM inspectors and associate assessors drawn from the sector reviewed a total of 33 colleges. Each subject review covered all quality elements. In the course of reviews, evaluations of the elements were graded using a standard four-point scale of *very good, good, fair* and *unsatisfactory*.

2.4   The quality element, *Teaching and Learning Process*, achieved consistently high grades over the past three years of the review process. It was graded as good or very good in 99% of individual subject reviews. Overall, this was a very positive outcome. However, the definition of an overall grade of *good* is that it indicates that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The evaluation does not indicate that all teaching and learning is good; there may still be some weaknesses that require action to bring about essential improvement.

2.5   In arriving at a grade for *Teaching and Learning Process*, reviewers considered a wide range of evidence and discussed issues with staff and students. Most importantly, they observed episodes of learning such as lessons and workshops as an integral part of gathering evidence. Reviewers observed 2795 episodes of learning in the 33 reviews. Of these, 30% were graded *very good*, 59% were *good*, 11% were *fair* and less than 1% were *unsatisfactory*.

These figures confirmed that the grade *good* awarded for teaching and learning in subject areas encompassed judgements of *fair* for a minority of individual lessons. In many cases it also encompassed less formally expressed judgements equivalent to *fair* in relation to other aspects of the quality element beyond what was observed directly in the episodes of learning.

2.6   In contrast, *Student Achievement* was graded as *good* or better in only 71% of subject reviews. It is worth noting here that a grade of *fair* could result from an important weakness in attainment in one or a few programmes within a subject area. Within that area, there might also be areas of *good* or *very good* achievement. An overall grade of *fair* did not necessarily indicate only *fair* achievement by all students or in all programmes in a subject area.

2.7   There are several important reasons for the relatively large number of *fair* and *unsatisfactory* grades for *Student Achievement* compared to those awarded for *Teaching and Learning Process*. They derive from reviewers' consistent application of current advice on awarding grades.

- The evaluation of *Student Achievement* takes into account student retention as well as attainment of qualifications by those completing their programmes, and the quality of coursework. Low retention rates, where these occur, will impact on attainment rates and influence the grade for *Student Achievement*.
- The grade awarded for *Student Achievement* is also affected by poor or irregular student attendance.
- The grade awarded for *Student Achievement* is reduced by the incidence of partial attainment on programmes with named awards. For example, the Student Programme Achievement Ratio gives no recognition to the progress made by a student who achieves success in, say, 60% of units on a programme.
- In evaluating the *Teaching and Learning Process* over the past three years, reviewers have arguably tended to emphasise the context for learning and the teaching process to a greater extent than the outcomes of teaching in terms of the amount of learning actually taking place.

2.8   The reasons for low retention rates may sometimes be unrelated to the quality of the learning experience. For example, learners may leave programmes of study because they obtain employment in their chosen specialist area, or they may accept a belatedly-offered place on programmes at HE institutions (HEIs). Learners in FE colleges may also withdraw prematurely from programmes for non-educational reasons such as financial pressures or personal circumstances.

2.9   The evaluation of the *Teaching and Learning Process* is based largely on the activities, including episodes of learning, observed in the college at the time of the review. Students observed working in the college are self-evidently those who continue to attend at least up to the date of the review. Premature withdrawals from programmes and irregular or poor attendance do not influence the grade for the *Teaching and Learning Process*.

3   Towards more effective learning in FE

3.1   This section sets out and invites the reader to reflect on a range of ideas about learning, including through the medium of ICT. These ideas arise from the current social and political context, and from research work in teaching and learning. Appendix 1 provides a bibliography drawn from the literature survey undertaken by HMIE for this report. The literature survey is not claimed to be comprehensive, but it served to identify some recurring themes that are particularly relevant to the future effectiveness of a Scottish FE sector operating within the context of the Scottish Executive's Lifelong Learning Strategy. These themes are identified in paragraph 3.11 below. Appendix 1 is structured in line with these themes. This structuring aims to demonstrate the potential for the balance of thinking in the FE sector to move across from the teaching to the learning process. Such a shift in balance is already evident in existing aspects of good practice, as will be illustrated in later sections of this report.

Context and recent developments

3.2   Teaching and learning in FE involves preparing learners for employment and citizenship, improving their ability to function within the economy and to contribute effectively to the wider social and cultural environment. It also involves motivating a wide cross-section of our society to become lifelong learners, equipped with core skills which enable them to adapt to change and enhance their own quality of life. This ambition is inclusive, celebrating diversity by extending opportunities to learners who are at risk of being marginalised because of reasons such as disabilities, ethnicity, gender or sexuality, and providing fresh hope and support for those coming from a background of little or poor prior education.

3.3   There is now wide acceptance among educationists that a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning can help people to be more independent. This independence is seen as equally important for all learners, regardless of their previous achievements. Definitions of teaching and learning emerge that are broader than the transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner. The teacher's role continues to be influenced by the subject area, level of study and the characteristics of the learner but the major focus of the role shifts from being the source of knowledge to being the provider of guidance, constructive monitoring and feedback. Learning is then less to do with assimilating knowledge and more to do with personal growth and development, with learners and teachers working in partnership. This shift in roles means that self-reflection, dialogue between teachers and learners and productive use of learning materials and resources are all key contributors to the process. Within this general shift in roles, there are distinctive and evolving requirements for teachers in providing guidance, monitoring and feedback for learners who are learning off campus on flexible and distance learning programmes.

3.4   Within such a learner-centred approach, learners are encouraged to be more active in and responsible for improving their own knowledge, understanding and skills. Learning is often most effective where the quality of the social interaction and communication among the learners and the teacher is regarded as crucial components of the process. In that sense, the quality of relationships is seen as a central influence on the quality of the learning. A key role for the teacher is to create a climate where learning becomes a social activity that encourages self-confidence and self-expression. Many learners make better progress through sharing their thinking with others. The interaction can allow them to adjust their own ideas

or perceptions and accommodate new thoughts by engaging with views put forward by the teacher or by other learners. The teacher continues to have a very important role in acting as a guide to learners going through this process of restructuring their understanding.

3.5   New technology and increasing globalisation of education have made knowledge readily accessible. Sophisticated computer applications are increasing the potential benefits of technology-assisted learning. They offer learners access to tools and information without memorising large amounts of data or maintaining large volumes of written documentation. Technology now makes it possible for learners to work remotely from the college campus, while having access to college-based learning materials and support. Such tools include products such as online help systems for computer applications and online access to written documentation for such diverse products as software development environments and aircraft maintenance procedures. Their characteristics are clear: rapid access to information; portability; continuous availability; ease of update; and effective search facilities.

3.6   Other products that may be characterised as performance support tools include online knowledge databases, performance and decision support tools and job aids. These applications move learning closer in time to the point of need and have led to the development of the notion of just-in-time-learning (JITL).

3.7   The use of technology-assisted learning presents a new challenge in thinking about learning activities. It requires consideration of a new skill, *information literacy*, that is concerned with finding, evaluating and using information. Competences include:

- search skills: for specifying effective online search parameters
- discrimination skills: for selecting likely candidates from a web search
- evaluation skills: for assessing the value and relevance of accessed information and to take into account the variable quality and reliability of information from "non-validated" sources.

3.8   It cannot be assumed that a learner with ICT skills developed in a home environment, such as using games or other non-educational applications, has the necessary skills to benefit from the use of online access to learning or performance support tools. These skills of knowledge acquisition and management need to be developed.

3.9   Learners coming to FE after an unsuccessful school career or after a long break from formal learning are unlikely to benefit from these new models of learning if they are the sole means of access to learning. For such learners, the support role of the teacher discussed earlier in this section remains crucial. In many cases, the best chance of success for students will derive from a carefully considered *blended learning* approach that draws on technology-assisted and other ways of learning and on face-to-face teaching and other instruction, particularly where highly specific knowledge or skills need to be acquired.

3.10   Learners coming to FE for retraining because of technical changes in the workplace or career changes are more likely than other learners to focus on the acquisition of specific new knowledge and skills. They may also contextualise their learning in different ways. Teachers in FE can capitalise on the distinct knowledge, skills and experience that these learners bring and should acknowledge their greater independence and self-awareness.

Recurring themes

3.11   The ideas emerging from recent reflection on students' learning and the impact of new technologies suggests that there are recurring themes that should inform future development. One possible expression of these themes is set out below. The list is not exhaustive, and individual themes are not independent of one another. They will often be present in different combinations within effective learning contexts. The themes feature in all that follows in this report, including its conclusions and recommendations. They are highly relevant to HMIE findings, confirmed by student views, and evident in research activity in the FE sector.

A   A greater emphasis on learning processes and outcomes will ensure that the learner is at the heart of the process and can derive maximum benefit.

B   Learning should be delivered in ways that empower people to be independent and active learners, and to be reflective, questioning and insightful in their approach to learning.

C   All learners need to build on their own strengths to effect personal growth and development. They can be helped to develop their self-confidence in learning by provision that enhances their core skills and vocational competence and supports self-expression.

D   The quality of human relationships and communication impact on the quality of learning. Learning with and through others is both personally rewarding and functionally effective.

E   Learners need specific preparation for employment, citizenship and their contribution to the wider social and economic environment. They may also need to re-engage with education and training at various points in their lives.

F   The teacher in FE should continue to have a key role as a guide, enabler, supporter and a source of information and knowledge.

G   New technologies offer learners a range of opportunities to learn more flexibly and effectively. In order to maximise the potential of these facilities, learners need to develop a range of skills and raise their awareness of their particular needs.

4   Learning in FE colleges 2000-01 to 2002-03

HMIE findings in the current review cycle

4.1   This section explores further the key strengths and weaknesses in student learning that underlie the grades awarded over the three years 2000-01 to 2002-03 for the quality elements *Teaching and Learning Process* and *Student Achievement*. It is the outcome of a detailed examination of 70 individual subject reports relating to the subject reviews of 11 colleges (about one third of the total number of subjects reviewed over the three year period). These 11 colleges were selected as a representative sample of Scottish FE provision, based on size, geographical location and programmes offered. Their reviews included twenty curriculum areas, covering almost all of the SFEFC/HMIE subject classifications. HMI and associate assessors, who were peer reviewers, ensured that the expectations and judgements underlying the grades awarded were realistic in the context of the colleges and the sector. Reviewers' findings relating to the quality elements *Teaching and Learning Process* and *Student Achievement* for this sample were analysed against selected points of reference within key quality indicators in the framework, grouped as shown below. These indicators are highly relevant to the themes identified in section 3. This section also reflects on the views expressed by learners to HMI during visits to a further five colleges in the preparation of this report. HMI have also drawn on findings reported within other quality elements where they relate to teaching and learning and student achievement.

A5.1, 5.2, 5.3 - Context, standards and planning

- **Classroom/workshop ethos -** the atmosphere in which learning takes place
- **Prior learning and experience –** the extent to which the learning process takes account of and builds on the students' prior knowledge and experience
- **Standards set by lecturers –** particularly when these are beyond the minimum requirements of the programme
- **Lesson planning -** the matching of approaches to lesson aims, content and delivery

A5.4 - The teaching process

- **Personal development -** emphasising personal and social aspects of learning; building self-confidence
- **Core skills –** ensuring that students are developing competence in core skills

A5.5 - The learning process

- **Student involvement in the learning process -** the extent to which students are actively engaged in and committed to the learning process
- **Project and placement activities –** study projects, work experience, external activities
- **Independent learning –** self-directed learning; activities which involve problem solving and independent thinking, and develop and enhance students' core skills

A7.1 - Student achievement in coursework

- **Student achievement -** the standards students are achieving, particularly when these are beyond the minimum requirements of the programme.

Findings from detailed analysis of 11 subject reviews

4.2   The analysis of the 11 sets of subject reviews revealed the following strengths and weaknesses.

Classroom/workshop ethos (Concerned with themes B, D, E, and F)

4.3   The frequent references in review reports to classroom/workshop ethos were almost all positive. The atmosphere in which students learn was described variously as friendly, relaxed, informal, purposeful, and conducive to learning. Relationships between staff and students were supportive and collaborative. Reviewers often referred to teamworking, partnership, shared commitment to success, good rapport and mutual respect. There were also several references to the variety and range of teaching and learning approaches.

Prior learning and experience (Concerned with themes B, C, F, and G)

4.4   Lecturers generally took appropriate account of learners' prior learning and experience in adapting their teaching approaches to meet learner need. Positive evaluations referred specifically to students building well on prior knowledge and experience, the integration of skills and knowledge gained in the workplace, and integrative projects directly related to the jobs of students. However, lecturers most often applied the process of identifying prior learning and experience only to students identified during the programmes as having difficulty. There was little evidence that lecturers adopted a systematic approach to establishing initial baselines from which to maximise and measure individuals' progress.

Standards set by lecturers (Concerned with themes B and F)

4.5   Lecturers generally ensured that the pace of learning was appropriate, and challenged students to achieve beyond minimum levels required for successful completion of the programme. However, in a few cases, the slow pace of lessons, often accompanied by a narrow range of approaches, made for a non-stimulating experience for students.

Lesson planning (Concerned with themes C, D, F and G)

4.6   Lecturers generally planned lessons effectively, setting out a suitable variety of teaching approaches and classroom and workshop opportunities. However, on too many occasions, planning was not carried into practice. Mismatches with intention included a lack of breadth in the learning process, excessively task-based and outcome-driven approaches, and insufficient use of ICT to widen the learning experience.

Personal development (Concerned with themes C, E, F, and G)

4.7   The almost uniformly positive outcomes were highly encouraging. Staff in colleges helped learners, including mature students and adult returners, to improve their self-confidence either as a direct result of the learning process or their wider experience of college life. Many students developed a range of life skills and a positive work ethic. Very importantly, confidence-building arrangements often led directly to increased learner motivation.

Core skills (Concerned with themes C, D, E, F, and G)

4.8   Many staff in FE colleges gave due attention to developing and enhancing their students' core skills. They focused effectively on increasing student confidence in the use of *information technology*, the integration of *communication* skills with vocational studies within programmes, and the development of effective skills in *working with others*. In particular subjects, learners developed *numeracy* and *problem solving* skills as part of a contextualised learning experience within mainstream units. As a result of all these arrangements, many students consolidated their core skills and gained good transferable and organisational skills through individual and group work.

4.9   However, in too many cases core skills received insufficient attention. They were not being developed effectively, either discretely or through integration within vocational units, and there was insufficient encouragement for students to acquire core skills beyond minimum levels. For example, opportunities were not usually available for able students to 'fast-track' in *communication* units.

Student involvement in the learning process (Concerned with themes B, D, E and F)

4.10   Students had ample opportunities to become actively involved in the learning process. Review reports praised active and confident student participation, enthusiastic responses to lecturer questioning, effective group working and interaction with peers, role play and presentations to other students, and activities set in a realistic working environment. Examples of particularly good practice included an instance where students with learning difficulties worked 'for real' in a college's fast-food kitchen; good use of a simulated working environment in a "Practical Training Office"; and student 'ownership' of a college's hardware and networking laboratory. Such activities also served to enhance students' core skills very effectively.

4.11   However, in more than a few instances, teaching styles did not stimulate active learning. Excessive dictation of notes and lecturer activity dominating the lesson discouraged student discussion, limited opportunities for team-working and, most damagingly, impacted negatively on student motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

Project and placement activities (Concerned with themes B, C, E, F and G)

4.12   Students undertook a substantial amount of useful work-related and work-based activity. These activities included:

- contact with practitioners in relevant vocational sectors
- collaboration with external organisations on ICT projects
- participation in national competitions
- work experience placements leading to employment, including a few examples of placements in European countries and the USA.

4.13   Students derived significant benefits from the above and similar experience. Their practical skills and confidence were improved by work experience. They developed transferable or cross-curricular skills through project work, and managed their own learning in project activities. Commendably, in one college, work experience was an integral part of

the majority of programmes, although this was not the result of a college policy on work experience.

Participants in the range of work-related and work-based activities were not the sole beneficiaries. A 'Computing and IT Showcase' enabled students to present their projects to prospective employers, and a 'live project' in architectural technology allowed students to present their project to their class group and others for scrutiny and discussion.

Independent learning (Concerned with themes B, C, D, F and G)

4.14   Review reports confirmed that students welcomed and benefited from opportunities to engage in independent or self-directed learning. On many occasions, they took responsibility readily for shaping their approaches and targets through individual learning plans. Opportunities for *problem solving* led to gains in independent and critical thinking, and allowed students to reflect on their learning and challenge assumptions. Students frequently made good use of library and learning centre facilities, and used ICT and the Internet. They made effective use of high quality self-help materials where these were provided to *fast-track*, as for example in an intensive HNC course in digital media. Learning experiences were much poorer where students had insufficient opportunities to develop independence and creativity and there was little or ineffective use of flexible learning resources.

Student achievement (Concerned with themes C, D, and E)

4.15   The evaluation of *Student Achievement* was positive overall. In general, standards of practical and course work were at least in line with, and were often above the minimum required standard. Additional tutoring and guidance were key factors in ensuring good attainment, and in a few cases they led to extension activities for more able students. Students responded positively to the pace of learning and challenges set. When challenging standards were set, students usually met them. Students achieved most personal learning goals and action plan targets, especially in access, introductory and outreach courses. Well-motivated students made good use of lecturer activity and support to achieve well.

4.16   However, many of these positive features had to be set against poor attendance and completion rates. These outcomes were clearly matters for concern because of the obvious adverse effect of poor retention on student attainment. Other key negative influences on achievement included the slow pace of learning, insufficient challenge, some students not responding to challenge, and a lack of encouragement to achieve beyond minimum levels.

Summary of strengths, weaknesses and main points for action

4.17   The next sections of the report picks up on the recurring themes emerging from the ideas discussed in Section 3 and evaluates the current strengths and weaknesses in learning, teaching and achievement with reference to these themes. They also summarise the most common focuses of main points for action across the subject areas at colleges reviewed. This summary can be considered as an agenda for improvement across the sector as a whole.

Strengths of existing provision

4.18   The detailed examination of reviewers' reports on the *Teaching and Learning Process* and on *Student Achievement* revealed that existing provision satisfied many of the requirements identified under the recurring themes.

- The classroom/workshop ethos in FE colleges is predominantly very positive. Colleges have developed a learning environment in which most students are comfortable and work in partnership with staff.
- Students are actively involved in learning in most programmes, and gain self-confidence during it.
- Widespread and varied project work encourages independent learning, develops vocational skills, and often adds a work-related or 'real life' element to the learning experience.
- Independent learning and problem-solving activities are well established in many programmes.
- When lecturers set demanding standards, students respond well to the challenge.
- Practical work and course work are generally of a good standard, and are often above minimum requirements.

Weaknesses

4.19   Important weaknesses include the following:

- A majority of students do not develop their core skills well, often because they do not have the opportunities to do so. In too many cases, there is insufficient coverage, contextualisation and integration of core skills within programmes.
- In a minority of teaching and learning situations, insufficiently high expectations from lecturers, often reflected in unnecessarily slow pace and a lack of challenge to students, militate against effective learning and achievement.
- Attendance, retention and completion rates are poor in many programmes. While most colleges are aware of this weakness, and many have taken action to deal with specific points, only a few have developed effective, college-wide strategies to improve attendance, retention and completion. A few colleges have not taken significant action to address this problem.

Main points for action

4.20   A number of the main points for action in the 11 subject reviews analysed relate to teaching and learning, and achievement. The points that featured most strongly are summarised below.

- Colleges should be more analytical in their use of available information in the form of performance indicators, client feedback and employer and student requirements to inform the improvement of the quality of the student experience.
- Staff development and career review processes should ensure that teaching staff have their professional and industrial development needs addressed and that new entrants to the profession receive appropriate induction on teaching, learning and assessment practice.

- Programme teams and section managers should evaluate the quality of teaching and learning more systematically and share good practice identified.
- Lecturers should extend the range of teaching and learning methods and improve the quality of teaching and learning materials.
- Colleges should identify and implement student retention strategies to help address low attainment and achievement.

Good practice in teaching, learning and student achievement (over three years of reviews across 33 colleges)

4.21   Subject reviews over the past three years identified 221 examples of good practice that met the criterion of "sector-leading or innovative practice worthy of dissemination" for presentation in a published report. Of these "good practice box" examples, 64 (29%) related to the *Teaching and Learning Process* while nine (4%) related to *Student Achievement*. Several examples were in three important areas which confirm that expanding students' horizons and giving them greater freedom to learn yields rich results.

- The effective use of a range of innovative and suitably well-balanced learning approaches - case studies, role play, external visits, work-based projects, contributions from local speakers from industry - stimulated students and resulted in positive learning outcomes.
- The effective and imaginative use of ICT in programme delivery across a range of subject areas helped to raise student motivation by improving access to information and broadening the students' experience.
- Learners developed independent study skills through the use of interactive flexible learning packs, high-quality flexible learning materials, and good quality ICT resources, and by involvement in innovative research and development activities.

The learners' views

4.22   Learner views are central to quality improvement. All colleges gather these views systematically in some way. However, there are weaknesses in the most common method used presently by colleges to gather student views on teaching and learning. Student questionnaires, used on their own, often do not provide sufficient information to inform improvements in teaching and learning. Many students who are unused to reflecting on the quality of their learning experience provide largely unconsidered responses. Taking these factors into consideration, HMIE decided that constructive and insightful learner feedback would best be obtained in the five colleges visited through face-to-face discussion with students who had been helped to prepare for the process. Learner feedback for the purposes of this report was gathered as follows.

- HMI identified a broad sample of students willing to talk about their learning experiences in the colleges visited.
- HMI briefed the students on the task of recording their learning experiences. They began with a brainstorming exercise about what learners found helped them learn best, introduced the task of keeping a diary of good learning experiences for two weeks, and explained that all the information was to be anonymous.
- The diary was 'owned' by the learners and did not have to be submitted. They were also given a short list of examples in everyday language of the kinds of things that other learners had said about the learning process, to assist their thinking.

- Finally, HMI returned to the college and conducted focus group interviews on the learners' records and thoughts about learning over the intervening weeks.

4.23   This exercise generated substantial and valuable information about learner experiences and what the learners saw as essential to effective learning. Once briefed, most learners readily engaged in the discussion, recounting their own positive and negative experiences in a very comprehensive way. Inevitably, some groups of learners were more willing or able to engage in discussion than others. Interviewers sought to gain best value from the exercise by building throughout on what learners said rather than focusing on questions from a prearranged agenda.

4.24   During interviews, learners identified a range of things that helped or hindered their learning. The most frequent positive points related to human relationships and working in partnership **(themes C, D and F)**. The **lecturer/learner relationship** was seen as the key issue by most learners. They thought it important that the lecturer understood them and treated them as equals. Typical comments were "*someone who appreciates you for what you put in*", "*someone having faith in your ability to achieve*", "*you feel accepted*" and "*people are treated with dignity*". Learners valued lecturers whom they perceived as having subject credibility, often from experience outside the college, and who could relate their learning material to real work experiences. **Relationships with other learners** were also important. Many liked to be able to share ideas and to learn from others in the class or group. They spoke of being "*encouraged to create good relationships with other students*" and "*feeling comfortable with those around you*". Learners were critical of others who disrupted work, often wanted lecturers to take a firmer line while also having some appreciation of the difficult balance that lecturers had to maintain. A few learners recognised the problems caused by their own and their friends' behaviour and commented that staff had dealt with the situation well. One group of care students talked very favourably about the community (of staff and students) within which they worked. Another group emphasised that, within their subject area, an ethos encouraging mutual praise and support by other learners and staff had helped them to learn and to maintain a creative atmosphere.

4.25   Learners generally found it more difficult to talk about **approaches to teaching and learning (themes B and C)**. They commented positively about co-operative learning, having a range of activities to do and the importance of knowing where they stood. Adult returners talked favourably about being "*assessed as you go along*". Critical comments were made about the small number of lecturers who had low expectations, who "*criticised (students) within earshot of others*" or "*talk down to you really badly*". Students whose programmes included work placement or work experience valued these experiences very highly. They also valued opportunities to share experiences with other students who had workplace experience.

4.26   A few students commented on the **accommodation and resources** in their colleges. Most were pleased with the facilities available to them. The most common criticisms were about issues such as the temperature of the classrooms, noise in the room or from adjacent rooms and problems with ICT. However, when pressed, they often recognised that some of these issues were irritations rather than real barriers to their learning.

4.27   Learners appreciated the value of good **guidance and support (theme F)**. They readily acknowledged the help that had led them to the correct course for them and the ongoing support they received from lecturers. Those who referred to guidance as a factor in

their learning, generally associated this with continuing first-line guidance from lecturers rather than with one-to-one interviews about their progress.

4.28   Overall, the learners interviewed for this report spoke very favourably about staff in their colleges, were very positive overall about their learning experience in college, and often contrasted this good experience with their prior experience of education. However, there was strong confirmation of a serious deficiency at present that militates against a truly effective and comprehensive evaluation of student learning. While most learners know *what they want* from their experience in FE, relatively few of them know *how* to set about achieving their objectives, particularly in respect of the learning processes necessary to achieve their goals.

Some implications drawn from learners' views, HMIE reports and recent developments

4.29   While many staff in FE colleges give serious and effective consideration to these matters, many others do not have a systematic understanding of *how* students learn. Where colleges have instituted lesson observation as part of their arrangements to evaluate teaching and learning, the focus, particularly where performance management is involved, is on the lecturer. There is less consideration of issues such as students' learning styles, dialogue between learners, negotiations between the lecturer and learners and the quality of learning. Many current teaching and learning approaches tend to be based on individual lecturers' preferences, modified on occasions in the light of discussions with peers. Section 3 of this report indicated that recent developments in educational thinking put the learner at the centre of the teaching and learning process and emphasised the characteristics necessary for effective learning. Reference has already been made to the increasing diversity of FE students in terms of age, ethnicity, background and experience. This diversity impacts on the range of ways in which learners approach and contextualise their experience.

4.30   Given these factors it is important that the development of all aspects of *learning skills* should become a key priority. It should encompass developing student awareness of learning approaches and giving them a more secure basis on which to negotiate, plan and manage their own activity and evaluate their own progress.

4.31   A further implication is that students should understand fully their own learning processes as well as possible so that they can manage them more effectively and to better effect. It is clear from meetings with learners that those with better communication and social skills were able to engage more effectively in any discussion or negotiation with staff and fellow students about their learning activities. In general, a more thorough grounding in core skills would help students to make more informed decisions on how to study, the most effective processes to adopt, and the most appropriate mode for particular activities. Developing *communication*, *numeracy* and *information technology* skills enhances self-confidence, allays anxiety and extends opportunity. *Working with others* and *problem solving* are crucial personal and social skills. Core skills help students to be better placed to take action themselves or seek the most appropriate assistance.

5   An FE sector initiative

5.1   While the contributions from a wide range of thinkers based on their experiences across all sectors of education (summarised in Section 3 above) are valuable, what FE staff think and do about teaching and learning remains a vital driver of the quality of the learner's experience. Many staff in all FE colleges work with each other within their own college and with colleagues in other colleges to reflect on the effectiveness of arrangements for student learning, identify and disseminate good practice, and find ways to overcome weaknesses. This section is a summary of the experience of one joint project. The outcomes of the project link well to the themes identified in Section 3.

5.2   *Focus on Learning; New Approaches to Improving Learning and Teaching,* published in February 2003, was the outcome of a collaborative development project. It was led by Cardonald College and also involved Angus College, Cumbernauld College and Falkirk College. SFEFC funded the project and SFEU contributed project support and mentoring.

5.3   Four of the aims of the project were to:

- motivate staff to explore new approaches to raising retention and achievement
- raise staff awareness of recent developments related to effective learning
- enhance staff skill levels with regard to change and to planning, delivering and evaluating effective learning
- embed effective new practices across the four colleges.

Fourteen individual projects conducted by small teams of lecturers each reviewed a current teaching programme and then developed and implemented an *intervention* designed to improve that programme. Most of the *interventions* were implemented during the academic year 2001-02. The projects required practitioners to apply and evaluate measures to raise *Student Achievement*.

5.4   The project began with a series of staff development activities that enabled lecturers to explore research and development work on teaching and learning and consider the implications for their own practice. Topics included **learning styles, adult learning, thinking skills, memory and recall, emotional intelligence,** and **ICT**.

5.5   Several teams paid particular attention to **learning styles**, for example by helping students and lecturers to recognise preferred learning styles and by introducing a wider range of learning methods. One team focused on **adult learning** styles and preferences, another on problems with study skills in otherwise able students working on programmes at advanced level **(themes A and B)**.

5.6   **Thinking skills** development was promoted in several projects. One introduced thinking skills elements into the delivery of *problem-solving* and *working with others*. Another promoted thinking skills as a means of improving retention. Both these projects also drew on insights into the implications of **emotional intelligence**. Several projects developed concept-mapping strategies with their students **(themes C and D)**.

5.7   Several teams addressed **memory and recall**, for example in a design programme where a CD-ROM tool was developed to help students to use correct grammatical forms or design conventions. A mnemonic on *I remember* helped project teams remember the keys to

improving recall, and they in turn helped students to develop recall strategies **(themes A, C and G)**.

5.8   The concept of **emotional intelligence** featured prominently in the project. Many lecturers already worked from their understanding of the impact of emotional factors on learning, and the conceptual framework helped them to further understand and develop strategies to help students overcome barriers to learning. One team leader developed a package of activities and support materials. Several teams felt that understanding and working with the concept of emotional intelligence was essential in all teacher training, and that developing emotional intelligence could be a long-term process which should be embedded widely across learner experiences. As the proposed plans were applied the teams inevitably increased their focus on learners and many identified emotional barriers to learning among their students. In several cases, insights into **emotional intelligence** were used to develop ways of raising self-esteem, promoting positive attitudes and introducing motivational techniques **(theme C)**.

5.9   The project gathered student views, and an analysis of these views identified factors considered influential to achievement and retention. Key factors included:

- the quality of teaching and approachability of the lecturer
- ethos and group dynamics
- the design and organisational aspects of programmes
- the students' views and attitudes concerning assessment
- the availability of guidance, induction and support
- the match between learning preferences of students and the teaching approaches of some lecturers.

5.10   Despite the project's focus on the measurable outcomes of retention and achievement, it became clear early on to the project teams that these outcomes were dependent on students possessing skills and attributes such as confidence, reliability, motivation, interpersonal skills and organisational skills. This led to discussion of *soft outcomes* and *distance travelled* as valid but difficult to measure aspects of growth and success, which may be more significant for individuals in the long term than achieving units.

5.11   The overall outcomes of the project were positive. The project yielded important results with potential medium and long-term benefits. Firstly, the insights and techniques developed, implemented and evaluated by the project teams were a rich source of ideas for teachers and managers. These should be used widely in the sector to stimulate and promote improvements in teaching, learning and achievement. Secondly, the *top down/bottom up* model of project management was effective in enabling practitioners to develop and implement well-considered, albeit sometimes unconventional, approaches. It harnessed the professionalism and energy of practitioners to the benefit of current learners and the further development of teaching and learning approaches for the broad FE student population. This dynamic generated an increasing willingness among staff to help learners take more responsibility for their own learning. Thirdly, partnership working across the four colleges was seen as a major strength in terms of extending expertise and experience and providing a supportive forum for reflection.

5.12   The primary aims of the project, to improve student learning and achievement, are long term ambitions.   As yet, no clear impact on student achievement can be demonstrated. The improvement of teaching and learning approaches is continuous work in progress.

6   Conclusions and recommendations

This section brings together the messages from earlier parts of the report.

Conclusions

6.1   While the learning experience of students in FE colleges is predominantly positive, further progress is needed if all learners are to receive consistently high-quality learning experiences.

6.2   Colleges have developed a learning environment in which most students are ready to learn, and where factors that by common consensus make for effective learning are present. College managers and staff work hard to help students learn, and learners confirm the quality of their experience. There is increasing awareness among all key stakeholders that learning processes impact at least as significantly as teaching methods on learning and achievement outcomes **(theme A)**.

6.3   Students are actively involved in the learning process in most programmes but the extent of involvement is insufficient in too many lessons. Independent learning and problem-solving activities are well established in many programmes. Project work encourages learners to extend the range of their activity **(theme B)**.

6.4   Many learners in FE achieve significant growth in their personal, social and vocational skills during their time at college. In many learning episodes, students acquire knowledge and enhance their own self-esteem. They reinforce their enthusiasm for their chosen area of study or acquire new interests, and proceed to levels of study that they had previously felt was beyond them. **(theme C)**.

6.5   The quality of communication between key stakeholders in FE is high. Many learners form effective working relationships with their peers and teachers. Different groups and individuals bring their own different styles, requirements and experience to bear effectively on the learning process. **(theme D)**.

6.6   Learners do not see teaching and learning as such as isolated from the broader environment within which they live and learn. They value their own experience of real-life aspects of learning through, for example, work placements and project activity, and also learning by proxy from the work experiences of other learners, lecturers and contributors from outside the college. These activities prepare students for employment, citizenship and life. **(theme E)**.

6.7   Learners attach great significance to their relationships with staff. An important function of the teacher is to provide support and guidance. Greater understanding of how people learn, of learning styles and other student preferences enhances teacher capacity to provide help. The *Focus on Learning* project demonstrates the value of management-led, practitioner-developed projects within FE colleges, the potential for effective collaboration between colleges and the potential benefits to be gained from the sharing of good practice **(theme F)**.

6.8   Examples of good practice identified through FE reviews confirm that well thought-out and supported technology-assisted learning, blended with face-to-face teaching, enables learners to obtain maximum benefits from developments in new technologies **(theme G)**.

6.9   Many learners at present make a useful contribution to the evaluation of learning in colleges. They are able to identify a range of factors that influence their learning. However, the majority of learners do not have sufficient insight into the process of teaching and learning, to help improve the quality of their experience. With a greater awareness of their own capacity for learning and the options available, and with more informed help from staff, all learners can become more aware of what helps them learn most effectively. Weaknesses in the way many colleges presently gather student views on teaching and learning also limit progress in this area. There is a need to develop more effective approaches to gathering students' views, including the use of focus groups, more sophisticated questionnaires and learning logs.

6.10   Gaps in the development, enhancement and effective use of core skills constitute one of the most serious barriers to more effective learning, personal fulfilment, prospective employment and meaningful citizenship. Core skills deficiencies restrict learner capacity to interact with others and to fulfil their own potential fully.

6.11   Learner achievement in many instances is inhibited from the outset by poor attendance and compounded by failure to complete programmes of study. Improving learner self-confidence, self-awareness and motivation together with appropriate staff expectations and early intervention should lead to improved retention and achievement.

Recommendations

6.12   All key stakeholders in FE should work together to further improve the current largely positive learner experience in FE by improving the tools with which learners operate and increasing their capacity for personal, social and technical development by:

* enhancing sectoral awareness of all aspects of the learning process
* enhancing the initial and continuing core skills development of learners
* addressing the issues of poor learner attendance and low retention rates rigorously.

6.13   The FE sector should also:

* give serious consideration to developing a 'Learning processes, styles and skills' component to include within induction programmes for all learners on full-time programmes and other programmes of significant duration
* provide staff development to increase lecturer awareness of how learners learn on college campuses and, with the aid of ICT, remotely from the college campus, for example, by incorporating appropriate components within PDAs
* develop methods for evaluation of teaching and learning to take due account of the learning process
* develop or refine their core skills strategies as appropriate, to provide all students with effective core skills development within a systematic, coherent and progressive framework
* provide staff development to help advance their core skills strategies

- establish and implement retention strategies that highlight the role of effective teaching and learning arrangements in enhancing student motivation.

6.14   SFEFC is invited to:

- consider its possible role in supporting the FE sector to address the issues highlighted in this report
- identify appropriate mechanisms such as conferences and workshops to promote wider discussion of this report
- consider how it might best support collaborative developments to address the priorities for the sector identified in the report's recommendations.

6.15   All participants in the currently ongoing process of development of a revised quality assurance model for self-evaluation and external assessment in FE for 2004-05 and beyond should:

- reflect and act on the issues discussed in this report
- seek to incorporate the good practice identified in this report into the way we evaluate teaching and learning.

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The works listed below are grouped in order of the recurring themes identified in section 3 of this report, to facilitate further investigation by interested readers

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Appendix 2: Glossary of terms and abbreviations

FE	Further Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HMI	HM Inspector(s)
HMIE	HM Inspectorate of Education
HNC	Higher National Certificate
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
JITL	Just-in-time-learning
SFEFC	Scottish Further Education Funding Council
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
SFEU	Scottish Further Education Unit