

## Flexible Delivery

Supporting the development of the flexible curriculum:  
flexible entry and flexible programmes

Project overview report and review of flexible  
programme provision

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## Preface

The approach to quality and standards in Scotland is enhancement-led and learner-centred. It was developed through a partnership of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The Higher Education Academy has also joined that partnership. The Enhancement Themes are a key element of a five-part framework which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement, supporting learners and staff at all levels in enhancing higher education in Scotland drawing on developing, innovative practice within the UK and internationally.

The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject-level reviews undertaken by the higher education institutions themselves; guidance on internal reviews is published by SFC ([www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk))
- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) run by QAA Scotland ([www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR))
- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance on the information to be published by higher education institutions is provided by SEC ([www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk))
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) ([www.sparqs.org.uk](http://www.sparqs.org.uk))
- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, which are facilitated by QAA Scotland ([www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)).

The topics for the Themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of developing a programme of development activities, which draw upon national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each Theme are intended to provide important reference points for higher education institutions in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each Theme, its steering committee, the range of research and development activities, and the outcomes are published on the Enhancement Themes website ([www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector, including taking forward the outcomes of the various Enhancement Themes, a new overarching committee has been established, chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller (Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde). It has the important dual role of supporting the overall approach of the enhancement themes, including the five-year rolling plan, and of supporting institutional enhancement strategies and management of quality. We very much hope that the new committee, working with the individual topic-based Themes' steering committees, will provide a powerful vehicle for the progression of the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish higher education.



Norman Sharp, Director, QAA Scotland



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## Introduction

### The Flexible Delivery Enhancement Theme

The Enhancement Theme Steering Committee for Flexible Delivery (established in January 2004) has implemented a programme of work to address the growing challenge faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop and adapt their provision to allow greater flexibility for today's large and diverse student body, as part of the wider implementation of a learner-centred approach.

To this end, the Steering Committee adopted the broadest possible interpretation of flexible delivery, to encompass not only modes of study but also methods of delivery, together with underpinning support and infrastructure. Accordingly, its programme of work has sought to encapsulate a vision of a learner-centred model of pedagogy and learner support, appropriate to the needs of the individual learner, located within a high-quality learning environment, and supported by efficient, effective business and administrative processes. This work has been informed by exemplars of good practice from HEIs worldwide, reflecting changing practice in learning and teaching to promote flexibility. It has also been informed by the outcomes from a series of workshops involving a number of international experts, together with UK and Scottish practitioners.

As a practical means of ensuring that the breadth of the Theme was reflected in the scope of its development projects, the Committee formulated a typology of flexible delivery, comprising the following key operational areas:

- flexible admissions
- credit, recognition of prior informal learning (RPL) and accreditation of prior learning
- flexible programmes
- student support, advice and guidance
- continuing professional development
- collaborative partnerships.

This typology provided a framework to support the planning and implementation of a number of projects addressing different practical applications of flexible delivery; the outputs from these projects provide a suite of tools to inform and support institutions, practitioners and learners in taking forward strategic development and practical implementation.

### **Supporting the development of the flexible curriculum: flexible entry and flexible programmes**

This is the first in a series of publications from the Enhancement Theme for Flexible Delivery. It represents the outcomes from one of six development projects supported by the steering committee, which includes a review of flexible programme provision in the Scottish higher education (HE) sector, together with a staff development pack and resource pack.

Building on the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) national guidelines for credit transfer and RPL, this publication:

- promotes the development and recognition of flexible approaches to learning
- supports flexible entry and flexible programmes through recognition of non-formal and informal learning and planned work-based learning
- identifies continuing professional development and other support needs of HE practitioners who are developing and operating flexible entry and flexible programmes
- provides appropriate support and staff development tools to facilitate implementation of the SCQF national guidelines in relation to operational management and curriculum design
- provides exemplars of good practice in the operational management of RPL and credit transfer, including curriculum design.

### **Other publications from this Theme**

Other publications from this Theme will address different dimensions of flexible delivery, including the strategic planning and implementation of flexible programmes, with a particular focus on blended learning, as well as a survey of virtual learning environment usage in the Scottish HE sector. The compilation of an on-line resource to facilitate access to information, tools and materials from JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) development programmes and the work of the Higher Education Academy will further assist institutions in enhancing flexible delivery within the context of their individual missions.

## Part 1: Project overview report

December 2005

Authors: Ruth Whittaker  
Hazel Knox  
Vince Mills  
Paula Cleary

### Project Team

Ruth Whittaker	SCQF RPL Consultant, Project Director and Flexible Entry: RPL Strand Coordinator
Hazel Knox	Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Paisley - Flexible Entry: Credit Transfer Strand Coordinator
Vince Mills	Director, Scottish Centre for Work-based Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University - Flexible Programmes Strand Coordinator
Paula Cleary	Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University - Project Development Officer

## Executive summary

### Introduction

The project's two strands sought to address practitioners' needs in terms of developing and operating **flexible entry** (recognising prior informal learning and credit transfer) and **flexible programmes** (part-time, distance, work-based and negotiated learning) within HEIs in the context of the SCQF.

This overview examines the project in terms of its goals and the approach used to achieve these objectives. It summarises the project's outcomes and raises key issues that have emerged during the project, to help in shaping an agenda for action.

### Summary of project outcomes

#### **Establishment of Flexible Entry and Flexible Programmes Coordination Groups**

Practitioners within Scottish HEIs with an interest or expertise in flexible entry and flexible programmes were invited to participate in HE Coordination Groups to contribute to achieving the project's objectives. Members of the newly formed Coordination Groups agreed that the groups would provide a much needed support network for practitioners in terms of sharing practice and experience and encouraging collaboration.

#### **Flexible entry staff development pack: Recognising prior informal learning and credit transfer within the context of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework**

The purpose of the *Flexible entry staff development pack* is to support staff in HEIs in developing and operating flexible entry processes within the context of the SCQF.

The SCQF guidelines for RPL and for credit transfer form the basis of this pack<sup>1</sup>. Illustrations of some of the key features of RPL and credit transfer are based on examples of practice within HEIs. The pack also provides a reflective staff development exercise and sources of further information.

The pack is designed to be used flexibly by HEIs to underpin staff development for new and experienced staff, the production of staff guides to flexible entry, and paper-based or on-line resources that can act as a source of reference for staff.

The pack is available on CD-ROM with this publication, and on the Enhancement Themes website ([www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)).

#### **Flexible entry resource pack: Recognising prior informal learning and credit transfer within the context of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework**

The purpose of the *Flexible entry resource pack*, the basis of which has been developed through this project, is to:

- support staff within the HE sector in implementing the SCQF guidelines for RPL and credit transfer

<sup>1</sup> The SCQF Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Informal learning and SCQF Credit Transfer Guidelines can be downloaded from the SCQF website ([www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)).

- support the use of the *Flexible entry staff development pack*.

The pack is available on CD-ROM with this publication, and on the Enhancement Themes website.

### **Review of flexible programme provision in the Scottish HE sector**

The review developed a working definition of flexible learning to try to gauge its prevalence, or otherwise, and to consider related issues.

A range of staff development requirements emerged from this review. These could provide an outline that would require further deliberation by the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group. In addition, consideration of the resources that would be required to support such staff development will be necessary.

Details of the outcomes of this review are reported in Part 2 of this publication, as well as on the Enhancement Themes website.

### **Agenda for action**

Flexible entry and flexible programmes are clearly located within strategies of widening access, participation and social inclusion, and are integral to the lifelong learning agenda within Scotland. To sustain the momentum for developing a more flexible curriculum, which has been generated through this and other project work to support the Flexible Delivery Enhancement Theme and implementation of the SCQF, key issues need to be addressed. The project team proposes that these issues form part of a wider agenda for action for both the Enhancement Themes and the SCQF.

These issues are presented in this overview and centre on the need to support the mainstreaming of flexible entry and flexible programmes within HEIs. This requires:

- explicit resourcing of the provision at national and institutional levels
- recognition of diverse approaches to achieving and demonstrating learning within programme design
- training and support for staff developing and operating flexible entry processes and flexible programmes.

The Flexible Entry and Flexible Programmes Coordination Groups could play a significant role in supporting practitioners as the sector seeks to address these challenges. The groups could also provide a forum enabling practitioners within institutions to both inform, and be informed by, developments at national and European levels.

The project reports, *Flexible entry staff development pack* and *Flexible entry resource pack* can all be downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website.

## Project overview report

### 1 Introduction

This overview looks at the project's goals and the approach used to achieve these objectives. It summarises the project outcomes and raises key issues that have emerged during the project, to help in shaping an agenda for action.

The project had two strands - flexible entry and flexible programmes - which addressed:

- practitioners' needs in terms of developing and operating flexible entry (RPL and credit transfer) and flexible programmes (part-time, distance, work-based and negotiated learning) within HEIs in the context of the SCQF
- curriculum design for flexible delivery, with particular reference to RPL, credit transfer, the achievement of learning outcomes by a variety of different routes, and the use of flexible modes of assessment.

### 2 Project objectives

#### 2.1 Flexible entry strand

The objectives for this strand were to:

- put in place coordinated support for HE practitioners in implementing the SCQF national guidelines for credit transfer and RPL, through the sharing of good practice; this was achieved primarily by means of establishing a Flexible Entry Coordination Group
- develop a resource pack containing examples of current practice in developing and implementing RPL and credit transfer
- promote greater consistency of approach to RPL and credit transfer processes across the Scottish HE sector by developing a national staff development package which can be tailored to suit individual institutional needs.
- identify models for the operational management of RPL and credit transfer within institutions.

#### 2.2 Flexible programmes strand

The objective for this strand was to identify the needs of HE practitioners in developing and operating flexible programmes, in particular addressing:

- the extent and nature of flexible provision within HE
- the types of learners engaged in such provision
- the nature of partnerships with employers and voluntary organisations
- the extent to which such provision is credit-rated within the context of the SCQF
- the extent to which other e-learning, RPL and personal development planning (PDP) are, or could be, used in flexible programmes.

The review was supported through the establishment of a Flexible Programmes Coordination Group.

### 3 Project team

Project Director and Flexible Entry: RPL Strand Coordinator - Ruth Whittaker, SCQF RPL Consultant

Flexible Entry: Credit Transfer Strand Coordinator - Hazel Knox, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Paisley

Flexible Programmes Strand Coordinator - Vince Mills, Director, Scottish Centre for Work-based Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University

Project Development Officer - Paula Cleary, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University

### 4 Project approach

Practitioners with expertise or a particular interest in flexible entry and/or flexible programmes were identified in all 21 Scottish HEIs. They were invited to participate in the Flexible Entry and/or Flexible Programmes Coordination Groups.

The project team devised surveys to identify current operational models in relation to flexible entry (RPL and credit transfer) and flexible programmes. The invited members of the Coordination Groups were asked to complete these surveys. The survey outcomes were incorporated in the development of the *Flexible entry staff development pack* and the review of flexible programme provision within the context of the SCQF.

The surveys for RPL and credit transfer also asked respondents to indicate whether they would be willing to share examples of practice. The project team collated those provided in order to develop the basis of the *Flexible entry resource pack*.

Two meetings of the Coordination Groups were held in October and November 2005 at Glasgow Caledonian University. So far, 25 people from 13 institutions have agreed to join the groups (current membership is listed in Appendices A and B).

The purpose of the first meeting was to:

- share with the group the key outcomes that had emerged so far from the surveys
- identify key issues emerging in terms of support for staff in operating flexible entry processes and developing flexible programmes
- agree the format of the examples of current practice in RPL and credit transfer that would form the basis of the *Flexible entry resource pack*
- agree the nature and outline of the *Flexible entry staff development pack*
- agree the scope of the review of flexible programmes.

The second meeting of the groups focused on:

- discussion and agreement of any changes to the draft *Flexible entry staff development pack*
- a review of the developing *Flexible entry resource pack* (examples of practice)
- consideration of the most effective means of disseminating the *Flexible entry staff development pack* and encouraging its use in HEIs
- discussion and agreement of the draft report on the review of flexible programmes and recommendations for the draft *Flexible entry staff development pack* to meet staff's support needs
- agreement of the strategy for continuing the Coordination Groups beyond the life of the project.

The tight timescale of the project (August to December 2005) and the need to obtain information quickly in terms of survey responses and examples of practice meant that some of the practitioners interested in participating in the Coordination Groups were unable to attend the meetings or provide information within the project deadline.

In terms of survey responses, 11 were received in relation to credit transfer, nine on RPL and eight on flexible programmes (the responding institutions are listed in Appendix 3). The picture of current practice in relation to flexible entry and flexible programmes is therefore not comprehensive. Moreover, some of the survey responses reflected programme or school practice rather than institution-wide practice. The key issues emerging in relation to operational practice and staff development needs are, however, fairly representative of the sector as a whole.

The majority of the RPL examples contained within the *Flexible entry resource pack* have been provided by SCQF development work being undertaken to compile an SCQF RPL resource pack. The SCQF pack will contain examples of RPL practice from across all education and training sectors in Scotland. The *Flexible entry resource pack* produced through this project should therefore be viewed as a starting point for further development rather than as a final product. Further examples of practice can be added to the pack through continuation of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group.

The review of flexible programmes identified key issues in relation to the way in which flexible delivery has been developing in Scotland. This includes the extent and nature of flexible provision within HE; the types of learners engaged in flexible delivery; the nature of partnerships; the extent to which such provision is credit-rated within the context of the SCQF; and the extent to which e-learning, RPL and PDP are, or could be, used in flexible programmes.

An outline of staff development needs has been developed through reflection on these issues. Appropriate resources will be required in order to support such development. Continuation of the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group is therefore vital for these resources to be developed.

In addition to project development work, Dr Hazel Knox led a workshop on the project, on behalf of the project team, at the conference on 'Widening Participation to University Study through Flexible Delivery' in London on 21 October. The event was jointly organised by ESCalate, FACE and

Continuum<sup>2</sup>. The work of the project was well received by workshop participants, and the presentation generated considerable interest in the *Flexible entry staff development pack*.

Participants in the Coordination Groups welcomed the project as a means of addressing staff support needs in the areas of flexible entry and flexible programmes. They also saw it as a way of linking the development work being undertaken under the Enhancement Theme for Flexible Delivery with that being undertaken to support implementation of the SCQF.

## 5 Summary of project outcomes

### 5.1 Establishment of HE Coordination Groups for Flexible entry and Flexible Programmes

Members of the newly formed Coordination Groups agreed that the groups would provide a much-needed support network for practitioners, in terms of sharing practice and experience and encouraging collaboration.

The work of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group beyond the life of this development project would include:

- supporting the dissemination and use of the *Flexible entry staff development pack* within institutions
- supporting further development of the *Flexible entry resource pack* through identifying and including growing examples of practice in RPL and credit transfer, and sharing resource materials, such as staff and student guides, support material and quality assurance tools
- helping to embed the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes relevant to this area of practice
- supporting the development work in relation to RPL and credit transfer being undertaken as part of implementation of the SCQF within the HE sector.

The work of the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group would include:

- developing the outline of staff development needs for flexible delivery into a detailed programme
- developing the appropriate resources to support staff development needs for flexible delivery
- disseminating and supporting the use of such resources within institutions
- helping to embed the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes relevant to this area of practice
- supporting the development work being undertaken in relation to flexible programmes as part of implementation of the SCQF within the HE sector.

Continuation of these groups is dependent on an organisation providing appropriate infrastructure. The Coordination Groups need to have a clear purpose, and it will be important to have mechanisms in place to translate their work into practical changes in the sector. Without these mechanisms, there will be little incentive for practitioners to participate, and the innovative approaches being developed may not be widely implemented.

<sup>2</sup> ESCalate; the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Education; FACE: Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education; Continuum: Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies.

Membership of the groups will grow if their role is fulfilling a valuable function. Placing the coordination of the groups under the auspices of QAA Scotland and SCQF HE development work would support the explicit linking of work to embed the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes with implementation of the SCQF in the HE sector.

### **5.2 Flexible entry staff development pack: Recognising prior informal learning and credit transfer within the context of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework**

This pack is available on CD-ROM with this publication and can be downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website. Its purpose is to support staff within HEIs in developing and operating flexible entry processes within the context of the SCQF.

The SCQF guidelines for RPL and for credit transfer form the basis of the *Flexible entry staff development pack*<sup>3</sup>. Extracts from the guidelines are included throughout the pack. Illustrations of some of the key features of RPL and credit transfer are drawn from the surveys of operational practice undertaken for the project, and from examples of practice within Scottish HEIs. These examples have been provided by members of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group and through the SCQF RPL development work being undertaken to produce an SCQF RPL resource pack applicable across all post-16 education and training sectors.

- The pack also provides a reflective staff development exercise and sources of further information.
- The pack is designed to be used flexibly by HEIs to underpin staff development for new and experienced staff, the production of staff guides to flexible entry, and paper-based or on-line resources that can act as a source of reference for staff.
- The pack can also be shared with partners in colleges, in the community and in the workplace to ensure mutual understanding of the process of flexible entry<sup>4</sup>.

### **5.3 Flexible entry resource pack: Recognising prior informal learning and credit transfer within the context of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework**

This pack is available on CD-ROM with this publication and can be downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website. The purpose of the resource pack, the basis of which has been developed through this project, is to:

- support staff within the HE sector in implementing the SCQF guidelines for RPL and credit transfer
- support the use of the *Flexible entry staff development pack*.

Part 1 of the pack contains examples of credit transfer and RPL practice. These examples have been provided by members of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group and through the SCQF RPL development work being undertaken to produce the SCQF RPL Resource Pack.

Part 2 contains policy documentation and resource materials being used to support staff and students in the RPL process.

<sup>3</sup> The SCQF Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Informal Learning and the SCQF Credit Transfer Guidelines can be downloaded from the SCQF website ([www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)).

<sup>4</sup> This summary is taken from part of the introductory section to the *Flexible entry staff development pack*.

The pack produced through this project should be viewed as a growing resource that will be added to through the continuing work of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group. Further examples of practice could be provided as more innovative forms of support, assessment and credit-rating are developed within HEIs.

#### **5.4 Review of flexible programme provision: current practice relating to the development and operation of flexible programmes**

The review developed a working definition of flexible learning to try to gauge its prevalence, or otherwise, and to consider related issues.

The review established that flexible learning of some sort was taking place in all the HEIs involved in the project. On-line learning was the most common, usually as part of a 'blended' approach, but community, work-based and individualised learning were also in evidence across a number of the HEIs.

Flexible delivery is in demand by students who come from a variety of backgrounds and require wider access opportunities. However, unlike the initial target groups for wider access programmes, many of those looking for flexible delivery are in work.

There are a range of partnerships in operation which use forms of flexible delivery. Some are based on a fully mutual relationship between an employer and an HEI, some tend to lean more heavily on existing provision within an HEI, and others are initiated by third parties such as government departments or the Enterprise Network.

The development of the SCQF has been key in providing a framework for designing flexible programmes. The SCQF has also helped to resolve the issue of equivalence by providing 'level' statements and consolidating the notion of credit accumulation.

On-line learning, RPL and PDP are all important in the delivery of flexible programmes. On-line learning in particular has generated a range of as yet unmet needs in terms of staff development. RPL is particularly useful for the potential users of flexibly delivered programmes. PDP has a particular relevance to those students pursuing flexible delivery who need to identify their learning requirements and goals as part of a planning process and understand the role of informal and non-formal learning.

The review identified a range of staff development needs emerging from these points. These could provide a basis for possible further deliberation by the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group, which generated the issues covered in the review's report (see Part 2 of this publication). In addition, consideration of the resources that would be required to support such staff development will be necessary.

## **6 Key issues and an agenda for action**

A number of key issues emerged from the outcomes of the operational surveys and through discussion by participants in the Coordination Groups. These issues need to be addressed in order to support the development of the flexible curriculum. The key issues outlined below will help to shape

an agenda for action for the Enhancement Themes as well as for the implementation and use of the SCQF within HE.

### **6.1 Students' experience of flexible learning**

Further investigation of students' reaction to, and experiences of, flexible entry and flexible programmes is recommended as a means of informing development in this area. This project did not have sufficient time to explore the student perspective.

There is extensive documentation about the issues facing transfers from Higher National Qualifications (HNQs) to degree courses. However, much of this information is about generic issues of culture shock, lack of study skills and adjustment to new delivery and assessment regimes, rather than issues of curricular match. Many of these issues face all students who gain entry to HE on the basis of credit transfer and RPL.

Students' experience of flexible entry may be appropriately explored within the Enhancement Theme for The First Year, and the planned Themes of Developing the Effective Learner and the Inclusive Curriculum.

### **6.2 Mainstreaming flexible entry: funding**

The lack of central funding for flexible entry, particularly for RPL activity, will continue to act as a barrier to provision for flexible entry. The SCQF Guidelines for RPL encourage the use of less resource-intensive support mechanisms, such as group approaches, RPL modules, electronic communication and e-learning, and more streamlined forms of assessment, such as structured interviews, reflective accounts, projects and assessment on demand. Many of the HEIs that responded to the project's operational survey are either actively exploring or using such approaches.

Only two of the nine responding institutions operate RPL procedures through a central APL/RPL coordinator who works in partnership with academic staff within schools/faculties in supporting, assessing and monitoring RPL claims.

The role of an institution's APL/RPL coordinator can be to:

- provide the central point of contact for all RPL/credit transfer enquiries
- ensure that the registry, or equivalent central department, is kept informed of any credits awarded through RPL/credit transfer
- maintain administrative systems for RPL/credit transfer
- provide a support mechanism for staff and students throughout the period of the RPL/credit transfer claim
- convene meetings of advisers to consider the operation of the RPL/credit transfer process, to help in ensuring a consistent approach across the institution.

Most institutions operate a devolved model for flexible entry, with no specific resource allocation to RPL support and assessment. Staff who provide support to students compiling RPL claims and assess

claims for credit generally do so at school, departmental or programme level on the basis of goodwill. This activity is not built into their recognised workload, and as such there is insufficient incentive for staff to engage in this activity.

In the context of both credit transfer and RPL, funding also needs to be available to provide educational guidance. It is important to ensure that students or prospective applicants clearly understand the process and possible outcomes of flexible entry routes before they make the decision to proceed with a claim.

Funding is also required for the resource-intensive processes of curricular matching in credit transfer claims where there are no clear or agreed articulation routes.

If flexible entry is to develop its potential as a strategy for facilitating participation in HE for students from under-represented groups, a change in the funding of HE is required. Establishing a clearer link between the awarding of credit and funding would be a key development. It is strongly urged that the Scottish Funding Council explore a shift to credit-based funding.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the ways in which HEIs are encouraged to increase the number of flexible programmes they offer. Flexible delivery is an effective means of increasing access, and it is under this banner that the development and operation of flexible delivery should be promoted.

### **6.3 Mainstreaming flexible entry and flexible programmes: programme design**

Flexible entry routes and flexible approaches to learning need to be addressed at the point of programme design rather than programme delivery. Rather than fitting the student to the provision, the approach to programme design should focus on supporting entry and progression routes that meet the needs of different learner groups. Thus programmes should be designed to accommodate multiple entry routes, multiple prior learning experiences and multiple delivery strategies without disadvantaging the learner. Programme design should also allow for the myriad competences and knowledge that students bring to the academic curriculum. There is a clear link between such an approach and the need for educational guidance to ensure academic coherence. The design of learning outcomes should therefore seek to facilitate a range of different routes for their achievement that link into delivery and assessment methods.

To support entry into programmes by an increasingly diverse student population, many institutions are striving to achieve the longer-term goal that credit transfer and RPL will present standard, rather than non-standard, entry routes into HE. For this to be achieved, activity needs to be sufficiently resourced at institutional and national level, staff need to be appropriately trained and supported, and programmes need to be designed to facilitate rather than hinder flexibility.

Institutions may wish to assess if it might be feasible to include in their validation procedures a consideration of whether the programme in question could be delivered flexibly as a matter of course. This would encourage the view that all programmes ought to be available on a flexible basis unless there is a strong argument against it.

#### **6.4 Developing effective mechanisms for recording, tracking and monitoring flexible entry claims**

Student information management systems within HEIs need to incorporate the recording of prior credit that is transferred into a new programme of study. Moreover, support for credit-based funding and credit-based awards will require recording to occur. The tracking of students is necessary to assess the usage of, and demand for, flexible entry. Monitoring mechanisms are essential to ensure that flexible entry processes and decisions are being undertaken in an effective and consistent manner.

Many of the institutions that responded to the project's surveys are actively addressing these issues, but further support and guidance is required in these areas.

#### **6.5 Linking flexible entry with personal development planning**

Explicit linking of flexible entry processes with PDP should be actively explored within higher education. The reflective processes underpinning both RPL and PDP are similar. The formative dimension of RPL focuses on enabling learners to make clearer connections between the learning they have already achieved and further learning and development. PDP could support this formative dimension and facilitate the recognition of prior informal learning within programmes of study at HEIs after students have started their course. Moreover, this approach would enable students to reflect on the contribution that their current and planned experiential learning, for example gained through part-time work, can make to their overall learning experience.

Embedding the recognition of prior and current learning within the reflective PDP process would be of benefit to institutions as well as individuals, since students with high motivation and clear learning/career goals are less likely to withdraw.

It is recommended that this connection should be further explored within the context of the Effective Learning Framework and through the Enhancement Theme for The First Year.

#### **6.6 Sustaining the Flexible Entry and Flexible Programmes Coordination Groups: role of the SCQF development partners**

The Flexible Entry and Flexible Programmes Coordination Groups established by this project comprise practitioners from HEIs with an interest and/or expertise in flexible entry and flexible programmes. The role of the groups has been to support the development work of this project, but continuation and growth of the groups beyond the life of the project would enable them to develop as a practitioner support network.

The *staff development pack* will ideally evolve with usage, be updated and expand, as will the *resource pack*, through the work of the Flexible Entry Coordination Group. The Flexible Programmes Coordination Group would have a key role to play in the development of resources for staff who are developing and operating flexible programmes, if it were appropriately resourced.

The Coordination Groups could also have a key role in helping to embed the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes and in supporting the use of the SCQF within the HE sector.

The continuation of the Coordination Groups would be welcomed by participants. The groups provide a useful national forum for exchanging experience and examples of good practice. Continuation will require a mechanism and resources to sustain the momentum developed through involvement in this project.

It is recommended that linking the organisation and focus of these groups to the development work being undertaken in relation to use of the SCQF in the HE sector should be explored.

### **6.7 Linking flexible entry and flexible delivery to the development of general degrees**

The link between the development of general degrees, the 'Scottish Bachelors', and flexible delivery and flexible entry needs to be made.

The issue will be maintaining academic coherence in any new programme of study which incorporates multiple entry routes and delivery regimes. In this, educational guidance plays a central role - not just at pre-entry stage, but on a continuing year-by-year basis as students proceed towards an exit award.

## **7 Conclusion**

Flexible entry and flexible programmes are clearly located within strategies of widening access, participation and social inclusion, and are integral to the lifelong learning agenda within Scotland. To sustain the momentum for developing a more flexible curriculum, which has been generated through this project and other work to support the Flexible Delivery Enhancement Theme and implementation of the SCQF, key issues need to be addressed. The project team proposes that these issues form part of a wider agenda for action for both the Enhancement Themes and the SCQF.

These key issues centre on the need to support the mainstreaming of flexible entry and flexible programmes within HEIs. This requires:

- explicit resourcing of the provision at national and institutional levels
- recognition of diverse approaches to achieving and demonstrating learning within programme design
- training and support for staff who are developing and operating flexible entry processes and flexible programmes.

The HE Coordination Groups for Flexible Entry and Flexible Programmes could play a significant role in supporting practitioners as the sector seeks to address these challenges. The groups could also provide a forum that will enable practitioners within institutions to inform and be informed by developments at national and European levels.

## Appendix A: Flexible Entry Coordination Group

### Founding members

Ted Finch	Napier University
Colin Fraser	University of Abertay
Ralph Gunn	Bell College
Robin Harding	The Open University in Scotland
David Kirk	Queen Margaret University College
Hazel Knox	University of Paisley
Julie McAndrews	University of Aberdeen
Lea McKay	University of Paisley
Dawn Porecki	University of Glasgow
Mireille Pouget	University of Stirling
Gerry Reid	Glasgow Caledonian University
Vivienne Urquart	University of Dundee
Eleanor Waugh	University of Glasgow
Ruth Whittaker	Glasgow Caledonian University and SCQF RPL Consultant

The project team would like to thank all of the Coordination Group members for their contribution to this development work.

## Appendix B: Flexible Programmes Coordination Group

### Founding members

Andrew Eadie            Glasgow Caledonian University

Lynne Hooton            SISWE

Charles Juwah Robert Gordon University

Maggie King            Heriot-Watt University

Linda Knox            University of Glasgow

Vince Mills            Glasgow Caledonian University

Mike McDonagh        Napier University

Dawn Porecki           University of Glasgow

Sue Tickner            University of Glasgow

Eleanor Waugh        University of Glasgow

The project team would like to thank all of the Coordination Group members for their contribution to this development work.

## Appendix C: Responding institutions to the operational surveys

### Credit transfer

Bell College

Glasgow Caledonian University

Heriot Watt University

Napier University

Robert Gordon University

The Open University in Scotland

University of Aberdeen

University of Abertay

University of Glasgow

University of Paisley

University of Stirling

### Recognition of prior informal learning

Bell College

Glasgow Caledonian University

Heriot Watt University

Robert Gordon University

University of Aberdeen

University of Abertay

University of Glasgow

University of Paisley

University of Stirling

**Flexible programmes**

Bell College

Glasgow Caledonian University

Heriot Watt University

Robert Gordon University

University of Abertay

University of Glasgow

University of Paisley

University of Stirling

The project team would like to thank everyone who responded to the operational surveys.

## Part 2: Review of flexible programme provision

Report on the review of current practice relating to the development and operation of flexible programmes in the Scottish HE sector

### Final report

December 2005

Author: Vince Mills

## Executive summary

The review carried out as part of the project described in Part 1 of this publication identified current practice in developing and operating flexible programmes, in HE in Scotland, in particular relating to:

- the extent and nature of flexible provision within HE
- the types of learners engaged in such provision
- the nature of partnerships with employers and voluntary organisations
- the extent to which such provision is credit-rated within the context of the SCQF
- the extent to which other e-learning, RPL and personal development planning are, or could be, used in flexible programmes.

Data was generated from a number of sources: questionnaires distributed to contacts in Scottish HEIs; focus-group discussions with HEI practitioners who have expertise in running programmes based on flexible delivery; information based on the matrix of institutional responses on flexible delivery, compiled in 2005 as part of the work of the Enhancement Theme for Flexible Delivery<sup>5</sup>.

The review developed a working definition of flexible learning to try to gauge its prevalence, or otherwise, and to consider related issues.

The review found that flexible learning of some sort was taking place in all the HEIs involved in the project. On-line learning was the most common, usually as part of a 'blended' approach, but community, work-based and individualised learning were also in evidence across a number of the HEIs.

Flexible delivery is in demand by students who come from a variety of backgrounds and require wider access opportunities. However, unlike the initial target groups for wider access programmes, many of those looking for flexible delivery are in work.

There are a range of partnerships in operation which use forms of flexible delivery. Some are based on a fully mutual relationship between an employer and an HEI, some tend to lean more heavily on existing provision within an HEI, and others are initiated by third parties, such as government departments or the Enterprise Network.

The development of the SCQF has been key in providing a framework for designing flexible programmes. The SCQF has also helped to resolve the issue of equivalence by providing 'level' statements and consolidating the notion of credit accumulation.

On-line learning, RPL and personal development planning are all important in the delivery of flexible programmes. On-line learning in particular has generated a range of as yet unmet needs in terms of staff development. RPL is particularly useful for the potential users of flexibly delivered programmes. PDP has a particular relevance to those students pursuing flexible delivery who need to plan their learning requirements and understand the role of informal and non-formal learning.

<sup>5</sup> *Flexible Delivery Consultation: The Institutional Perspective*, report prepared for steering committee for Flexible Delivery Enhancement Theme by Ruth Whittaker, March 2005. The report can be downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website ([www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)).

The review identified a range of staff development needs emerging from these points. These could provide an outline that would need to be 'worked up' by the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group (see Part 1 of this publication), which generated the issues covered in the report of the review. In addition, consideration of the resources that would be required to support such staff development will be necessary.

## Report on the review of current practice relating to the development and operation of flexible programmes in the Scottish higher education sector

### 1 Introduction

Flexible Delivery was chosen as an Enhancement Theme because of the assumption that HEIs in the twenty-first century need to adapt their provision to support mass HE, with its diverse student body. Many students are no longer studying in classic full-time, full terms or semester patterns. Flexible delivery is being interpreted by QAA in its widest sense: modes of study, methods of delivery, underpinning support and infrastructure.

Specifically, the report identifies current practice in developing and operating flexible programmes, in HE in Scotland, in particular relating to:

- the extent and nature of flexible provision within HE
- the types of learners engaged in such provision
- the nature of partnerships with employers and voluntary organisations
- the extent to which such provision is credit-rated within the context of the SCQF
- the extent to which other e-learning, recognition of prior informal learning and personal development planning are, or could be, used in flexible programmes.

In addition, the review (which was carried out as part of the project described in Part 1 of this publication) sought guidance from staff who volunteered to support the project on likely staff development needs that 'fell out' from the discussions on flexible delivery.

### 2 Methodology

Questionnaires were distributed to contacts in Scottish HEIs who were known to be interested in flexible learning. In all, eight returns were received.

In addition, the HE Coordination Group for Flexible Programmes, which was established as part of the project, enabled two focus-group discussions to be held. These were made up from members of the Coordination Group. The Coordination Group comprises HE practitioners who have expertise in, and typically are engaged in, running programmes based on flexible delivery. The group considered issues raised in the project's survey questionnaires and in the scoping study undertaken by QAA<sup>6</sup>.

The review also drew on the matrix of institutional responses on flexible delivery compiled in 2005 as part of the work for the Flexible Delivery Enhancement Theme<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The study can be downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website.

<sup>7</sup> Flexible Delivery Consultation: The Institutional Perspective, report prepared for steering committee for Flexible Delivery Enhancement Theme by Ruth Whittaker, March 2005. The report can be downloaded from the Enhancement Themes website.

It is important to note that this report does not claim to be a comprehensive account of flexible delivery in HE. To begin with, the number of participating institutions was small and the focus-group participants self-selecting. Furthermore, it was nigh impossible for those who completed the questionnaires to know the totality of provision within their own institutions.

The value of this report is that it brings together information from what might be termed flexible delivery 'activists', who are keen to widen this type of provision. They are sensitive to the challenges surrounding flexible delivery because they have encountered and had to overcome obstacles within and beyond their own institutions in their efforts to develop flexible approaches to learning in HE.

### 3 Summary

The review developed a working definition of flexible learning to try to gauge its prevalence, or otherwise, and to consider related issues.

The review found that flexible learning of some sort was taking place in all the HEIs involved in the project. On-line learning was the most common of these, usually as part of a 'blended' approach, but community, work-based and individualised learning were also in evidence across a number of the HEIs.

Flexible delivery is in demand by students who come from a variety of backgrounds and require wider access opportunities. However, unlike the initial target groups for wider access programmes, many of those looking for flexible delivery are in work.

There are a range of partnerships in operation which use forms of flexible delivery. Some are based on a fully mutual relationship between an employer and an HEI. Some tend to lean more heavily on existing provision within an HEI. Others are initiated by third parties, such as government departments or the Enterprise Network.

The development of the SCQF has been key in providing a framework for designing flexible programmes. The SCQF has also helped to resolve the issue of equivalence by providing 'level' statements and consolidating the notion of credit accumulation.

On-line learning, RPL and personal development planning are all important in the delivery of flexible programmes. On-line learning in particular has generated a range of as yet unmet needs in terms of staff development. RPL is particularly useful for the potential users of flexibly delivered programmes. PDP has a particular relevance to those students pursuing flexible delivery who need to plan their learning requirements and understand the role of informal and non-formal learning.

The review identified a range of staff development needs emerging from these points. These could provide a basis for future deliberation by the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group, which generated the issues covered in this report. In addition, consideration of the resources that would be required to support such staff development will be necessary.

## 4 What is flexible learning?

The practitioners involved in both focus-group discussions thought it would be useful to try to develop a working definition of flexible learning, in order to discuss its prevalence or otherwise. In the first focus group, it was felt that to get a sense of the breadth of flexible provision it was almost necessary to describe flexible delivery as any provision that was not delivered in the traditional full-time way.

However, the second focus group adopted the following definition based on George and Luke (1995).

Flexible delivery is essentially concerned with designing learning opportunities which are economically sustainable and pedagogically defensible in the current social climate. It is concerned with promoting deep approaches to learning by purposefully selecting forms of delivery which:

- are multidimensional
- increase the choices available to staff and students in teaching and learning
- result in a blurring of the traditional internal/external boundaries.

Flexible delivery brings together three dimensions:

- student learning, including place, time and pace of learning; considerations of entry and exit points; and assessment methods
- forms of delivery, including place, time and pace of delivery; collaborative ventures between teaching institutions and community organisations; and the variety of media and technologies employed
- content, including partnerships with industry, consideration of previous learning experiences through RPL policies, credit transfer and articulation arrangements<sup>8</sup>.

The practitioners at the focus group accepted this definition as a good basis for discussion, as long as it was understood that all aspects of flexibility were deemed to be applicable to assessment.

In relation to the above definition of flexible learning, three distinct forms of flexibility seem to have emerged. Although often not in a pure form, they are sufficiently autonomous to act as models. It is significant that all respondents indicated that flexible learning of some sort was taking place in their institution.

## 5 On-line learning

The first and perhaps most universal type of flexible learning is e-learning. To help in understanding the extent to which on-line learning is blended with other more traditional forms of learning, Mason's three models of on-line learning might be useful<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> George R and Luke R (Flexible Learning Centre, University of South Australia), paper delivered at the 'Learning for Life' conference, Adelaide, 30 November to 1 December 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Mason R (1998) Networked Lifelong Learning: Innovative Approaches to Education and Training Through the Internet, conference proceedings, edited by L Banks, C Graebner and D McConnell, University of Sheffield.

Mason describes the most 'basic' of these as the 'content and support model'. This model relies on the separation between course content and tutorial support delivered by email or alternatively by computer conferencing. The model supports the notion of relatively unchanging content materials that can be tutored by teachers other than the content authors. There is a limited amount of collaborative activity among students and peer commenting, and on-line assessments can be supported by computer conferencing. Mason suggests that considering the course as a whole, the on-line component would represent no more than about 20 per cent of students' study time in this model.

Mason's next category is the 'wrap around model'. This consists of on-line tailor-made materials (study guide, activities and discussion) wrapped around existing materials (MSc, postgraduate diploma or certificate). Mason reports that other on-line features might include real time online events and Screen sharing software. In this model Mason suggests around 50 per cent of the student's time will be spent on on-line activities.

Mason's third model is the 'integrated model'. This consists of collaborative activities, learning resources and joint assignments, and the core of the course takes place on-line through discussion, accessing and processing information, and carrying out tasks. Even the course contents are fluid and dynamic and largely determined by the individual and group activity. The integrated model dissolves the distinction between content and support, and is dependent on the creation of a learning community.

Stirling University, for example, offers a Technology Enhanced Learning MSc, Postgraduate Diploma or Certificate. The distinctive feature of this programme is its absolute dependence on the internet, since the programme is offered only in distance study mode. It is therefore available globally, as long as students have access to a networked computer with a modern web-browser.

Students engage in dialogue with tutors and others using computer-mediated conferencing. The web allows access to text-based programme materials, and provides opportunities to try out, explore and evaluate technology-enhanced environments for their potential for teaching and learning.

Throughout the programme, students are engaged in tasks designed to support their enquiry. These tasks explore module themes. Student progress is assessed by assignments associated with tasks; students receive personalised on-line feedback on their assignments from tutors. For the MSc, the work-based action enquiry and research study is assessed through a dissertation report<sup>10</sup>.

## 6 Work and community-based learning

Work-based learning has also emerged as an increasingly widespread form of flexible delivery. The term emerged from the Enterprise in Higher Education Programme in the late 1980s and early 1990s, sponsored by the Department of Employment. The Department defined work-based learning as:

'The effective learning that can take place at the workplace, and not only in the formal academic setting of the lecture theatre and laboratory, and help individuals to learn through the experience of work itself.' (Department of Employment, 1992<sup>11</sup>)

<sup>10</sup> [www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/Courses/MSC\\_TEL.htm](http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/Courses/MSC_TEL.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Education Department 1992 Learning Through Work: Sheffield, Employment Department, Higher Education Department

However, more 'radical' models have been developed in the HE sector. At Glasgow Caledonian University, work-based learning is defined as learning that happens at or through work as opposed to, for example, learning that is delivered in the workplace. The workplace provides the basis for the curriculum.

It is important to note, however, that forms of work-based learning vary not only among but also within institutions. Glasgow Caledonian University, for example, offers models that have been developed in close partnership with employers, these can be one, two or three 'year' programmes, although they do not follow a standard academic year, as well as 'themed' learning contracts that are marketed directly to students and use a top-up mechanism, to take students from diploma level to general degree level. This is in addition to individualised master's programmes where a partnership between employer, student and university is necessary to generate a learning programme dependent on work-based activities. Also noteworthy is that all Glasgow Caledonian's work-based programmes have, to a greater or lesser extent, a facility to use on-line learning - not just as a repository of learning materials, but in most courses to allow dialogue between student and student, and between tutor and student<sup>12</sup>.

The development of community-based learning has followed a similar trajectory. Like the workplace, community settings can provide the subject matter as well as the location for learning.

For example, the Bachelor of Community Learning and Development run by the University of Glasgow provides a professional qualification in community education. Validation of the course is by Community Education Validation and Endorsement Scotland, which is the professional endorsing body for Scotland and part of Lifelong Learning UK, the sector skills council.

Although much of the programme is provided through traditionally delivered modules on a block-release basis, there are also placement tutorial groups, which explore the linking of teaching to students' work practice. The placements are also supported with tutor visits to the placement at the beginning, middle and end of the placement.

## **7 Building your own degree**

The third form of flexibility that has developed is frameworks that allow students to 'build' their own degree. The development of the SCQF has been significant in allowing HEI staff and students to identify which modules can offer the necessary credit points at the appropriate level to achieve a qualification.

Napier University, for example, has developed a customised degree framework. This route is particularly popular with HNC/D students. Students can select subjects and combinations of subjects which would not normally be available in the 'named route' courses. The degree can be chosen within the following subject areas: Arts and Social Sciences, Business Management, Engineering, Built Environment and Computing, or Health and Life Sciences. Alternatively, it can be built across these areas<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> [www.learningservices.gcal.ac.uk/scwbl/](http://www.learningservices.gcal.ac.uk/scwbl/)

<sup>13</sup> [www.napier.ac.uk/parttime/part-time-degree-edinburgh.htm](http://www.napier.ac.uk/parttime/part-time-degree-edinburgh.htm)

The focus group raised a number of issues in relation to the coherence of such programmes and the recognition of relevant credit. It was acknowledged, however, that the cross-disciplinary nature of many contemporary workplaces may require levels of flexibility that a named programme approach is not able to provide. The music industry was cited as an example where knowledge specific to musical theory may need to complement business skills, along with an understanding of digital technology.

In relation to recognition of credit, there are still widespread differences in practice based on general and specific distinctions. The University of Glasgow has decided that it will offer 40 general credits for any HND, no matter what subject area a student wants to pursue. The Open University has historically allowed students to use credit from a wide variety of programmes to progress to exit awards.

## 8 The types of learners engaged in such provision

There was general consensus among participating staff regarding the kind of learners who are most interested in pursuing flexible delivery models. They acknowledged that a wide range of groups require flexible delivery:

- people in employment seeking continuing professional development
- people seeking access to further or higher education
- unemployed people who are unable to access full-time learning for financial reasons
- EU students/international students
- learners with disabilities
- carers
- those seeking to change or progress in careers and who already have educational qualifications (for example, those seeking master's-level recognition)
- those seeking to change careers and who do not have educational qualifications (for example, those seeking a first degree).

The first focus group expressed a concern that funding regimes, rather than the needs of learners, often shaped the forms of flexible delivery adopted. They felt that policy priorities in this area would be likely to remain unfulfilled if funding incentives were not introduced. They thought that current provision tended to be concentrated in areas where employability was of greatest concern as opposed to, for example, arts-orientated programmes.

## 9 The nature of partnerships with employers and voluntary organisations

All of the institutions that submitted questionnaires were involved in one form of partnership or another. This is interesting in light of employers' perception, often aired through the media, that universities are not responsive to the needs of industry.

There are a range of partnerships in operation which use forms of flexible delivery. Some of these are based on a fully mutual relationship between an employer and an HEI. Some tend to lean more heavily on existing provision within an HEI. Others still are initiated by third parties, such as government departments or the Enterprise Network.

In the first model, the employing organisation is actively engaged in the design and delivery of the learning programme. It also provides facilities and time for learners to undertake the learning in the workplace, and may have representation on the programme board of the HEI. A good example of this is the programme run by Glasgow Caledonian University for the Strathclyde Police Training and Recruitment Centre. The delivery itself uses a combination of 'traditional' seminars, on-line learning and work-based assessment.

HEIs can also tailor existing provision as well as providing bespoke courses. The Open University, for example, has a team of corporate development managers throughout the UK whose role is to discuss employers' requirements with a view to providing flexible solutions to their learning needs. In addition to The Open University's 'traditional' distance learning, it now also offers work-based action learning and a range of on-line provision. The Open University has a range of high-profile clients from across various sectors who access their provision, including British Airways, Marks and Spencer and MENCAP.

There are also government-driven initiatives. A number of HEIs, for example Paisley University, are engaged in the Knowledge Transfer Partnership. This is a government scheme designed to encourage transfer between higher education and business. Employers benefit by recruiting a graduate for a two-year period, as well as regular consultancy support from an HEI. They also receive a development budget for the graduate as part of the package. The programme is primarily targeted at small and medium-sized enterprises, but up to 20 per cent of the programmes can be with large organisations. Some HEIs, for example Glasgow Caledonian University, use the placement as a form of work-based learning and accredit learning undertaken during the placement.

Participants in the review made considerable comment on the role of professional bodies. Given the preponderance of professional bodies, they have had a critical role in influencing the shape of much provision. It was felt that while some professional bodies were sensitive to and supportive of flexible delivery, some were more conservative in their approach to teaching and learning. It was also deemed important that the views of service users, as well as professional bodies, were carefully considered in programme design.

There was also a strong feeling that it was essential for academic institutions to retain control of learning programmes in relation to issues such as academic rigour and balance. In this regard, it was felt that the SCQF had helped to provide an important framework for evaluating the level of non-traditional provision.

## 10 The extent to which such provision is credit-rated within the context of the SCQF

Within one of the two focus groups where the SCQF was discussed, the consensus was that its development has been key in providing a framework for designing flexible programmes. Perhaps just as importantly, it was also stressed that the SCQF has helped to solve the problem of equivalence. Prior to the SCQF, questions were raised about how a particular flexible programme could be accredited at a particular level that would make it equivalent to an established programme delivered by 'traditional' means. The SCQF has helped to resolve that issue by providing 'level' statements and consolidating the notion of credit accumulation.

In the survey of providers, SCQF 'levelled' qualifications were accepted as appropriate for entrance purposes, with some exceptions. These exceptions were Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and, to a lesser extent, HNQs.

In relation to SVQs, some programmes in some institutions did not recognise them as valid for entrance purposes, even if they were at the right level. One of the two focus groups formed from the coordination group identified a number of possible reasons for this. One was the different approaches often adopted for competence-based qualifications, with their heavier emphasis on skills and behaviours and less weight on knowledge and understanding. It was also felt that SCQF equivalence was less clear in relation to vocational qualifications than to other qualifications. Vocational qualifications often straddle levels.

Further, the wide range of vocational awards with highly specific content, which is less able to be generally applied, was also considered to be an issue. To take one example, qualifications in hairdressing are more likely to encompass a comparatively narrow base of skills than some of the vocational qualifications in management, which might provide a fairly wide range of both skills and knowledge and understanding. Consequently, some receiving HEIs were reluctant to accept some vocational qualifications as entrance qualifications.

Though less common, one institution in the survey did not accept HNQs as an entrance qualification to some of its programmes. This was probably because of the nature of the provision. It is likely that in terms of the content of specialised programmes - in this case health - no appropriate HNQs, in terms of content, would be likely to be on offer.

The group felt that there were still unresolved accreditation issues within the context of the SCQF. For example, the perception that 'named' qualifications are superior to those built across a range of subjects (often termed 'general' qualifications) could still be seen in some institutions. It was acknowledged that this issue was complicated because a number of the 'ancient' universities offered general unnamed degrees, giving some flexibility at least in their composition. Nevertheless, establishing 'parity of esteem' for different routes to awards remained a concern.

Precisely the same issue could be raised in relation to vocational qualifications. There was clear evidence that they were not treated equally with other qualifications considered to be at the same level. This may be because the different nature of competence-based approaches does not sit easily with outcome-based programmes. In which case, some consideration may need to be given as to how learners moving from one approach to the other can be supported.

## **11 The extent to which other e-learning, RPL and PDP are, or could be, used in flexible programmes**

### **11.1 E-learning**

The evidence from the questionnaire returns and the discussion groups was that on-line learning has established itself as an essential part of flexible delivery, whether - to use the models described earlier - as content and support, wrap-round or integrated formats.

The focus groups' description of the range of delivery strategies for e-learning or on-line learning is given in Section 5 of this review report. However, a range of other issues were also considered in relation to on-line learning. These are worth recording because they have a bearing on possible issues for staff development.

There was concern that there has not been enough effort on the part of HEIs to help their staff to engage with the pedagogy of e-learning. Staff were often expected to develop strategies with limited or no support. It was argued that as well as the necessity of developing new approaches, on-line learning generates a new set of demands on tutors' time - for example, the problem of dealing with numerous questions sent by email with the expectation of a prompt response.

This concern was closely allied to two other issues: developing good practice to engage the learner, for example by developing communities of practice on-line, and effective learner support.

### **11.2 RPL**

RPL was fully covered in the other strand of this development project (see Part 1 of this publication). However, it may be worth noting that RPL was seen by both the Focus Groups formed by members of the Coordination group as having an important role to play in flexible programmes, since it is often the case that learners pursuing a flexible programme will, for a number of reasons, also be seeking RPL.

Examples offered included learners with considerable experience, sometimes in comparatively demanding positions in their employing organisation. They want this recognised. Additionally, for those learners for whom a qualification is a motivating factor, RPL reduces the amount of time needed to undertake the programme and hence enhances the attractiveness of flexible routes.

Finally, if learners are self-funding - and many mid-career returning adults are - then RPL reduces the cost of the programme, depending on the pricing policy of the providing institution. This issue is addressed in the *Flexible entry staff development pack*, which has been produced through the other strand of the project.

One of the solutions suggested by the discussion group for facilitating RPL was for providers to develop much more sophisticated approaches to assessment by outcome. This would allow those who feel that they can demonstrate the learning outcomes of any given programme an opportunity to do so.

### 11.3 PDP

PDP is already an intrinsic part of many flexible programmes. In Glasgow Caledonian University's Learning Contract Framework, for example, learners must undertake a PDP module in both the undergraduate and postgraduate frameworks.

The PDP modules function in two ways: they allow learners to take stock of where they are and where they would like to be, and therefore enable them to engage in planning about their learning. The modules also introduce learners to the theories underpinning experiential learning. This assists them if they wish to make claims for RPL, as well as helping them to identify learning that takes place in informal and non-formal settings.

## 12 Staff development

In light of the discussions on the nature of flexible delivery and the kind of learners who are likely to seek it, the following areas of staff development needs were identified by the focus groups comprised of Coordination Group members:

- curriculum design
- cultural awareness
- teaching and learning skills
- valuing (owning) flexibility
- managing expectations
- understanding partnerships and possible funders - further education, employers, Scottish Executive, professional bodies.

It was also felt to be important to make administrative staff aware of these issues through formal staff development support.

In addition to in-house staff development, it was thought important to share good practice across the HE sector, perhaps through electronic briefings and/or listserv provision - a system for creating, managing and controlling electronic mailing lists.

### 13 Recommendations

The staff development needs outlined above need further consideration in order to ensure that the emerging list is comprehensive, appropriate and relevant to the needs of all staff engaged in flexible delivery within the HE sector.

To address these needs, resources have to be generated to provide flexible support for relevant members of staff. While on-line resources are likely to feature as an important part of this resource, there may be other more traditional forms of support required to be put in place, such as learning sets, seminars and 'master classes'. As a first step, an audit of what already exists needs to be undertaken.

It is important that we tap into the enthusiasm and expertise of the Flexible Programmes Coordination Group, which was established as part of this project. This will entail providing infrastructure to enable the group to initiate, sustain and embed the good practice emerging from the staff development programme that arises.

## Appendix D: Napier University - glossary of flexible learning terms

**Blended learning** - use of a combination of on-line, flexible and face-to-face teaching methods to provide learning materials, student support and assessment.

**Distance learning** - modules, programmes or courses where students are, for the most part, physically distant from the tutor and institution.

**e-learning** - the use of information and communication technology to support teaching, learning and assessment.

**Flexible learning** - modules, programmes or courses offering a significant element of student choice, which can include aspects such as timing, place, pace, modes or topics of study, levels and means of support, and methods of assessment.

**Managed learning environment** - integration of the whole range of institutional systems that contribute to the learning, teaching and assessment process.

**Occasional attendance** - a programme, module or course that contains an element of sporadic face-to-face contact, which may be optional or mandatory, scheduled or ad hoc.

**Off-campus (partner college/NHS institution)** - modules, programmes or courses where students attend the campus of a partner college (UK or international) for their studies.

**Off-campus (distance/online)** - modules, programmes or courses where students study primarily in on-line or distance mode and do not attend a physical campus.

**On-campus** - modules, programmes or courses where students attend a Napier campus for their studies.

**Online learning** - the use of the internet, particularly the world-wide web, to support teaching, learning and assessment.

**Open learning** - modules, programmes or courses that aim to reduce barriers to education by promoting open access and providing a high degree of flexibility.

**Virtual learning environment** - a web-based application for developing, delivering and assessing on-line courses, providing mechanisms for ongoing student monitoring and support.