

Learner Baseline Interviews

Four learners were interviewed in September 2004, whilst they were involved in the time management course, which was the first in the programme. They were interviewed at the venue for the first face-to-face workshop. Two of the learners were employed by NZQA, one by the NZ Fire Service, and the other by FRSTO. One of the interviewees was responsible for Training and Development in her organisation.

Three of the interviewees did not intend to seek promotion in the next two years. One was about to move to a new job; whilst another did not see any possibility of promotion in her present organisation, saying that *'I am it in admin.'* The fourth learner *'absolutely'* intended to seek promotion within two years.

Two of the learners learnt of the course through their manager, and one from an e-mail from her HR department. Reasons for taking the course included the opportunity to formalise learners' management skills, personal development, gaining the National Certificate and *'e-learning looked more interesting than Recognition of Current Competence'* as a way to learn. The learner involved in organising Training and Development *'had organised about 20 others to take the course'* and thought it *'good to identify with others taking part.'* She has since withdrawn.

All interviewees had received professional development of varying kinds during the previous two years. This professional development included specific computer skills, management courses, and sector specific courses such as fire rescue. Three out of the four learners had studied Te Reo during this time.

Two of the interviewees had busy family and working lives. They were concerned about the amount of time the programme would demand, and recognised the need for personal time management. Another interviewee was *'excited'* at first, but by the time of the interview he felt *'a bit daunted'* by the first unit. The fourth learner was *'interested'* in the programme, but recognised personal issues relating to fears of *'being checked up on.'*

All four interviewees claimed at least average levels of computer expertise. One had a job involving revising a website and regarded her skills as *'good.'* All were confident about their typing and word processing skills. They also felt positive about their use of the Internet and e-mail. Three of the interviewees said that they had taken part in some form of online learning in the past. This was very high compared to the percentage of questionnaire respondents who had previously been involved in online learning (12%).

The interviews then turned to discussion of learners' initial impressions of the programme. One learner found the introductory course *'helpful,'* and another regarded it as *'useful'* to be shown around the programme. However, she tended to *'get lost'* in the Blackboard system. The two other learners, both from NZQA, had problems with the introductory unit. One regarded it as *'irritating'* and found it *'hard to get my head around what was wanted.'* She described the existence of small and large work groups as *'cumbersome.'* She *'got angry'* and thought that there were too many ways to navigate from one page to another: *'one or two would be enough.'* She added that people at her workplace were *'almost turned off'* the programme.

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One interviewee regarded the Blackboard tour as *'helpful.'* However, the others were more critical. One *'felt cross with'* Blackboard. She still did not know how to save documents and to post answers. She had lost answers, and resorted to copying and pasting work into Word before submitting it. Another found some parts of the tour to be good. For her, the most useful aspect was the course map. She would like to know how to increase the font size.

The introduction to the National Certificate in First Line Management was *'not recommended'* by one learner; and two others regarded it as *'incomplete.'* It *'gave some information that you wanted, but you didn't get a realistic idea of how all the bits fitted together.'*

One person who had *'come in cold'* to the course *'without feeling ready'* She found that the warm up course made her *'think what I thought and felt about management.'* Others also felt positive about the exercise. For example, one learner commented that *'it was good having to post something to the discussion board'* She enjoys having to think and to post the results of her thinking in the public arena. However she regretted the lack of peer feedback. Another interviewee reported that his organisation had just emerged from a long industrial dispute, and that one had to *'put your personal feelings to one side and try to be constructive.'* He found the exercise useful because it helped him focus on the course. The fourth interviewee thought that the exercise *'made assumptions that learners were already in management'* but that *'this is not true for some.'* She hoped that the programme would also acknowledge those for whom it was a stepping-stone.

Opinions varied as to the ease of use of Blackboard and the discussion board. One learner had not used the discussion board because he felt *'intimidated'* and *'did not want to be the first one in and say dumb things.'* Having discussed the course with a colleague who was also a learner, he felt more confident. Both NZQA interviewees did not like the discussion board and the problems uploading completed assignments. One, commented that she *'hates it'* but that she wanted to complete the programme and would *'hold in.'* Both NZQA interviewees have since withdrawn from the programme; one because of having changed her employment.

Two learners expected to access the programme mainly or solely from work. One expected to print out material at work and work on it at home, whilst the other would access it from work because he *'can lock myself away in my office and do it undisturbed. I can control my own time and space.'* By contrast another expected to access material *'usually at home'* in order to get *'peace and quiet and lack of interruption.'* The fourth interviewee expected to access it both from work and at home.

All four interviewees had ideas about how they would manage participation in the programme from their workplace. Three had thought about allocating specific time periods during the week, whilst the other learner had considered how she intended to use the time she intended to allocate. One found the time management course *'interesting,'* saying that *'nobody has had time to do the time management module.'*

Learners anticipated a range of benefits from their participation in the programme. These included benefits to themselves as individuals and to their organisations as a whole. Individual benefits included improvement in study skills, recognition of their pre-existing management skills and development of improved skills in management and leadership, enhancing their employability and achieving the National Certificate qualification.

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One learner expected benefits to *'flow on'* and to benefit the whole organisation. Another pointed to the programme's potential to promote cross fertilisation across government organisations, and to *'break down silos.'* She also expected that participation would help her affirm others taking part in the programme. Another learner expected that the programme would help him ensure that his subordinates deliver required outcomes.

Discussion and Suggestions for Improvement

Demographic and other quantitative findings will be discussed and compared to the corresponding data for the Asure Meat Inspector Supervisors' project (Winter 2004). Qualitative findings will then be discussed under the headings given in the Scope of Study section. These are:

1. Why did learners choose to embark on the programme?
2. What benefits do learners expect to gain from the programme?
3. What are learners' current managerial responsibilities and career aspirations?
4. What types of professional development and training have learners received in the recent past?
5. Do learners prefer online or face-to face involvement in professional development and training?
6. What are learners' levels of ICT competence?
7. What are learners' areas of concern and feelings about starting the programme?
8. What level of support do learners anticipate from their managers?
9. How do learners expect involvement in the programme to impact on their working and private lives?
10. What has learners' experience been of the programme to date?

Finally, some preliminary suggestions will be made which could lead to improvements to the project in future.

Demographic and other Quantitative Data

The gender distribution of learners in the present project is equally divided between the two sexes. This contrasts with that in the Asure project (Winter 2004) in which the vast majority (90%) were male. The ethnicities of the Asure learners were divided between Pakeha (86%) and Maori (14%). In the present project, it appears that the proportion of Pakeha learners is lower (74%). However, 14% of respondents to the questionnaire gave their ethnicity as 'Other' or left the question blank. Several of those who responded 'Other' specified their ethnicity as 'New Zealander.' The evaluator suspects that some of these respondents may be of European ethnicity. The percentage of Maori in the present learner group (7%) is half that of the Asure project. The present project includes small percentages of Pasifika (3%) and Asian (2%) learners. These ethnicities did not appear in the Asure project.

The learner age distribution in the present programme extends to lower ages (three aged less than 30 years) than in the Asure project. The youngest learner in the latter group was 38 years of age. At the other end of the age range, only three learners enrolled in the present programme (5%) were above 55 years old, compared with nearly one quarter in the Asure project. The age data from the present project was gathered in five-year bands. This only allows an estimate of the mean age as between 40 and 44 years. The mean age of the Asure learners was approximately 49 years.

The geographical distribution of learners in the present project was not as widespread as in the Asure project in which the learners were fairly evenly distributed throughout the country. For example, in the Asure project, over half of the learners for whom details were available were employed in sites throughout the South Island. By contrast, only six (10%) of the respondents to the current entry questionnaire were from the South Island, all of them from Christchurch.

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The largest number of learners had been working for between one and ten years in the public sector (Figure 4). There were also increased numbers of learners who had been employed over 20 years in the sector. It is suggested that employees may be actively seeking ways to enhance their promotion prospects after a few years in the sector, but that other commitments, such as family, may make it more difficult for them to study in their middle years. When the learners have been employed for longer periods, they may again have more time to devote to professional development. Figure 5 shows that half the learners had been in their current position between one and five years. It is likely that many of these will seek promotion in the near future, since 59% of respondents indicated that they intended to do this. Comparable data on career aspirations were not obtained for the Asure workers.

The greatest number of respondents (15) was employed by the Fire Service. Respondents were fairly evenly distributed throughout the other sectors, with from 9 to 12 responses from each sector. 11 responses were from NZQA, although there were 20 learners enrolled from this organisation. However, 9 (45%) subsequently withdrew from the programme.

By contrast with the figures from NZQA, withdrawals from the Department of Corrections totalled 17%, and 22% from Internal Affairs. These lower numbers may be due to there being champions for the programme in these sectors. Thus, at least three senior managers from Corrections Department continue to be committed to the programme, and one of the programme tutors is employed by the Department of Internal Affairs. Thus it appears that having champions for the programme within a sector might improve retention in the programme. Frankola (2001) suggests that learner commitment is enhanced by managers also taking online programmes alongside other learners.

It appears to be important for champions to be aware of the inevitable shortcomings of a pilot programme, and to remain committed to it. There is some evidence that having a champion who loses commitment to a programme can lead to significant numbers of learners to withdraw.

Suggestion 1. Enrolment may increase, and withdrawal rates decrease if each organisation has a committed champion of the programme on its staff. These outcomes may also be enhanced by ensuring that some high profile managers of learners take the programme

22% of respondents to the questionnaire had Bachelors' or higher degrees. This contrasts with the Asure project in which no learners claimed University level qualifications. At the other end of the scale, 38% of respondents claimed no higher qualification than University Bursary. In the Asure project, only 11% claimed no post school qualifications. Nearly three quarters of the Asure personnel had Certificate or Diploma trade qualifications. The corresponding percentage of Public Sector employees was 36%.

We now move from consideration of the more quantitative data to discussing data more relevant to the questions listed above.

Why did learners choose to embark on the programme?

What benefits do learners expect to gain from the programme?

Most of the questionnaire respondents (93%) claimed that they had made a choice to take the programme, with only 7% reporting that they had been directed to study it. The majority of responses indicated that learners expected to gain content knowledge, or information which has practical application. Around 10% expected to gain the qualification, and roughly 9% expected to achieve self-development. Several learners commented that they expected participation in the programme to improve their job related skills, or to help them increase their confidence. Literature indicates that ways of improving learner motivation is for content to be relevant and applicable to learner situations, and learners 'own' the programme.(e.g. Rossett and Schafer 2003)

Suggestion 2. In future programmes it will be important to carry out prior research to ensure that content is maximally relevant to learners, and to design the programme to enhance learners' feelings of ownership.

What are learners' current managerial responsibilities and career aspirations?

Most learners (84%) had some managerial responsibilities when they completed the questionnaire. Staff responsibilities ranged from one or two part time staff upwards. One learner had responsibility for nearly 600 staff. He mentioned that he found the programme useful, because it reinforced knowledge which he had not been formally taught, but had picked up by '*osmosis*.' Around 40% each of respondents mentioned that they had responsibility for staff or for operational matters. Around 20% had responsibility for marketing, whilst only about 2% included finance in their roles. 59% of learners indicated that they were currently seeking promotion, and 29% of responses concerning the way that participation might affect their job or career indicated that programme might make them more valuable to their organisations, or improve promotional prospects.

Suggestion 3. Learner recruitment might be improved if the programme were marketed as enhancing learners' promotional prospects.

What types of professional development and training have learners received in the recent past?

Management and leadership training accounted for 43% of the professional development mentioned by survey respondents, and a further 23% were job specific. Learners also mentioned computer studies, and some who were involved in training or assessing mentioned education related courses. Few of the learners (12%) had previously studied online.

Do learners prefer online or face-to face involvement in professional development and training?

Since so few learners had previously studied online, many felt unable to respond to this question. Of those that did, many thought they preferred face-to-face learning. In many cases this was due to the immediacy of response to learner questions, and because of the visual aspect and the ability to get to know one's fellow learners. Some learners appreciated the time flexibility and the opportunity to reflect before contributing afforded by online learning. They also mentioned the long-term availability of resources.

Learners in the Asure project, who were interviewed approximately half way through their course, also stated that they preferred face to face learning situations. Learners in the Asure project were generally older than those in the present programme, and had a different educational background. (Winter, 2004) It will be interesting to see whether the preference for face-to-face learning continues throughout the time of the present programme.

What are learners' levels of ICT competence?

Most of the learners were daily computer users and had good general computer skills. As expected typing skills of male learners were not as high as those of females. Two thirds knew what a discussion board was, but only one third had previously used one. In the Asure project, few learners claimed knowledge about discussion boards, and many had limited typing skills.

What are learners' areas of concern and feelings about starting the programme?

Half of the learners had concerns about participating in the discussion groups. over twice the number who had concerns about infrastructure problems, and three times the number who were concerned about navigating through the online materials. Some learners did not want to appear ignorant online, and others were diffident about sharing online with people they did not know. In the Asure project, learners were diffident about the discussion board, especially at first. Learners in this earlier project started by doing the minimum, but got more involved as time went on. It appeared that face-to-face instruction and encouragement to use the board increased usage and perceived value of the board. It is likely that careful introduction to the discussion board and practice in its use at an initial face-to-face training session would reduce apprehension and increase use of the board.

Suggestion 4. Hold a compulsory face-to-face workshop in a computer suite for all learners prior to the start of the programme during which the Learning Management System is carefully introduced, and learners practice relevant skills including collaborating in workgroups and using discussion boards.

Learners who expressed concerned feelings about starting the programme were frequently worried about the time commitment needed. It appears that some learners may have gained a false impression of the amount of time necessary to complete the course. More accurate information to learners might enable them to make a more informed choice about starting the programme, and could result in fewer withdrawals. A well-briefed champion for the course in each organisation may help in future.

Suggestion 5. Ensure that candidate learners are adequately briefed on the programme content, mode of delivery and benefits before they commit themselves. This briefing could be carried out by the programme champions mentioned in Suggestion 1.

What level of support do learners anticipate from their managers?

Most learners expected to receive considerable support from their manager. However, few specified the type of support they anticipated receiving. Learners in the Asure project commented that they had support from their managers in the form of making time available, providing resources and authenticating work. It will be interesting in the present project to ascertain the actual level and types of support provided to learners by their managers. It will

also be relevant to discover managers' perceptions of the nature and benefits of the programme.

How do learners expect involvement in the programme to impact on their working and private lives?

Over one third of respondents recognised the need to organise their time to accommodate the programme, and around a quarter anticipated negative effects.

One of the major reasons given by learners for withdrawing from the programme was related to the time factor. It could be that learners had unrealistic expectations of the time commitment necessary to succeed in the course. This could be minimised by potential learners being given accurate information before enrolment. (See Suggestion 5)

In the Asure project, several participants also found difficulty juggling time to complete the course. The literature also mentions time constraints as an important factor in learner withdrawals from online courses.

What has learners' experience been of the programme to date?

Opinions of the programme from those who had participated in online courses in the past varied from positive to negative. The interviewees tended to have had negative experiences of the online component at the beginning of the programme. One interviewee felt '*intimidated*' and two others, who had both studied online previously, made strong criticisms of the Blackboard Learning Management System and the way that it was used in the present project. They pointed to difficulties in navigating and printing out the course material, and to problems with the workgroup and discussion group structure.

Learners in the Asure project also reported problems in navigating and in printing course material. Although some of the learners in this earlier project reported issues with using the discussion board, none mentioned concerns about their groups' composition, in marked contrast to the present programme. This may be a consequence of the Asure learners sharing similar working conditions and culture, and consequently being much a more homogeneous group than the public sector participants.

Navigational problems, difficulties in printing out course materials and improving the general user friendliness of the programme materials have been addressed in response to learner feedback. Some learners have commented favourably on the improvement.

Changes have also been made to the structure of the workgroups. The small size of the initial workgroups made it difficult for several groups to start a viable dialogue, and groups were made larger for the second and subsequent courses. However, this change did not address the concerns of learners regarding participating in groups which did not contain others from their own workplaces or sectors. The cross-sector work groups were created at the request of the Public Sector Training Organisation. It was anticipated that this would foster cross-sector awareness in the learners. However, it is likely that rather than doing this, it might have inhibited participation altogether.

Literature is clear on the importance of group cohesion in working collaboratively online (e.g. Stacey (1999), Lawless and Allen (2004)). This cohesion could be promoted by including in

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workgroups at least two participants from a given workplace, and also by compulsory learner participation in an initial orientation workshop in which online interaction could be practiced. Such a face-to-face workshop could also be used to familiarise learners fully with the Blackboard environment and its idiosyncrasies.

Suggestion 6. Improve learner safety in workgroups by including at least two learners, wherever possible, from the same worksite or sector.

Other Comments

Data was also obtained on the extent of learners' reflective practice and discussion of their jobs with peers and management. The questionnaire also investigated the ways in which learners thought they could most effectively contribute to their online groups. These findings will be discussed in a subsequent report in which baseline learner data will be used to find out to what extent learner practice and perceptions are changed as a result of participation.

References

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Stacey E (1999) *Collaborative Learning in an Online Environment* *Journal of Distance Education* accessed through <http://cade.athabascau.ca/vol14.2/stacey.html>, January 5 2005

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Key Aspects of the Revised Research Plan

Delivering Applied e-Learning in the Workplace: Polytechnics and ITOs Working Together

Introduction

TANZ and the PSTO conjointly were successful bidders in the TEC's eCDF funding offer. Their project seeks to deliver applied e-learning in the workplace and is outlined below. The target groups identified as suitable candidates for learning in this manner are first line managers and candidates for such positions in Public Sector organisations.

In order to ascertain the effectiveness of the project, TANZ/PSTO has requested that Ultralab undertake the necessary evaluation. A research plan formed the basis of the contract between TANZ and Ultralab. Since the original plan was formulated, the project has commenced. The original project and research plan envisaged the involvement of workplace e-learning facilitators to support learners' progress. The research plan was designed to investigate learner outcomes as a function of workshop and facilitator support, and involved four groups of learners. In the event, no workplace based e-learning facilitators were forthcoming, and fewer learners enrolled in the project than was anticipated. Consequently the present research plan represents a modification to take account of these factors.

Project Overview

Background

The present *Applied Workplace-Based Education and Training: Delivered Online* project builds on the National Certificate in First Line Management (online) which was first delivered to Asure meat inspectors during 2003.

Rationale

The project was developed to meet the following needs:

- Expand the range of learning options available within public sector organisations
- Meet the needs of differing sectors
- Promote support for learning within a workplace
- Increase the offerings of unit standards available online
- Improve range of delivery options

Objectives

- To provide high usage first line management and generic health and safety unit standards in an online format.
- To develop and deliver effective e-learning models that will include standards, protocols, processes, procedures and templates designed to increase capability and capacity within workplace based, applied, web-enabled education and training.
- To ensure the transferability and reusability of the developed electronic unit standards as agreed by public sector organisations and TEOs that will be applied to and supported within the workplace.

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- To develop guidelines and criteria for a learning objects repository that will ensure national consistency, access, reusability and continuous improvement. The repository will include case studies, scenarios and simulations from the workplace as a continually updated database of such assets available for reuse in various contexts.
- To identify, capture and evaluate each phase of the project, by way of research and evaluation processes which will then provide valuable learning and information back to key stakeholders.

The project is delivered in conjunction with several TEOs, ITOs and Public Sector organisations. It will be delivered in a manner that links with and is consistent with the Ministry of Education's goals in the area of e-learning.

Research Questions

Two major research questions can be identified in this project:

3. Whether and to what extent do varying levels of face to face support affect learning outcomes for learners.
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of workplace-based e-learning as opposed to the withdrawal of staff from their normal places of work?

Online vs face-to-face

A number of sub-questions are generated when this aspect of the research is considered in more depth:

- How effective is the online programme?
- What are the learner's experiences of learning online?
- What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the online delivery of the programme?
- What are the relative contributions of the online and face-to-face components of the programme?
- Do learners' outcomes correlate with the extent of their involvement in the face to face component of the course?
- Why do localised learners choose to take a greater or lesser number of optional workshops?
- Do localised learners taking few optional workshops, and distributed learners, achieve at a different level from localised learners taking many optional workshops?
- Do localised learners taking few optional workshops, and distributed learners, feel disadvantaged compared with localised learners taking many optional workshops?
- What factors impact on learners' adoption of e-learning (technical aspects/learning skills/learning process)?
- Do these factors support or hinder learners' learning?
- How do outcomes of this programme compare with those of the *Asure* project?

Workplace-based vs withdrawal

- How effective is the programme in terms of learner's experiences when based in the normal place of work?
- What are learners' experiences of learning within the normal place of work?
- What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the *in situ* delivery of the programme?
- Is manager involvement a critical factor in learners' success?
- What are the effects of workplace-based e-learning on:
 - e-learning tutors?
 - learners?
 - managers of participants?

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Methodology

The approach to this research will be that of a mixed-method case study of the implementation of e-learning within the workplace. As such, data will be gathered by:

1. Post-implementation questionnaires to all participants
2. Interviews with stakeholders and participants.
3. Content analysis of online interactions
4. Usage analysis of online resources
5. Content analysis of other pertinent documents
6. Observations of learning occasions and related activities
7. Analysis of the roles, functions and relationships of participants and stakeholders, based on soft systems methodology.

Learners will be allocated to three different groups. The groups vary as to the the amount and type of of face to face learning that takes place. Comparisons of e-learning and face to face delivery will be made within these three groups. Historical comparison with previous face to face deliveries of the same programme will not be undertaken.

The course involves eight compulsory modules and one elective module chosen from four options. In addition there is an introductory module. Three of the compulsory modules, which focus on interpersonal skills, involve compulsory face to face workshops. The remaining modules have voluntary face to face workshops. The bulk of the teaching and learning for all modules takes place online.

The largest groups of participants are located in Wellington and Auckland (localised learners). There is also a number of participants distributed in the regions, including a group in Christchurch.

Localised learners have to attend compulsory workshops for three of the modules. These workshops are delivered in both Wellington and Auckland. They may also attend up to five optional workshops.

Distributed learners are catered for with a two day workshop at the beginning of the course and a one day workshop towards the end of the course.

On the basis of their attendance at workshops, learners will be divided into three groups as follows:

1. Distributed learners
2. Localised learners participating in compulsory workshops and 0-2 optional workshops
3. Localised learners participating in compulsory workshops and 4-5 optional workshops

A limited study of participants in the *Asure* programme will be undertaken to compare outcomes with those of the present programme. This study is the subject of a separate research proposal.

When any qualitative approach is taken in a research context, it is often necessary to modify the proposed plan and methodology as needs dictate.

Data Sources

- Pass rates
- Enrolment records
- Minutes of meetings
- Archive of online interactions

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- Course materials and websites
- Transcripts of interviews
- Schedules of observations
- Responses to questionnaires
- Logs of usage of online resources

Sampling Plan

Interviews with:

- The programme tutors
- All key stakeholders
- Sample of learners from each of the three groups to include a variety of programme material deliveries and workplace contexts. Minimum of two interviews per learner.
- Sample of learners who withdraw from the programme
- Sample of learners' managers. One interview per learner manager

Observations

- Observations of each type of workshop:
 - 2 days of the optional workshops
 - 2 days of the compulsory workshops for localised learners
 - one of the workshops for distributed learners
- Learners *in situ* to cover several phases of the modules over time (Interviews will be timed to coincide with observations)
- The reference group process

Questionnaires

- All participants (including those who withdraw from the programme)
- All participants' managers

Timeline

The timing of milestones associated with the TANZ/PSTO project is as follows:

Milestone	Period
1	1 Jan-31 March 2004
2	1 April-31 June 2004
3	1 July-30 Sept 2004
4	1 Oct-31 Dec 2004
5	1 Jan-31 March 2005
6	1 April-30 June 2005
7	1 July-30 Sept 2005
8	1 Oct-31 Dec 2005

As far as possible, an alternating pattern of data collection in one period, followed by an analysis/write-up stage in the following milestone period will be adopted. Thus, data collection will mainly occur during Milestone periods 3, 5 and 7, with analysis and reporting in Milestone periods, 4, 6 and 8. The final research report will be published at the end of Milestone 8.

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Notes

The term “stakeholders” is used in this document to describe any persons or organisations with interests in the outcome of this programme and includes learners, tutors, e-learning facilitators, individual training organisations and course providers.

It is important to note that this research is not undertaken to evaluate the quality of the course material, but to compare the effectiveness of differing blends of the two different modes of delivery.

Glossary of Terms

ITO	Industry Training Organisation
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
eCDF	e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund
TANZ	Tertiary Alliance of New Zealand
PSTO	Public Sector Training Organisation
Soft systems methodology	A methodological approach to understanding a situation that includes an investigation of its cultural and behavioural contexts.

Appendix 2. Learner Entry Questionnaire

TANZ ECDF National Certificate in First Line Management On Line Evaluation Research

Entry Questionnaire

Your participation in the evaluation research will help the course project team understand your needs as learners, and how the course might be improved to meet these needs.

Please answer every question and return the form in the addressed envelope direct to the evaluation researcher. Data records will remain confidential to the Ultralab research personnel involved in the evaluation. Any reported quotations from the data will be unattributable to individuals or their workplaces.

Please return this questionnaire by 13 September 2004

Personal Details

1. Family Name		2. First Name		
3. Gender	M <input type="checkbox"/>	F <input type="checkbox"/>		
4. Age Group	<30 <input type="checkbox"/>	30-34 <input type="checkbox"/>	35-39 <input type="checkbox"/>	40-44 <input type="checkbox"/>
	45-49 <input type="checkbox"/>	50-54 <input type="checkbox"/>	55-60 <input type="checkbox"/>	>61 <input type="checkbox"/>

5. Ethnicity (Please tick one only)

Pakeha/European

Maori

Pacific Islander

Asian

Other (Please specify) _____

6. Employing Organisation
7. Where in New Zealand do you work?

8. Position Title

9. How long have you worked in the public sector? (Please tick one)

0 to 1 year 1 to 5 years 5 to 10 years

10 to 15 years 15 to 20 years Over 20 years

10. How long have you been in your current position? (please tick one)

0 to 1 year 1 to 5 years 5 to 10 years

10 to 15 years 15 to 20 years Over 20 years

11. Are you seeking or considering seeking promotion? (Please tick one)

Yes No

12. Does your present position involve managerial responsibility i.e. supervising and organising the work of others? (Please tick one)

Yes No

13. Please outline these responsibilities:

14. How frequently do you discuss issues and challenges related to your job with your peers?

a. Never

b. One to three times a month

c. One to five times a week

d. Daily

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15. How frequently do you discuss issues and challenges related to your job with your manager?

- a. Never
- b. One to three times a month
- c. One to five times a week
- d. Daily

16. Do you reflect critically and effectively on your performance? (Please tick one)

Yes No

17. If the answer to question 16 was **Yes**, describe the method you use for reflecting, (e.g. diary, journal, discussion)

Previous Education and Training

18. What is your highest academic qualification? (Please tick one) (If you have an overseas qualification, please indicate the equivalent New Zealand qualification.)

- a. No formal qualification
- b. School Certificate
- c. Sixth Form Certificate /UE or University Bursary
- d. National Certificate
- e. National Diploma
- f. Bachelors' Degree
- g. Higher Degree (Master's or Doctorate)

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19. Please describe any work related courses or other professional development which you have undertaken in the last five years?
20. What was the nature of that professional development?
21. Have you ever previously taken any **online** courses for professional or personal reasons?
(Please tick one)
Yes No
22. If so, what was your experience of working in an **online** environment?
-

23. Have you previously studied any courses for professional or personal reasons by correspondence or telephone? (Please tick one)
Yes No
24. Which mode of training do you prefer? (Please tick one)
a. Face to face
b. On line
c. Correspondence or telephone
25. Why do you prefer this mode of training?

Computer Access

26. Have you access to a computer outside work? (Please tick one)
Yes No
27. Where do you access a computer outside work? (Please tick one)
a. At home
b. At a friend's house
c. At a library
d. At a school or other educational institution

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e. Elsewhere (Please specify below)

28. Do you have access to the Internet outside work? (Please tick one)

a. No

b. Yes – by modem

c. Yes – broadband

29. What level of access to the on line course materials do you anticipate having at work?
(Please tick one)

a. Unlimited access at any time

b. Access at specific times - please specify the times below

30. How much of the course work do you expect to do away from your place of work? (Please tick one)

a. None

b. Less than half

c. More than half

d. All of it

Computer Skills

General Skills

31. How well can you type? (Please tick one)

a. Not at all

b. I pick out words letter by letter

c. I can type accurately if I type slowly

d. I can type accurately and fast

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32. How frequently do you use a computer? (Please tick one)

- a. Never
- b. One to three times a month
- c. One to five times a week
- d. Daily

33. Can you use Windows or other file management tools e.g to create, manage, delete or save files and folders? (Please tick one)

Yes No

Word Processing

34. Can you create a simple document using Word or another word processing program? (Please tick one)

Yes No

35. Can you print it? (Please tick one)

Yes No

36. Can you save the document and open it again later? (Please tick one)

Yes No

Use of a Spreadsheet

37. Can you use a spreadsheet? (Please tick one)

Yes No

38. Can you create a spreadsheet from scratch? (Please tick one)

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Yes No

Use of a Database

39. Can you use a database? (Please tick one)

Yes No

40. Can you create a database from scratch? (Please tick one)

Yes No

Use of E-mail

41. Can you send an e-mail? (Please tick one)

Yes No

42. Can you open an e-mail? (Please tick one)

Yes No

43. Can you attach a file to an e-mail? (Please tick one)

Yes No

44. Can you open an attachment to an e-mail? (Please tick one)

Yes No

Internet Skills

45. Can you use a web browser? (Please tick one)

Yes No

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46. Can you use a search engine? (Please tick one)

Yes No

On Line Discussion Tools

47. Do you know what an online discussion forum is? (Please tick one)

Yes No

48. Have you ever been involved in an online discussion forum (Please tick one)

Yes No

49. Do you know what a blog is? (Please tick one)

Yes No

50. Have you ever used a blog? (Please tick one)

Yes No

Computer Related Concerns

51. Please tick any of the following areas with which you may have a problem or concern.

- a. Access to computers at work
- b. Access to the course on line materials
- c. Navigating through the on line course materials
- d. Participating in on line discussion groups
- e. Hardware or software problems

Course Related Questions

52. Why did you decide to take this course?

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- a. I was directed to take it
- b. I decided for myself to take the course

53. What do you hope to gain from the course?

54. How do you **feel** about starting the course?

55. How do you think studying the course will affect your work or personal life during the course?

56. How much support do you anticipate getting from your manager in taking the course?

57. What is your understanding of your role as a learner in the online group based activities which you will encounter in this course?

58. How do you think critical, journal based reflection may help your learning in this course?

59. Do you consider yourself to be a good communicator in an online environment (eg. Email, discussion forums etc.)?

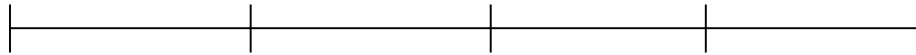
(Please tick one)

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Yes No

60. Please indicate how you think the online group experience will be for you. Place a mark on the line under each statement to indicate your level of agreement or disagreement

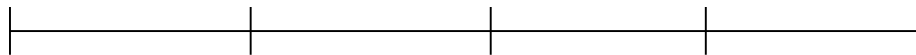
Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree



a. I feel confident about communicating online with my group

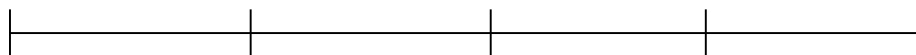
b. I think that other members of the group will benefit from what I have to say.

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree



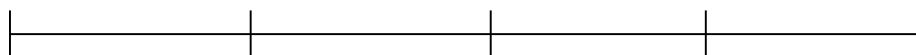
c. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group by **paraphrasing other people's ideas and opinions**

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree



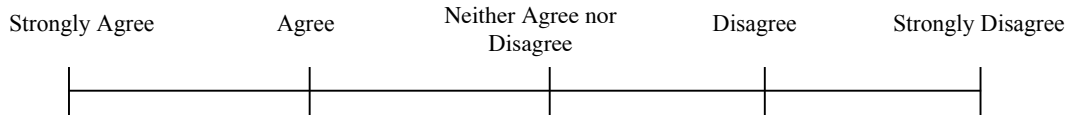
d. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group by **asking questions about other people's ideas and opinions**

Strongly Agree Agree Neither Agree nor Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

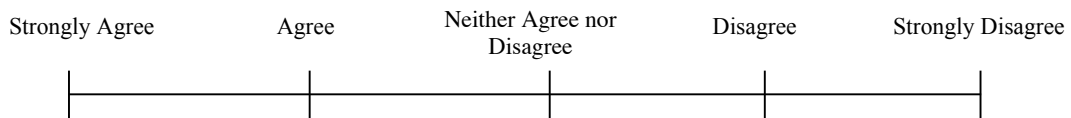


e. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group by **criticizing or arguing with other people's ideas and opinions**

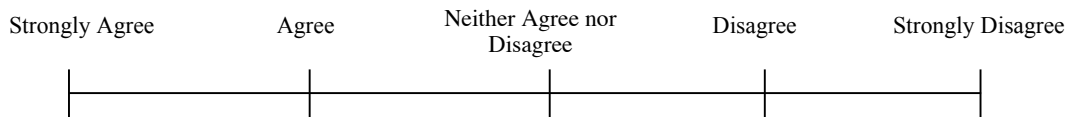
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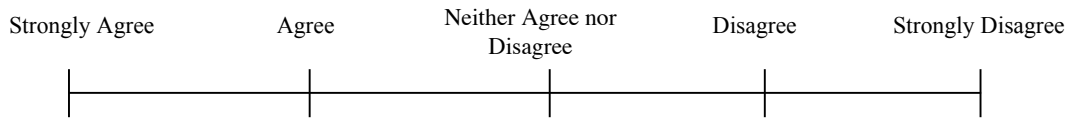
f. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group **by probing to find out what other people thought or felt when they offered ideas or opinions**



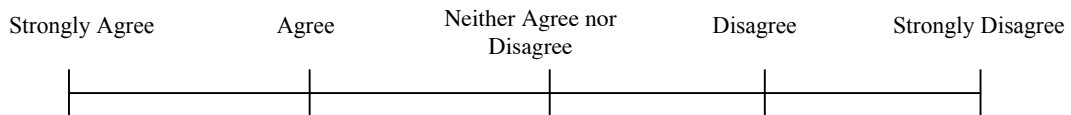
g. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group **by considering carefully my response to other peoples' ideas and opinions**



h. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group **by disclosing my thoughts and feelings**



i. I think I can contribute effectively to the online group **by expressing appreciation of others' contributions**



61. How do you imagine that completing this course might affect your job or career in the future?

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Please return this questionnaire by 13 september 2004

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please use the stamped envelope to return it and the consent form directly to the researcher:

Dr Michael Winter

Ultralab South

PO Box 13678

Christchurch.

You may contact Michael if you have any queries or concerns regarding this questionnaire:

03 379 0714, or michael.winter@ultralab.net

Appendix 3 Focus Questions for Preliminary Learner Interviews

TANZ Preliminary Interview with Learners

September 2004

Name _____ Employer _____ Date _____

1. How did you learn about this course?
2. Why did you decide to take this course?
3. What other training/professional development have you had in the past two years?
4. Please outline your feelings on contemplating starting the course.
5. Please comment on your level of computer skills:
 - a. Typing skills
 - b. Word processing skills
 - c. File management skills
 - d. E-mail skills
 - e. Internet use
 - f. Use of search engine

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- g. Spreadsheets skills?
 - h. Database skills
 - i. Have you taken a course online before?
6. How did you find the introductory unit?
- j. The tour of Blackboard
 - k. The intro to NFLM
 - l. The warm up exercise?
7. Please comment on the ease of use of the Blackboard system in general and the discussion board in particular.
8. Have there been any issues regarding access to the programme from your worksite?
9. Have you had any infrastructure problems?
10. Do you have a computer and/or internet connection at home?
- a. PC or Mac?
 - b. Roughly how old is your machine?

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c. If you have an internet connection is it by modem or broadband?

11. What support have you had so far from your manager for studying the course?

12. Do you intend to access the course from work, at home or elsewhere?

13. Why?

14. How do you anticipate managing your participation in the course from your workplace?

15. What benefits do you see in taking this course?

16. Do you intend to seek promotion in the next 2 years?

Appendix 4 Report: Why do Learners Withdraw from the Online National Certificate in First Line Management Course?

Abstract

The present report summarises reasons given by public sector employees for their withdrawal from the online programme leading to the National Certificate in First Line Management. Findings are discussed in the light of literature reports. Some suggestions are made which could lead to lower withdrawal rates in future.

Executive Summary

The online pilot programme leading to the National Certificate in First Line Management, which is produced and run by the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand in conjunction with the Public Sector Training Organisation, has suffered from a lower level of enrolments and a higher learner withdrawal rate than anticipated. The programme started in August 2004. 89 learners enrolled compared to a target of 120, and 22 had withdrawn by early November.

Learners who withdrew from the course came from many of the organisations which were involved. However most were from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The most common reason contributing to learner withdrawal was time pressure within the workplace. Other reasons included inappropriateness of the course, technical and learning management system problems, aspects of course design and change of individual work circumstances.

A survey of the literature showed that these issues are frequently encountered in online workplace learning initiatives, along with personal and cultural factors. Literature findings and consideration of the present data led to the following suggestions for improvement to enhance retention in the future:

- Ensuring that learners receive accurate information about the course, and the time, effort and commitment needed to complete it successfully
- Clear communication to learners of infrastructure required to access the course at home
- Effective technical support
- Assessment of learner readiness for e-learning in terms of computer skills and provision of training to remedy inadequacies
- Helping learners to develop their independent learning skills
- Compulsory face to face introductory and component course workshops
- Setting up learner groups based on workplaces
- Working closely with managers to ensure effective learner support

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- Ensure that the first course is sufficiently challenging and relevant to engage learners and to indicate the general level of the programme.

Introduction

The present programme leading to the National Certificate in First Line Management is a pilot initiative funded by the e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund. It is designed to support the development of skills of junior managers in public sector organisations, and is run by the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand (a cooperative group of Polytechnics) and the Public Sector Training Organisation. Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology is the tertiary institution developing the programme.

The training, which is mainly online, also includes complementary face-to-face workshops, and is scheduled to take 18 months to complete. Participants in the programme are drawn from a range of public sector organisations, including the Departments of Corrections, Internal Affairs, the Fire Service and from Local Government. The design and execution of the programme draws on the lessons learned during the delivery of a similar programme to Meat Inspector Supervisors during 2003-2004. (Winter 2004)

The original target for the number of learners for the present programme was set at around 120 learners. The number of learners who eventually enrolled in the programme was 89 (CPIT 2004a). However, by early November 2004, 22 learners had withdrawn from the programme, (CPIT 2004b) and a considerable number of the remaining learners had not taken an active part in the programme, or had fallen behind in completing assignments. At least one of the inactive learners has since withdrawn.

The high level of withdrawals is a cause for concern to the programme organisers. In order to gain some insight into reasons for learner withdrawals, the author was asked to carry out a brief investigation as part of his evaluation research into the online NCFLM project. As a result of his findings, the author will make suggestions which may result in reduced levels of withdrawal in future programmes.

Several authors have written about dropout rates from e-learning courses. The literature has been reviewed by Rossett and Schafer (2003), and by Frankola (2001a). Rossett and Schafer quote statistics of only 69% commencing mandatory online courses and 32% starting those that were voluntary. They also give figures indicating a 25% completion rate of online study courses. Frankola (2001b) has published tips for increasing e-learning completion rates. Some of the reasons given by her for high dropout rates are:

- Students don't have enough time
- Lack of management oversight
- Lack of motivation
- Problems with technology
- Lack of student support
- Individual learning preferences
- Poorly designed course
- Substandard/inexperienced instructors

It is of interest to investigate whether the same reasons are given by learners in the present study.

Methodology and Data Sources

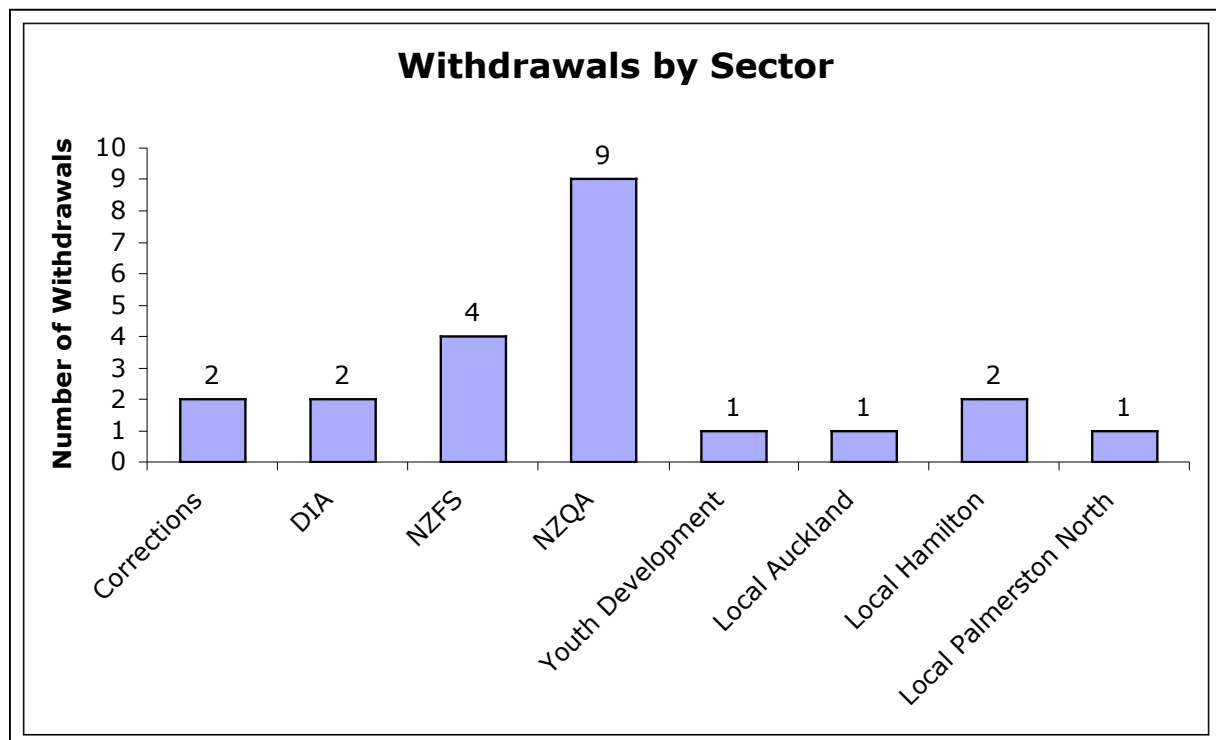
The methodology is that of a limited case study. Data sources include relevant documents provided by staff of Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology and the Public Sector Training Organisation, e-mail transcripts, transcripts of phone interviews carried out with learners, and data collected from a learner entry questionnaire carried out at the beginning of the programme.

Findings

Numbers of Withdrawals Across Sectors

At the beginning of November, the total number of withdrawals numbered 22 – or close to 25% of those enrolling. They were distributed over a wide range of organisations (Figure 1). Since this data was collected, the author is aware of at least one other learner from a local government organisation who has withdrawn.

Figure A1 Learner Withdrawals by Sector November 2004



It is clear that withdrawals have occurred across a wide range of organisations. NZQA has by far the highest number of withdrawals.

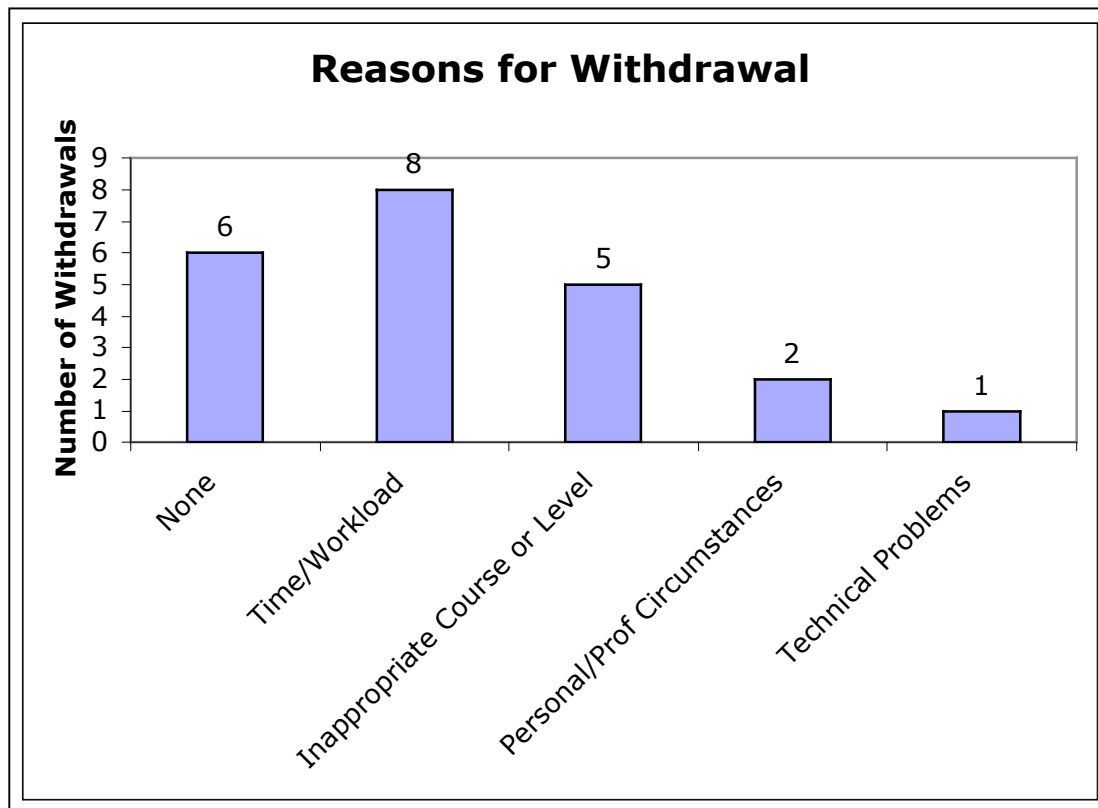
Reasons Given for Withdrawal on Notification of Withdrawal

Learners notified the programme administrators of their decision to withdraw by e-mail. In several cases they gave reasons for their withdrawal. These reasons are summarised in Figure 2.

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The most common reason given by learners were related to time and workload issues. The first course in the programme covered time management, and it is interesting to speculate whether involvement in this course helped learners wake up to the fact that they could not realistically fit the programme into their busy schedules. The second most common reason related to perceived inappropriateness of programme content. It appears that one person who wrote *'I know nothing about this – can you please clarify for me?'* was enrolled by her ITO in the wrong programme!

Figure A2 Reasons Given by Learners on Notification of Withdrawal



Attrition of NZQA Participants

As a result of concern regarding the high withdrawal rates amongst NZQA staff (nine withdrawals out of 20 enrolled – 45% of the total), a meeting was set up on 11 November 2004 between NZQA, the PSTO training advisor and one of the tutors to discuss the reason for this attrition. Notes on this meeting were forwarded to the author by the PSTO training advisor. (Cudby (2004)) Three relevant points emerged from this meeting:

- ‘Workload peaks and troughs vary greatly between business units within NZQA making it difficult to meet course deadlines at specific times of the year’
- ‘Some participants have already had considerable training and experience in the role of FLM and as such would have been better suited to a RCC (Recognition of Current Competency) type process. One expressed a reluctance to invest time in the Blackboard activities as she felt with her experience she would not gain much’
- ‘Distribution of the workgroups was not helpful – it would have been better if all NZQA people were in the same workgroup then they could support each other’

Data Obtained by Phone Interview of Withdrawn Learners and by Direct e-Mail Communication

Phone interviews were carried out in December 2004 with three people who had withdrawn from the programme in early November. These people represented NZQA, the Fire Service and a Local Government organisation. Another member of a Local Government organisation who had been inactive for some time was also interviewed. He said that he too had withdrawn from the programme.

After the interviewer had established that the interviewee had indeed withdrawn from the programme, he asked why the person had withdrawn, and focused on time/workload, course appropriateness, infrastructural and other issues. Focus questions for the interviews are given in Appendix 1. Changes in circumstances tended to emerge early in the interviews.

A fifth person, who was a member of the Department of Corrections, was unwilling to be interviewed. However, he did e-mail his reasons for withdrawing. The reasons contributing to these five persons’ decision to withdraw from the programme are summarised in Table 1.

Table A1 Interviewee and e-Mail Respondent Reasons Contributing to Withdrawal

Reason	Number of Responses
Time Factors	4
Infrastructure Issues	3
Learning Management System Issues	3
Aspects of programme Design	2
Change of Individual Work Circumstances	2
Other	2

The most common factor contributing to withdrawal was related to time. Two of the people who mentioned time had recently had changes in their employment situations. They found that the requirement to adapt to their new situations left them insufficient time for the programme. One of these respondents reported that she felt misinformed by her sector’s HR department about the time needed for the programme. She had been told that she could do it in *‘half the time’* recommended for the programme, because it *‘was only a level 4 course.’*

Another respondent mentioned problems with the Blackboard learning management system. He found difficulty printing off material, saying that each page had to be printed separately, and that he did not have the time to go through the process. The fourth respondent reported excessive pressure from other aspects of his work, having *‘17 other projects.’* This person also had problems navigating the Blackboard site, and compared the experience unfavourably with other online learning experiences he had in the past. He thought that e-mails giving information designed to help navigation should have been available before the material to which it referred was posted on the site. One other respondent found the online material confusing, especially the instructions as to how to proceed.

Two respondents, coming from very different sectors, had difficulties with the way the work groups and discussion forum were designed. One of them found her work group did not

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function because of lack of involvement of some members: *'if your work group isn't on to it, it's pointless.'* The other did not appreciate being put into a work group with people from other sectors: *'I thought it didn't make sense to hook us into groups without considering it might have been helpful if (those of us at this site) could have worked together rather than on a notice board with people we didn't know.'* This person also *'didn't like the format of the message board system, at my age it is difficult to understand.'*

Computer issues were reported by two people. One had difficulty with his home computer which *'would not download the program which made things a little tricky.'* The other reported that the computers at his workplace were not the most up to date and were quite slow.

Three respondents commented positively about the programme content, and would be willing to start the programme again when the factors causing them to withdraw had been resolved. However, one person thought the programme had been oversold, saying that there had been a large number of enthusiastic participants at her former workplace who had been sold the programme as free and valuable. She thought that there would have been a large number of dropouts amongst her former colleagues. The person who responded by e-mail was clear about his experience: *'to be honest this was my first attempt at education, and if this is the way of the future to be honest I will stay dumb'*

Discussion/Conclusions

Time constraints were common factors reported by interviewees in the present study, in withdrawal e-mails and during discussion with staff at NZQA. They were also the most common reasons reported by Frankola (2001a) in her review of the literature. This paper also highlights lack of managerial oversight and lack of motivation as two factors in learner withdrawal. These factors were not directly addressed in the present study, although managerial support in terms of making time available for e-learning, encouragement, rewarding success, and providing a dedicated e-learning environment have been suggested in other studies to support learner success. (e.g. Rossett and Schafer (2003))

The second most common factor reported in the withdrawal e-mails was inappropriateness of the programme. Three of the five learners mentioning that the programme was inappropriate were employed by NZQA. This is consistent with the comment on the meeting with NZQA staff that some of the participants had *'already received considerable training and experience in the role of FLM and... would have been better suited by a RCC type process.'* An interview with a learner who had persisted with the programme revealed that she perceived the first constituent course, time management, as containing little of value to her, but subsequent courses being more challenging. Most of the withdrawing learners dropped out early, and probably based their judgement of inappropriate level on their experience of the time management course alone. In any event this seems to reflect participants' receiving inappropriate prior information about the programme. This conclusion is borne out by one of the individual interviews.

There is some evidence that the programme may have been oversold to some learners. Comments that learners should be able to complete it in half the time because it is only a level four course trivialise the programme, and leaves students unprepared for the time and effort required for success.

Interviewees reported problems with aspects of the programme structure and/or with the Blackboard system. The difficulties in printing out material have been resolved, and issues of

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workgroup composition addressed by restructuring the workgroups for the second and subsequent courses. However, the new workgroup structure does not necessarily place all learners from a given workplace in the same group.

Some learners in the present study commented on technical issues. Problems with technology have been mentioned by other authors including Frankola (2004a) and Lawless and Allen (2004). These latter authors reported that technical problems were mainly at the user end. They also commented that students' lack of skills with the software can create learner anxiety. Many reports suggest ways of helping learners when they encounter technical problems. These include a call centre approach, and the provision of course managers who can handle technical issues. (Hitch L and MacBrayne P (2004), Frankola (2004a)) The latter paper reports that '*it doesn't work for instructors to do this kind of handholding because they want to get to content.*' In addition, Stewart (2004) has commented on problems encountered by learners who were online out of office hours when no technical support was available.

Rossett and Schafer (2003), in their article *What can we do about e-Dropouts* focus separately on e-learning and e-learners devoted to e-learner success. The factors involved in designing learning programmes include providing meaningful, tailored content which includes opportunities for action. Experiences need to be tailored for learner success. Successful online experiences also '*touch the heart.*' The authors discuss providing content which meet the priorities of users '*not the passions of subject matter experts.*' Opportunities for action which the authors mention include seeking, trying, deciding, comparing and communing. It is interesting to note that the authors go beyond asynchronous discussion forums in the range of ways learners may commune. In order for experiences to be structured for success, learners need to be kept away from situations where their confidence will be dashed – both as regards content and ease of use of the interface. The authors also describe ways of engaging learners' minds and hearts. Some of these involve communicating why the learning is important, making the experience authentic and relevant to the learners' experience, and ensuring that the learner can access information and support when back on the job.

Rossett and Schafer (2003) also suggest ways that the e-learner can help themselves take advantage of e-learning. It is suggested that e-learners should consider whether they are able and willing to undertake e-learning, whether they are happy to try new approaches, how honest they are with themselves, whether they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning and whether they can anticipate problems they might encounter. The authors also suggest that learners will benefit from talking to management about online learning. They could clarify what relationship there is between the course, career and work group goals, the level of support, including time, what alternatives there are, and whether there are others in the organisation who have previously succeeded in e-learning.

Frankola's *Tips for Increasing e-Learning Completion Rates* (2004b) emphasises the need to develop an organisational culture that takes online learning as seriously as classroom teaching. She provides suggestions for achieving this, including holding managers accountable for learner success, managers acting as role models by taking the courses, providing formal rewards for achievement and tracking employee performance on courses. These suggestions boil down to providing clear and effective managerial support for online learning.

Several of the issues emerging from the data considered in this report have already been addressed in the design of the second and subsequent courses in the programme. These

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include efforts to employ the learning management system in a more user friendly way, for example by making it easier to print out course material; and reorganising the composition of discussion forum work groups. However, as mentioned above, the work group reorganisation did not include ensuring that groups included learners from the same site. It will be interesting to discover learners' responses to these changes.

Other changes could be made to improve learner retention for the remainder of the course, and in future presentations of the programme. These include:

- Ensuring that learners receive accurate information about the course and the time and effort commitment needed to complete it successfully
- Clear communication to learners of the infrastructure required to access the course at home
- Effective technical support
- Assessment of learner readiness for e-learning in terms of computer skills and provision of training to remedy inadequacies
- Helping learners to develop their independent learning skills
- Compulsory face to face introductory and component course workshops
- Setting up learner groups based on workplaces
- Working closely with managers to ensure effective learner support
- Ensure that the first course is sufficiently challenging and relevant to engage learners and to indicate the general level of the programme.

•

Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Focus Questions

Note – These questions form part of a wider interview of learners. A ‘withdrawn’ response to the first question of this interview leads to the second question and sub questions below.

1. How are you getting on with the NCFLM course?

2. Withdrawn			
Would you mind telling me the reason you withdrew?			
Time	Wrong Level	Infrastructure	Other
Could you elaborate on that?	Did you get all the information you needed?	What problems did you have with the infrastructure?	Ask for information
How could the time issue have been resolved to help you continue with the course?	What information did you lack?		

Interview Notes:

Time

Wrong Level

Infrastructure

Other

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