

Project Name: On-line induction for flexible and distance learning

Amendment History:

Version No.	Date	Reason for Amendment
1	February '09	New Proposal

Project Manager

Tim Maxfield – Worcester Business School (WBS)

Document Distribution

<i>Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Action/Information</i>
Debbie Lambert	UW	Members of LLN steering Group	To approve project

Background

Non-traditional, part-time learners are often anxious about what an academic assignment should look like. Many may never have experienced Higher Education, and the nuances of academic writing, whereas others may have done so, but not for some considerable time. Although guidance is provided on full time courses, non-traditional learners studying in part time mode are often unclear about course and institutional requirements. Evidence from Exam Boards historically suggests that learners are often disappointed by their inability to engage fully with the task in the initial assignments of their programme. Consequently, many only manage bare passes in their early modules. Others do less well than this, and on programmes like the MBA, and Graduate Cert, in Leadership & Management, early failure can lead to withdrawal from the course, at a time when the University is taking deliberate measures to improve retention rates.

Comprehensive induction sessions are provided for part time students at conventional academic year start points, and detailed advice on assignment planning and preparation is available via course handbooks. However, as study patterns and intake points become more flexible, it is increasingly difficult to cover all the essential aspects of assignment preparation in a single induction. The MBA at UW now has three entry points (in September, January and April), and the new Leading to Excellence programme recently validated at the University will have multiple entry points, potentially whenever an open module begins, possibly on a weekly basis.

It is therefore clear to all who are responsible for supporting students through these less conventional study patterns that current arrangements of face-to-face induction, are failing in their ability to prepare learners adequately. The development of an online package to supplement other induction advice/ guidance currently available, but focusing upon assignment preparation, would reinforce the guidance provided elsewhere on

courses e.g. in the course handbooks, as well as ensuring a consistency of approach.

This on-line approach would afford maximum flexibility, would be in accordance with the theme of supporting flexible and distributed learning which runs throughout the work of the LLN, and would allow a sharing of approach and associated material with other LLN partners who are delivering similar programmes with unorthodox start times. The on-line support and guidance on assignments would be embedded in the VLE created to support all learners on WBS CPD courses, and would be available to other interested parties within the LLN to adopt or tailor according to need.

The package would consist of a series of digestible information sections consisting of short information paragraphs with appropriate images and links to worked examples in word format. There would also be simple multi-choice quiz type questions at the end of main sections. The intent would be to make this web-based material as interactive as possible. Additional support will be available from the personal tutor/ course manager through the e-mail facility embedded in the VLE, so that learners can seek essential advice and guidance at every stage. The chat room facility available within Blackboard can be utilised as a synchronous or asynchronous facility, and it is intended that through the design process (and particularly through the use of focus groups), preferred learning styles will be elicited and feedback will help to inform the project.

Objectives of the Project

- To better engage new and existing non-traditional learners who are studying through flexible and associated remote learning modes.
- To ensure consistency in the guidance offered in the preparation and writing of assignments, particularly those that are work-based or contain a reflective element.
- To share good practice across interested LLN partners, in the preparation and support of non-traditional learners.
- To engage a non-traditional group of learners in the CPD process of support and structured HE.
- To assist flexible provision, utilising blended learning approaches to meet the needs of this diverse student market.
- To increase student confidence in their preparation and completion of assignments.
- To improve the quality of assessed work submitted by non-traditional part-time learners.

Project Approach

The project has been developed to capitalise upon the strengths of the individuals involved, as indicated by the project team membership of the current project bid. Funding to support the project would facilitate an effectively planned and co-ordinated approach to materials development and learner support. The project would enable key participants from the two partners indicated (WCT and NEWC) to be involved in and to utilise the on-line material developed. The materials developer (Dr Mike Bagshaw, an HPL Associate of WBS) would be involved in broad discussion with relevant course managers at UW, the ILS at UW and FE partners in order to inform design and development. The project would also involve a pilot exercise with current part time students at the University to test the effectiveness of the approach adopted and to adapt accordingly. Blackboard is the recommended platform at UW, and therefore it is intended to produce the on-line material to this platform. There will

be an opportunity in the project to consult with ILS and colleagues in the LLN, in order to explore alternative approaches.

Scope:

A Key Products from the project

- An on-line package designed to support students in the target group.
- To improve the retention of students registered to UW programmes (and those of any FE partners utilising the package).

B Out of Scope

This project does not cover the full development costs of the entire VLE to support the Leading to Excellence (and related) programmes, as this would be the responsibility of the course tutors linked to delivery.

Constraints

- The willingness of FE partners to work together and share good practice relating to induction and use of the package.
- The excessive work pressures and time constraints facing senior managers (such as those participating in the Leading to Excellence programme), may impact upon the use made of the on-line package.

Initial Project Case

- Flexible approach to student support, designed to enhance attainment and engagement [with the programme].
- A broader set of beneficiaries (beyond UW students alone), involving FE partners and their non-traditional part-time learners.
- Project impacts upon retention of existing and new part-time students, through the development of on-line support for their qualification.

Benefits of the Project

Benefits to the student :

- Opportunities for improved performance, via a more effective preparation for written assignments.
- Flexible learning opportunities to ensure appropriate access to those in full or part time employment.
- The development of a range of learning and student support materials to add value to course delivery.

Benefits to the organisation :

- A more effective and better prepared workforce, better able to capitalise on the opportunity for higher level skills development.
- Improved completion rates on employer-sponsored training and development.
- Flexibility in design of on-line material will reduce the amount of time that learners spend away from the workplace.

Benefits to the LLN :

- A highly developed workforce.
- A less transient workforce.

- Provides a flexible delivery model designed to improve retention and course completion, which recognises the problems associated with abstraction from the workplace.
- Information relating to the package will be disseminated through established networks to which the Project Manager belongs e.g. regular liaison with key FE partners in relation to existing courses, and through mechanisms facilitated by the LLN e.g. Annual Conference.

Key Assumptions

- The availability of key members of the project team e.g. Dr. Mike Bagshaw, Tim Maxfield, Dr Carl Evans, Paul Furniss (Worcester Business School), and FE partners for consultation purposes (e.g. Steve Poole, Bridgette Thornton).

Costs

Staff costs for materials developer (8 days @ £400 per day)	£3200.00
Travel and subsistence e.g. meetings with FE partners	£100.00
Consumables	£100.00
Market testing (e.g. demonstration of product/ convening of student focus group and adaptation in light of feedback (2 days).	£800.00
Integration with existing VLE/ administrative costs to support document production (1 day)	£400.00
Total	£4600.00

How will the project be evaluated?

Analysis of appropriateness of material produced will be evaluated / adapted through the establishment of focus groups made up of existing/ potential part-time students. This will be done at interim and end points of the development project.

How will the project be sustained?

WBS has a range of CPD programmes designed to meet the needs of non-traditional part-time learners. The material will be greatly beneficial in ensuring the continued success of the learners on these and other related programmes, both within the Business School and other FE partners keen to utilise the approach (WCT and NEW College).

Implications for Equality and Diversity

This on-line approach opens up the opportunity to a wide range of people who would otherwise not be able to engage with HE through normal regular attendance at the university. This covers people in work, or with social responsibilities and those with mobility disabilities.

Initial Risk Log

The following table summarises the risks that have been identified that may prevent the project being completed to the required quality, budget and timescale. The probability and impact of each risk has been graded as low, medium or high to indicate the relative importance attached to each element of risk.

Risks	Probability	Impact	Containment Plan
On-line learning package does not achieve full and effective use by target market.	L	M	The package will be promoted within face-to-face sessions and via the on-line student handbook designed to support the programme.
Limited involvement in design and development of the on-line material through direct engagement of the partners, creates an obstacle to effective collaboration.	M	M	Partners will be consulted on the value of the material developed, both at the development stage and through the market testing stage.
To access materials in Blackboard students have to be registered on a course . The materials would therefore only be available to registered students. Non-registered students would also need access?	H	L	The majority of students accessing the on-line learning package will be registered students to the University (or the partner college, where the material is being utilised on a partner course). It is recognised that 'some' part time students may enrol initially for the module in attendance mode only, and at a later stage decide that they wish to seek accreditation (via registration). Detailed discussions have been held with the ILS (Libby Symonds and Peter Thornton) with respect to this latter point, and assurances have been given that students on the Leading to Excellence programme specifically will be registered manually. This will allow access of on-line material to all.
Is Blackboard the best place to deliver the package; students have historically had problems accessing Blackboard off campus.	L	H	Though some problems have been reported by students attempting to access Blackboard off-site, many of these problems now appear to have been resolved. There will also be an opportunity in the project to consult with ILS and colleagues in the LLN, in order to explore alternative approaches.

<p>Might there be problems in FE partners (within the LLN) accessing the material from Blackboard.</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>The project manager will ensure, through regular liaison with ILS, that the format in which the material is produced is compatible for affording access from other platforms.</p>
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Project Team

Tim Maxfield (UW)
 Dr. Mike Bagshaw (UW)
 Dr. Carl Evans (UW)
 Paul Furniss (UW)
 Libby Symonds (UW)
 Bridgette Thornton (NEWC)
 Steve Poole (WCT)