

Armagh College - reaching out to the community using IT

Armagh College is a traditional FE college based in Armagh. Started in 1902, it has a long history of providing both full time and part time programmes to 16 year old+ learners in the area.

Like many FE colleges in the 1990's, its part time enrolments had been gradually falling and by 1999 represented only 50% of the student enrolment. As a result of demographic trends, government policies and changes to the programmes approved by local schools, the college also began to realise that its full time student cohort would decline in the coming years. In 2000 the college took the strategic decision to move into adult learning and, more specifically, into adult learning in the community.

From 50% of the student cohort in 1999, the college has increased its part time enrolments to 81% of the cohort in 2003 representing an increase in part time student numbers from just 1,500 in 1999 to over 5,000 in 2003/4.

This is a significant increase and in order to achieve this strategic change of direction, the college embarked on a programme of community partnerships; forging links with a range of partners across the community within the geographic area served by the college. The aim is for 50% of part time students to be accessing learning within the community at a time and place convenient and accessible to them. By 2004, the college had entered into 52 partnerships with a range of organisations from across the community. This was an increase of 24 from the previous year and evidenced the success of the strategy in moving the work of the college closer to the learner rather than expecting the learning to come to the college. In 2004 Diana Farrelly, Lifelong Learning Manager, received the Local Heroes Award for her work in building the community programme.

The community learners really feel the benefits of the programmes:

'Without the outreach community centre I would not have been able to learn new skills and learn how to use a computer. It's wonderful, I can book my holidays using the Internet and get all the bargains you see on television.'

Kathleen Mohan
Killylea Community Outreach Centre

At an early stage, the college recognised that this development would need to be supported by an investment in technology; not only would many of the programmes offered be IT based but access to learning and assessment materials at 50+ locations was only feasible with the use of ICT. The college has begun using Virtual Campus as its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and is now supporting staff in the use of the VLE as a learning and assessment tool. The college also recognised that, although it does not own the hardware in the community based centres, reliable access to the VLE and the Internet would be a vital tool in building the confidence of community based learners, many of whom would not have IT access at home. As part of the partnership, it therefore provides the IT support to the community programme.

In parallel to the community development strategy, the college also began to investigate the use of e-assessment to maximise the flexibility offered to both full time and part time students. The college has now begun offering on-line, on demand assessment to students on

electrical installation, motor vehicle and plumbing programmes as well as using the VLE to manage e-portfolios from students on a range of programmes including, for example, some Northern Ireland Open College Network (NI OCN) programmes. The use of the VLE to manage portfolios and deliver formative assessment has improved the way in which tutors can support part time students by, for example, enabling learners to undertake self assessment at home or in the community and receive immediate feedback from tutors based elsewhere.

In 2004, the college began to transfer its Key Skills testing to on-line delivery. Although initially aimed only at new, first year, students, such was the success of the move in giving students confidence in their ability to achieve that the second year cohort also asked the college to allow them to transfer from paper to on-line. In monitoring the reaction of students to on-line assessment the college has found that the students are:

- More motivated
- More likely to attend the tests
- More likely to be successful.

Looking ahead

The college future plans envisage a continuing change in the balance between part time and full time students with full time students representing fewer than 13% of the student cohort by 2007. This will bring further challenges as even larger numbers of learners will be community based. To reach even harder to access communities, the college already has created a mobile IT resource, with laptops taken to community venues within the district.

This mobile unit enables rural communities to access computer training on their doorstep and further initiatives of this type will extend the number of community partnerships.

At the same time, the use of the VLE and on-line assessment will be widened so that, where appropriate, all students will have a blended learning experience with flexible and accessible assessment being provided through on-line tests and e-portfolios.

