Improving Access to Higher Education for Non-Traditional Learners

*by **Pip Hardy** and **Eileen Sutherland,** University of Sunderland, UK.*

Background

Late 20th century thinking acknowledges that technological competence will be one of the keys to employment and academic success in the future. There are clear and obvious links between the lack of education and qualifications and significant levels of unemployment experienced in some parts of the European Community. It has also been shown that the performance of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in these regions is seriously affected by the lack of training and the low skills levels of the workforce. New and flexible approaches to education and training are needed to help people respond appropriately to rapid and continuing technological change. Open and distance learning has the potential to overcome these barriers.

The University of Sunderland obtained funding from the EUROFORM programme in 1992. This money funded The Gateway to Learning Project. During this project development work resulted in the production of The Microcomputing Skills Programme, a set of open learning materials, which was successfully distributed to and piloted by 86 learners. Partners in the project were drawn from the UK, Northern Ireland and East Germany where many people have fewer qualifications and are therefore less employable than in some other parts of the European Community. The project was designed to facilitate training and access to Higher Education for the unemployed, women returners and SME staff. It had the following stated aims:

- to develop an open learning package in Microcomputing skills

- to provide innovative forms of support for learners

- to pilot the programme among hitherto under-represented groups in higher education

- to evaluate the success of the programme itself as well as the new forms of support.

In other words, we were hoping to break down cultural and educational barriers to learning and employment by using new methods of delivery and support.

Technological support

Although the materials could theoretically be used by distant learners without support, part of the purpose of our pilot programme was to evaluate a number of methods of support for learners studying technology skills. In 1993, the University of Sunderland won one of BT's first Higher Education Development awards. This award was intended to provide opportunities for non-traditional learners to link into the University by using modern communications technologies.

During the pilot period therefore, all learners were supported not only through the materials and their tutors but also in the following ways:

Video conferencing

Learners were linked to the University and in some cases to each other using BT's portable video conferencing machines (VC7000s) at three learning centres in Sunderland. The equipment was linked by means of a digital telephone service, ISDN2. Tutors based at the University used video conferencing to facilitate contact with learners at remote sites, thereby enabling them to receive the same tutorial support as that received by learners within the University. Video Conferencing also allows groups of learners at different locations to talk to each other, support and discuss their progress, as if they were in the same room.

Desk top conferencing (DTC)

Desk Top Conferencing was used to tutor the learners and to encourage collaborative working methods. Desk Top Conferencing enabled learners at remote sites to work together on a piece of work via the computer screen. The learners and tutors interacted by using light pens on the screen to create and/or amend documents, files and assignments. With DTC the learner was able to send and print out the newly created piece of work to the tutor immediately.

As part of the Gateway to Learning Project the University of Sunderland has prepared short guides in open learning format to help learners become acquainted with these two methods of communicating with one another. The learners and the tutors found the guides very valuable.

Radio

A series of five short radio programmes was also produced to support learners on the Microcomputing Skills Programme. The programmes were made by local community radio using students and volunteers. The programmes were broadcast initially over community radio. At the end of the broadcast the programmes were made available on cassette and the learners were able to telephone in any queries they had. The programmes were made in such a way as to reflect the content of each unit of the

Microcomputing Skills Programme, i.e. the Microcomputing Skills Programme is divided into 5 units therefore, each radio programme reflected a particular unit.

Video

A video programme was also produced to support the learners. The intention was that this programme was to he accessible to all members of European Community states. To this end, the video was scripted without words and produced by a local small business using students from a Media Training Centre for the Deaf who communicated through gesture and sign. The programme was shown to learners on video cassette and copies were made available to them. The programme will be shown to more potential learners in Sunderland in the near future by using satellite as a means of distribution.

Tutorial support

The learners taking part in the Gateway to Learning Programme were allocated a tutor/ facilitator. The tutor acted as a mentor and guide for the learner via telephone, fax, video and DTC and face to face.

The team of tutors (11 in all) were trained in open learning facilitative techniques and during the project, they took the opportunity to gain accreditation in this field. The tutors were able to use their work on the project as part of the work needed to acquire a NVQ level 3 in Flexible and Open Learning Training.

Overcoming barriers

Although we might have expected the use of this new technology to create discomfort and perhaps personal barriers, this has not, in fact, proved to be the case for the majority of learners. Even those people who initially protested their ignorance of technology have linked up and communicated with each other via video and desktop conferencing using the equipment to good effect and have gradually become accustomed to using computers as a way of instant and effective exchange of information. Overall, learners have been enthusiastic about the possibilities opened up to them through their studies.

The use of telematics for training enabled the learners to remain in a location where they were comfortable and able to learn easily. The learners did not have to travel far in order to take part in a University level 1 course nor did they have to spend any money. The University of Sunderland aims to provide a University without boundaries which will widen access to Higher Education for under represented groups. Through the Gateway to Learning Project the University has begun to establish a permanent and extended network of locational leaning bases linked to the University.

Accreditation

The University of Sunderland is strongly committed to facilitating access to Higher Education. In order to accredit the courses taken by non-traditional students new methods of entry have been established within the University through the Associate Student Scheme. Students registered on the Microcomputing Skills Program were given the status of Associated Students. This entitled them to have their assignments marked by university staff and to ultimately receive half credit (10 CATS points) towards a degree at the University of Sunderland.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the Gateway to Learning Project is currently taking place. The staff team are looking at the following areas and collecting qualitative and quantitative data:

- has the use of telematics provided sustained access for learners?

- have learners established helpful constraints?

- what was the nature and quality of interaction between tutor and learner?

- what was the potential for shared and collaborative work?

- was the equipment reliable and user friendly?

- what are the future funding and staff development implications?

The evaluation report will be available in August 1994.

Conclusion

It was widely felt by all who were involved in the project that many barriers have been broken in our attempts to find new methods of learning and support for non-traditional students. The technologies we have tried, although still in relative infancy, have the potential to make higher education possible for almost anyone with access to a computer, appropriate software and telecommunications links. New ways of working and support have proved successful and will be implemented in future programmes. New student status has been created and accreditation achieved. It seems likely that the people for whom the initial barriers have been removed will continue on their own paths to education or employment while leading the way for others to follow.