

Recommendations

The analysis of the data from the learners has provided significant pointers to what makes a successful non-formal community based learning centre. They are enumerated below as a series of recommendations that are separated into ones pertaining to the Flexicentre in particular, and others that can inform and help spread best practice in community based learning elsewhere.

The recommendations for the Flexicentre are:

- **that**, given the overwhelming endorsement from the learners, it continues to provide the services that it offers and in the manner in which it offers them, in particular in relation to its very positive support for intercultural integration and employability.
- **that** it consolidates and strengthens opportunities for social networking in order to enhance learners' bridging capital and build stronger social relationships that will, in turn contribute to community capacity building.
- **that** it considers forming partnership links with other community based learning centres so that both may share and develop best practice.
- **that** it re-considers the crèche charges which already appear to be erecting a barrier to learning for some parents who are unable to meet them.
- **that** it alters the signage outside the Centre to indicate more clearly what the centre offers and to whom it offers it.
- **that** it considers introducing the following activities;
 - employment support and counselling groups located within the Centre that echo its ethos and informality so that learners will be as comfortable with them as they are with the Centre generally, and not have to travel to a distant, unknown and more formal service.
 - more medium and longer term programmes that are specifically geared towards enhancing employability and accessing employment.
 - specific support (and possibly visits) to ease the transition into more formal learning contexts, especially colleges
 - semi-structured social groupings and occasions

- engaging learners as volunteers in the Centre, in particular training and matching them with English language learners for conversation practice
- sourcing volunteering opportunities outwith the Centre
- building up the Homework Club to encourage the next generation of lifelong learners
- book clubs for literacy and social development.

- **that** longer term, secure funding be allocated to the Centre so that staff are able to develop these and other new initiatives.

The recommendation for spreading best practice are;

- **that** Community Learning Partnerships adopt and adapt the Flexicentre model to develop good quality learning opportunities for adults within their partnership areas.
- **that** the key elements identified as collectively creating the sort of successful learning centre that the Flexicentre exemplifies, are developed into a PDA (Professional Development Award) for newly qualified community development workers, voluntary workers and front line staff in Scotland, and that the core of this training centres around values, attitudes and interpersonal relationships.
- **that** this course be accredited through SCQF and ultimately be validated through the CLD (Community Learning and Development) Standards Council.
- **that** additional research is conducted focusing on the formation and maintenance of attitudes, values and relationships in the Flexicentre, that will further inform the training courses.
- **that** parallel research is funded into other community based learning centres to add to the knowledge gained from this research about successful practice.

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Rosemount Flexicentre Research Project: Executive Summary

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This two year research study, undertaken by staff and students from the University of Glasgow and volunteers from the Rosemount Flexicentre, was jointly funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) Lowlands and Uplands Programme Priority 3 Fund, and supported by Learning Link Scotland and Rosemount Lifelong Learning.

The main aim of the study was to understand the impact of community based learning at the Flexicentre on the lives and employability of learners and the relevance of social networks in fostering change. The secondary aims of the study were to identify gaps in provision that could practicably be acted upon and to provide evidence that would inform training programmes pertaining to best practice in non-formal, community based provision.

Methodology

In order to achieve these aims, the study gathered data pertaining to the life circumstances and aspirations of users, their experiences and perceptions of the Flexicentre, non-users perceptions of the Centre, and the impact of the learning on the different domains of users' lives, including their employability. It paid particular attention to the role of social networks in effecting change.

The methodology for this research project comprised an analysis of the demographic data of all Centre users during the three month period before the start of the research, individual interviews with 146 users of the Flexicentre, 26 non-users and 6 ex-users, and two sets of focus groups; one set of 3 groups (21 participants) held in November 2009 and a second set of two groups (10 participants) in April 2010. Non-user interviews were conducted by peer researchers, i.e. selected centre users who had undertaken training in interviewing techniques.

Findings

Participants' Profiles

The participants in the survey were broadly representative of the user population of the Centre as a whole, though some categories were a little imbalanced. There was a slight under-representation of 29 - 35 year olds, women, Africans and unemployed users. Conversely, those in employment were slightly over-represented and couples significantly so. 30 of

the 38 nationalities registered at the Centre were represented in the research. 36% of the users surveyed had been attending the Centre for more than a year and 41% had been there for less than 4 months. However, 43% were on their 2nd or 3rd courses and ESOL and IT accounted for 88% of their previous learning. Word of mouth, through friends, family, neighbours and other agencies was the most effective source of information about, and spur to participate in the Centre, whereas the signage outside the Flexicentre proved to be the least effective source of publicity. IT was by far the most popular learning activity followed by ESOL, then Literacies and the Nail Technician course.

Learners' Aspirations

An interesting gender divide emerged from the discussions about the learners' aims and aspirations. Whilst the majority of the men were using their learning to access or improve their employment in the short or medium term, work was seen as a much longer term ambition for most of the women, primarily because of their childcare responsibilities, but also because of physical or mental health issues that they were working through. Almost all of the men were engaged in some sort of computing (IT) learning and many hoped that the European Computer driving Licence (ECDL) would either open up employment opportunities that were previously closed to them, or enable them to access further vocational courses. Although the women did talk about their longer term employment aspirations, only a few were in a position to consider them in the immediate future. They were

however enhancing their employability by building up skills and qualifications in subjects such as IT, English and Literacies, as well as their confidence in their ability to learn, and their interpersonal skills, all in the hope that these would enable them access employment or further education when their circumstances allowed. Their short term ambitions related to enabling them to communicate better, helping with their children's school work, having more control in their lives, studying towards obtaining qualifications and building social relationships to lessen their isolation.

Learners' Experiences at the Flexicentre

The Learning

Almost half (43%) of the participants had taken previous courses at the Flexicentre. Their learning experiences were all overwhelmingly positive and the features that they identified as contributing to this positive experience were; the flexibility it offered, the support given by staff and other learners, the relaxed, encouraging atmosphere, the opening times and the crèche facilities, without which many learners would have found it impossible to participate. They also spoke about the small group teaching which motivated and challenged, but still supported them; the relaxation room with tea and coffee available, and the fact that they could progress at their own pace without criticism, censure or 'fear of being marked down'.

Social Relationships

Participation in the Centre had a marked impact on learners' social relationships and some of these had extended into their lives outwith the Centre. A particularly strong finding was how these new relationships had fostered very positive, two way intercultural integration. Scottish learners talked about not just what they had learned about other cultures, but about coming to appreciate them and the very different lives that people had led. Similarly, members of different ethnic groups spoke of how much they had learned, not just about Scottish cultures and people, but about the whole range of cultural backgrounds that all the learners came from.

The Staff

By far the greatest number of comments about people's experiences at the Flexicentre related to the staff and, without exception, all were exceptionally positive in helping them to settle, to learn and to belong. Participants talked about;

- **the initial welcome** they received,
- **staff's detailed knowledge** of them as people and as learners,
- **their readiness to help** with problems or queries,
- **the encouragement** that they give to everyone,

- **their knowledge** and acceptance of different styles and pace of learning,
- **their knowledge** of other learning opportunities
- **their overall openness** and friendliness.

The Crèche

Of all the participants, 68% used the crèche facilities, and 91% of them were happy with the provision. For many, learning would not have been possible without the crèche, however they did not just see it as a place to leave their children, but as somewhere that also provided an important learning and social environment for them. Prior to the second round of the research, charges had been introduced for the crèche that participants in the second focus groups believed would create a barrier to participation for low income, tentative learners.

Rosemount's Distinctiveness

In order to ascertain what, if anything, was unique about the Flexicentre, learners were asked if learning there was different from their experiences of learning elsewhere and, if so, how. They overwhelmingly affirmed its distinctiveness and the factors they cited as contributing to this were; the opening hours, the range and nature of the learning opportunities, the pace of learning, the staff, the location of the Centre, the crèche and the fact that most of the learning was free. Whilst many of these features are found in other community based learning centres, it appeared that the holistic integration of them all in the Flexicentre has created a unique and very positive learning environment.

Learning Outcomes

Learners were asked if there had been any changes in their lives as a consequence of their learning at the Flexicentre. Their responses clustered under four headings; personal, family and community, social relationships and employability/employment. It should be recognised however, that these are artificial separations because change in one facet of people's lives frequently has a knock on effect on others.

Personal: The majority of learners cited a marked increase in confidence as a result of their learning and engagement with the Centre. This increased confidence in themselves as people, and as capable learners was clearly demonstrated in the participants' responses and particularly marked in the second phase of the research. They perceived themselves differently and the impact of this newly acquired self image was affecting their personal goals, their families and often the communities where they lived. It was a transformative experience for them and one that had opened up a wide range of possibilities that would not



previously have been contemplated. For some, it had enabled them to function independently in the outside world because of their improved literacy or English language, for some it had opened up new worlds of learning outwith the Centre, and for others it had led directly to, or laid the first step into employment, in other words, it had enhanced their employability.

Family/Community: Many told of the difference learning had made to their relationship with their children, in helping with their homework, in being able to converse knowingly about computers, and in the role model as learners that they were now presenting to them. Several had engaged in voluntary work in their church or with local agencies, and many reflected on how being in the Centre had enhanced their social lives and their social capital. So the ripples created by engagement in learning spread from the individual to their families and beyond.

Social networks: A growth in learners' social networks (both strong and weak ties) that had opened up new possibilities in relation to their learning and potential employment. Some of this occurred through discussion in classes, but most happened through casual conversations between people at the computers, during breaks in classes, and dropping off or collecting children at the crèche.

Employment/Employability: Several of the learners had already gained employment as a result of their learning, and many others, in particular, most of the men, were learning either to access work directly or to build the qualifications and skills required for specific occupations. The impact of the learning on their employability, though complex, was equally evident. Employability, rather than employment, suggests a state of readiness for work and the findings clearly evidenced how the participants were building towards this readiness in relation to their skills, confidence and social relationships. However, many of the women with young children, new EU and non-EU nationals with little command of English and asylum seekers were not in a position to seek employment, but were nevertheless developing a range of skills and qualifications that would make them employable when circumstances allowed them to seek work. They too were enhancing their employability skills and again, this was especially evident in the second round of focus groups.

Intercultural Integration: A very significant and strong thread running through these three themes, and all aspects of life at the Flexicentre was the contribution it makes towards intercultural integration as noted above, and the testimony of many of the learners indicates that this is what has emerged through social

networks forged in the Centre. Given the ethnically mixed nature of the community and the high number of refugees and asylum seekers living within it, the importance of such integration cannot be overemphasised, and in this, the Flexicentre stands as a model that other community based centres could learn much from.

What the Flexicentre Does Best and Could Do More Of

Participants were asked if they could sum up what they felt that the Centre did best. Their responses clustered around the following factors: – creating a great atmosphere, the staff and their relationships with learners, interpersonal factors, the opportunities available to learn and develop skills, and the ways in which all of these contributed to their employment or employability. Two quotes sum up the responses quite succinctly: "It's a wee goldmine, – fantastic." "It rocks!" Their only suggestions for its improvement pertained to additional space for more learning opportunities and for the crèche, however, these are at present beyond the ability of the staff to respond to.

Conclusion

The findings point to a range of factors that have coalesced to create such a successful community learning centre. Some pertain to the physical and structural such as the location, the opening hours and the crèche. Some are located in the range and quality of the learning experiences and the opportunities for social interaction, but none of these, either singularly or collectively are enough to produce such a positive learning and social environment. Above all other factors, learners universally spoke about the positive attitudes, values and approaches of the staff. It is this human, interpersonal dimension that has created a welcoming and enabling ethos and that has transcended the limitations of space and layout in the building. They have created a place where learning is more than the acquisition of skills, important though they may be. It is also about the recognition, acceptance and valuing of all people, and the learning about it has come from the example that they set. It is our contention that this is the most significant learning that we can undertake and the staff are to be commended in their success in it. We recommend that these characteristics form the basis of a CPD training course pertaining to the development of best practice in non-formal community based learning.

