

Was IT Good For You?

**A small scale research project
commissioned by the
Community University of the
Valleys Partnership**

Partners:

**Department of Adult Continuing Education,
University of Wales Swansea
DOVE Workshop, Banwen
Telecentre and Business School, Porth
Amman Valley Enterprise
Glynneath Training Centre**

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Executive Summary – a brief overview of our findings

The 'Was IT Good For You?' project was a student tracking research commissioned by the Community University of the Valleys Partnership. The purpose was to identify common results and experiences of more than 2000 students who have attended an ICT course, organised by the University of Wales Swansea (UWS), delivered in the community, which began in 1989.

There was evidence that past students had found the training an important stepping-stone into education or new careers, but until now a systematic tracking exercise of all students had not been undertaken.

- The courses have been delivered in eight partnership community centres and on UWS campus.
- ESF support has provided ICT resources and networking to the UWS campus, and a number of community centres, which has ensured equality in ICT resources and a shared curriculum development and accreditation.
- The course has been designed to be attractive to parents by taking place within school-hours and by providing childcare support. Embedded in the course is confidence-building, guidance, c.v. writing and job application skills.
- The provision of the courses in local community centres has been identified as a factor in recruitment.

The course tutors and administrators in the community centres and the University of Wales Swansea have worked in partnership to design and implement this study. We are interested in the students' perceptions of the effects of participating in the course, both immediate and delayed. The research has included questionnaires to all students, focus groups and case studies. The students were 80% female, 20% male and a comparison of their experiences has been drawn.

Our objectives were as follows:

- To track the participants in terms of work, further or higher education participation, influence on family or friend re participation, other outcomes affecting quality of life.
- To establish the most important factors in the success of the courses in work or educational preparation. To consider advertising and marketing, curriculum, student support, resources and facilities, job-search support and educational guidance and to consider the outcomes in relation to the local labour market.
- To identify local employers/SME's who have employed a number of trained students in order to further develop links.
- To select one or two case studies from each centre, to give a wide and balanced range of examples.

The 'outputs' of the research are an extensive database with 500 questionnaire responses including text answers, useful for further analysis by the CUV Partners.

Four completed focus groups and five individual case studies. Papers given at a national (FACE) and an international (ECER) conference and submitted for consideration for journals.

Two further pieces of work in planning stage.

Research results already being incorporated into the next funding application.

Student profile:

15% of women and 10% of men were single parents.

8% of women and 28% of men respondents considered themselves disabled at the time of the course.

12% of both men and women were carers at the time of the course.

This result is surprising, as we expected a greater percentage of women to be carers than men.

Only 16% of respondents considered the provision of childcare support essential. However, 51% of female respondents and 17% of male respondents found the provision during school hours 'essential'.

Barriers to participation:

82% of respondents would not have been able to participate if they had been required to pay the full **fees** for the course.

It would appear that 87% of our respondents who are participants in locally provided training and education consider that **local provision** is convenient or essential.

The focus group held in DOVE workshop identified lack of **transport** as a barrier to participation for some people who did not attend courses. They felt that public transport was either not available between valleys, too expensive, too irregular or too unreliable. They held that the reason for the high number of car users on the courses was because people without a car were **unable to attend** unless they lived very near to the centre. The focus group recommended that the transport needs of participants be addressed in the next funding application.

Widening participation

For 39% of respondents the course was their first education or training since leaving school, and following the course 58% of these went on to do further study. 40% of these gained paid employment following the course.

Progression (never simple, see accompanying ECER paper)

64 % of respondents went on to further study following the course.

51% of women and 27% of men found paid employment following the course.

It is anticipated that our findings will assist the CUV in curriculum, course and student support services policy planning. The information gained will also provide invaluable statistics for use in future funding applications by the CUV partnership. It is also anticipated that the case studies of successful student outcomes will provide excellent marketing material for the CUV.

We hope that the following report will be of use to the administrators, tutors and course providers of the Community University of the Valleys Partnership.

Judith James and Jean Preece, September 2002.

With thanks to all partners in the project, to Owen Bodger (PhD student in UWS) for his SPSS programming and to the students of TABS for the massive job of inputting the data.

Introduction – Project description, rationale and methodology

This project was a student tracking research commissioned by the **Community University of the Valleys** Partnership. The purpose of the research was to identify common results and experiences of over 2000 students who attended an ESF supported Information Technology course. The course, which began in 1989, was organised by the University of Wales Swansea (UWS). There is anecdotal evidence that students have found the training an important stepping-stone into new careers or further training, but until this research a systematic tracking exercise had not been undertaken.

Originally designed as a course for women seeking a return to work following fulltime childcare responsibilities, the course was designed to be attractive to parents, with school-hours provision and childcare support. Of the 2,024 students, 80% were female, 20% male, and a comparison of their experiences will be drawn. All students were required to be unemployed for at least six months prior to starting the course. Embedded in the Information Technology training was confidence building, educational and vocational guidance, curriculum vitae preparation and job application skills.

The courses were delivered in eight partnership community centres and on University of Wales Swansea campus. The community centres were located in isolated rural communities, in areas of deprivation due to the closure of the coal-mining industry or in urban

communities suffering from social exclusion. The provision of courses in local community centres has been identified as a factor in recruitment.

European Regional Development Fund support provided excellent IT resources including networking to the UWS campus, which ensured equality in resources and shared curriculum development and accreditation.

The course tutors and administrators in the community centres and the University of Wales Swansea have worked in **partnership** to design and implement this study. We were interested in the students' perceptions of the effects on them of the course, both immediate and delayed outcomes. The research methodology included questionnaires to all students, focus groups and case studies. This semi-structured approach was adopted because of the community-based nature of the course provision. It has resulted in both qualitative and quantitative information.

Project objectives

- 1.** To track the students in terms of work, further or higher education participation, influence on family or friends re participation, other outcomes affecting quality of life.
- 2.** To establish the most important factors in the success of the courses in work or educational preparation. To consider advertising and marketing, curriculum, student support, resources and facilities, job-search support and educational guidance and to consider the outcomes in relation to the local job-market.
- 3.** To identify local employers/SME's who have employed a number of trained students in order to further develop links.
- 4.** To select one or two case studies of "success stories" from each centre, to give a wide and balanced range of examples. Following an agreed interview schedule, researchers in each centre perform in-depth interviews and write these up.

Project research methodology

1. Questionnaires

Attempts were made to contact all (2,000+) students who participated in the courses since 1989. The research group devised a questionnaire to ensure all Centres' questions are answered. The questionnaire sought to track the students in terms of work, further or higher education participation, influence on family or friends re participation, other outcomes affecting quality of life. Finally, all students were asked if they would be prepared to participate in focus groups. The results were collated at UWS, input into SPSS at TABS, Porth and analysed centrally at UWS.

2. Focus groups

Focus groups were organised in each centre to establish the most important factors in the success of the courses in work or educational preparation. The Focus Groups considered advertising and marketing, curriculum, student support, resources and facilities, job-search support and educational guidance. They also considered the outcomes in relation to the local job-market. A facilitator from UWS worked with the centre researcher/s to run the focus group and to write up.

3. Case Studies

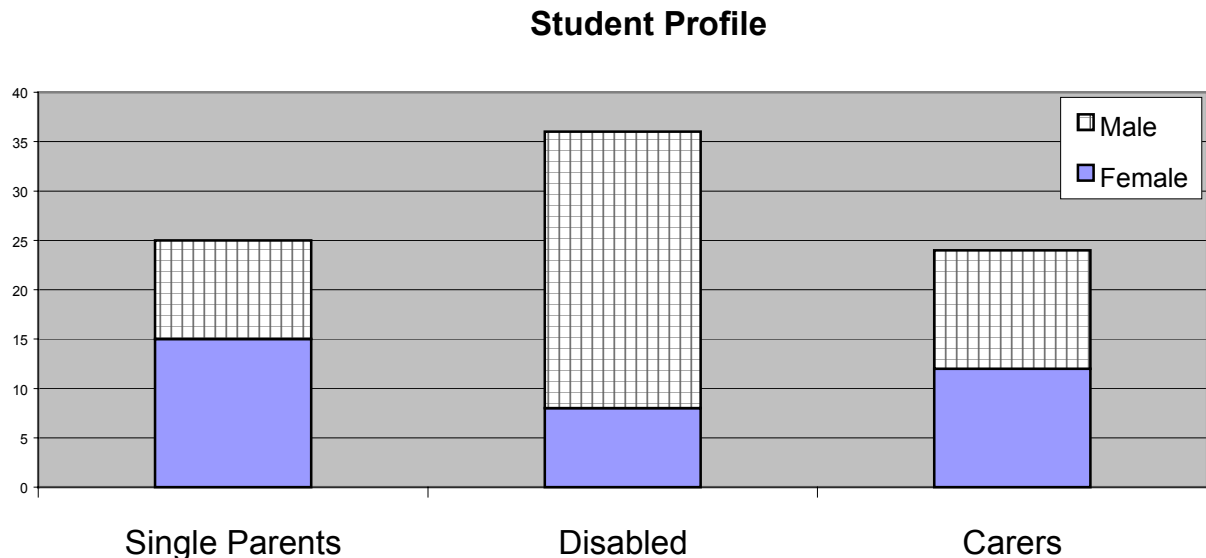
Following an agreed interview schedule, researchers in each centre identified suitable candidate/s for an in-depth case study, performed the interviews and wrote these up.

Our findings- selected details of the research.

1. Questionnaire Survey

The first query was a straightforward frequency question. Using SPSS we were able to ask how many and the percentage of respondents. Cross tabbing with gender gave us the basis for the gender analysis used in the ECER paper (Appendix 5). Some results of the gender analysis have been imported to this report, where it was felt that they provided an added dimension for the use of the CUVP.

STUDENT PROFILE



GENDER

The questionnaire respondents were 78% female, 22% male, which fairly accurately reflected the gender percentages of course participation recorded overall at **80% female, 20% male**. This figure demonstrates a **very high percentage of females attending this particular course**. This can be viewed in the context of the 'normal' uptake of all continuing

education courses in the community centres where the course is delivered.

Michael Williams, in his final external evaluation of the CCC project, (2001) (1) calculated that the enrolment on all courses in the community centres, which participated in both projects, was 'In total, 1,251 males (35%) enrolled and 2,292 (65%) females.'

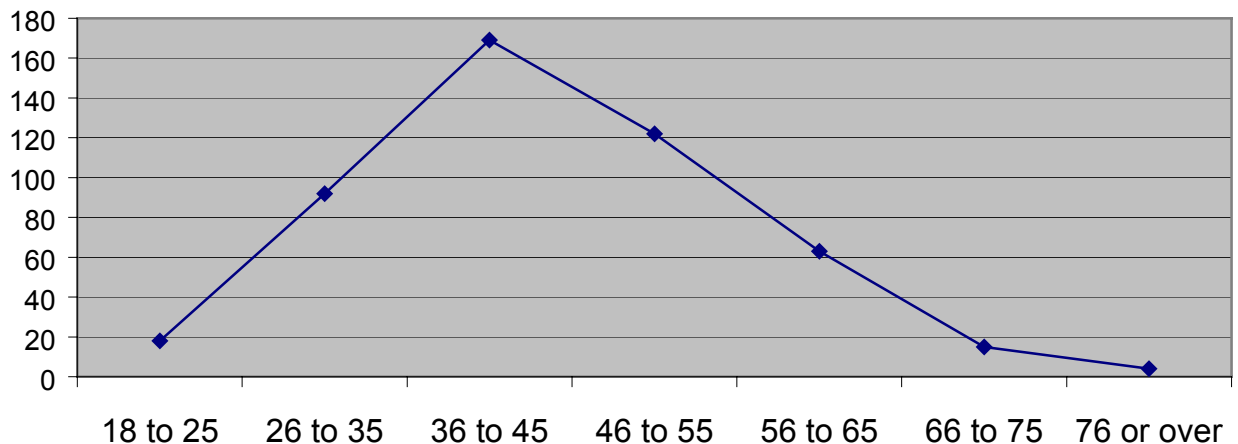
We considered that this result could be a reflection of the deliberate recruitment of women returners in the early days of the course, or due to the course design, which attracted parents responsible for childcare. Alternatively it could be as a result of the recruitment criteria that the student had to be unemployed for 6 months, which was not immediate enough provision for redundant men but suited women returners.

Finally it could be due to the course content, in that IT had not been available to this group when at school, but may be seen as more relevant to women for the purpose of directly gaining employment.

AGE

The age frequencies again appear to reflect the recruitment target of women returners, with 34% aged 36 to 45.

Age Profile of Students



3.8% of students were over the age of 64 at the time of the course and therefore ineligible for the European Social Fund subsidy. ESF rules have now changed to remove the upper age limit. A further 2.8% did not reveal their age, so may have also been over the eligible age at the time of their course.

This result may indicate to administrators that where there are eligibility rules, it may be necessary to ask for evidence of age, nationality, residency etc. in order to protect the institution from claw-back of funding.

Age	Frequency	Percent
Valid	14	2.8
18 to 25	18	3.6
26 to 35	92	18.5
36 to 45	169	34.0
46 to 55	122	24.5
56 to 65	63	12.7
66 to 75	15	3.0
76 or over	4	0.8
Total	497	100.0

Broken down for gender, the figures reveal that the **female students were concentrated in the 36 to 45 years age range, whilst the greatest number of male students occurred in the 56 to 65 years age range.** This will have a knock-on effect on the figures showing employment gained following the course by gender.

Age	Female	Male
18 to 25	4%	1%
26 to 35	22%	6%
36 to 45	37%	23%
46 to 55	24%	25%
56 to 65	8%	30%
66 to 75	1%	10%
76 or over	-	2%

ETHNICITY

Monitoring for the European Social Fund had made the research group aware that the incidence of participation by ethnic minorities during the period of study was so low as to be statistically insignificant in a study of this kind. Recent 'Positive Action' courses provided by the Department of Adult Continuing Education may change these rates for the current year (2002) but it was not possible to include this new data within this study.

PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 16 YEARS

53% of respondents were parents of a child under 16 at the time of the course. This could be as a result of marketing the course at parents through leaflets to playgroups and schools, or due to the course design being particularly suitable for parents with school hours and holidays and childcare support for pre-school aged children. **61% of female respondents and 24% of male respondents were parents of a child under 16 at the time of the course.**

SINGLE PARENTS

14% of the respondents were single parents at the time of the course. However, 5% did not respond to this question, so the frequency could be higher. Of the respondents, **15% of women and 10% of men were single parents at the time of attending the course.**

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The facilities for disabled students in all centres and on campus have improved over the years, with **increasing awareness** of access issues on the part of the funders of training, centres of delivery and institutions. **The percentage of respondents who considered**

themselves disabled at the time of the course was 18%. This figure may differ from the recorded percentage returned to the ESF because we have asked students whether they “considered themselves disabled” rather than whether they were registered disabled, in accordance with guidelines from ‘Disability Wales’.

We cross-tabbed this query with our question about which year the students attended the course in order to understand whether improved facilities are reflected in a greater participation rate. The results appear to indicate that this is the case. However, other factors such as a change in the rules governing studying whilst in receipt of benefit may have been a factor.

1988	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	2000	01
16%	0	3%	0	15%	6%	14%	12%	4%	17%	20%	16%	24%	24%

The above table shows the percentage of students who considered themselves disabled and the year in which they attended the course.

The result of gender cross-tabbing the data was interesting because it revealed that **8% of women and 28% of men respondents considered themselves disabled at the time of the course.** This is probably a reflection of the eligibility criteria, that of unemployment for at least 6 months, of the targeting of women returners and of the age of the male respondents.

We went on to ask how important disabled facilities were. The results reflect the findings above, with allowance for the fact that only a percentage of disabled people require special facilities.

7% of women and 16% of men respondents felt that the provision of disabled facilities was ‘essential’, with 79% of women and 65% of men deeming the provision ‘un-necessary’.

Comparison with the requirements of the general population would indicate whether we are meeting the needs of people with disabilities. It would be particularly interesting to make a comparison with the participation of people with disabilities in local mainstream Higher Education and with the percentage of people with disabilities attending in the community locations of the Community University of the Valleys Partnership.

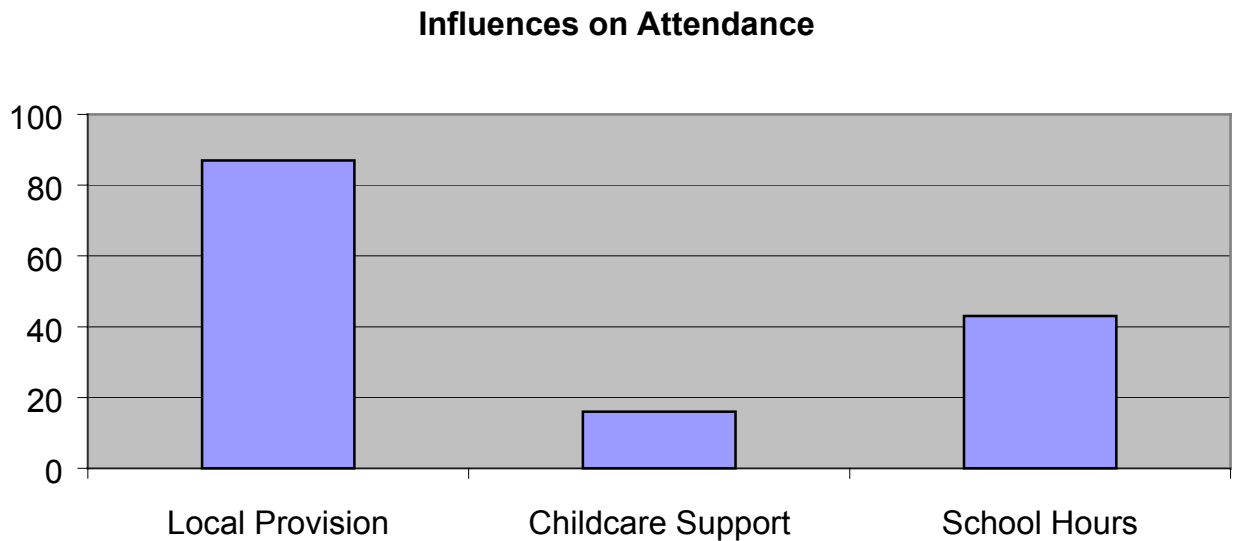
CARERS

Similarly the role of carer has been an increasing focus of attention over the period of the project. 12% of our respondents were carers at the time of their attendance on the course.

12% of both men and women were carers at the time of the course. This result is surprising, as we expected a greater percentage of women to be carers than men.

INFLUENCES ON ATTENDANCE

The research aimed to find out how important different aspects of the course design were for students.



CHILDCARE SUPPORT

As we knew that many of our students had children, we wanted to find out how important they considered the provision of childcare support. The responses were as follows:

Essential 16%

Unnecessary 71%

No response 13%

Only 16% of respondents considered the provision of childcare support essential.

We consider that this low response may be a reflection of the number who needed and used the support, rather than whether they believed it was important that the provision should be available. The majority of the students would have had older children of school age, as in the course catchment areas, school attendance is provided by the State from the age of three years (part-time) and four years (full-time). Therefore this response may have been significantly different in an area where there is no State provided childcare until the children begin full time school at five.

The responses were very different when we asked about the suitability of the hours of attendance of the course.

43% of respondents stated that school hours/holidays were essential, and only 44% that they were unnecessary.

However, it would appear that this requirement for school hours provision is not limited to women, as **51% of female respondents and 17% of male respondents found the provision during school hours 'essential'**.

This could be explained because as coalmining and heavy industry ceased a significant number of men in the region became responsible for childcare. Many emerging new employment opportunities were for light electrical component processing, which were accessed mainly by women.

LOCATION

The factors described above also relate to our question about the importance of provision in a local centre. We had gathered much anecdotal evidence about the importance of a local availability of provision and this was confirmed as 41% of respondents stated that local provision was essential. A further 47% answered that the local provision was convenient, with only 7% stating that it was not important. The size of this response is of greater significance when it is considered that some courses were held on UWS campus, which was therefore considered a local centre for these students.

It would appear that 87% of our respondents who are participants in locally provided training and education consider that local provision is convenient or essential. This is an important confirmation of one of the principles of the Community University of the Valleys, that quality education and training should be made available locally in order to widen participation.

TRAVEL TO PLACE OF STUDY

We went on to ask how participants had travelled to the centre where they studied. This needs to be set in the context of the well-documented poor provision of public transport in the South Wales valleys, with long and expensive journeys to reach the regional Institutions of Higher Education.

As 60% of women and 64% of men travelled to the course in their own car, this may reflect the paucity of public transport in the South Wales valleys. Considering that all students on the course were unemployed for at least 6 months prior to the course, this could be a reflection of the importance of access to personal transport in this region.

10% of women shared a car, 3% of men. An equal (approx) percentage of women and men walked (12%) or used public transport (9%).

The focus group held in DOVE workshop identified lack of transport as a barrier to participation for some people who did not attend courses. They felt that public transport was either not available

between valleys, too expensive, too irregular or too unreliable. They held that the reason for the high number of car users on the courses was because people without a car were **unable to attend** unless they lived very near to the centre. The focus group recommended that the transport needs of participants be addressed in the next funding application.

Due to the **Widening Participation policy of the Department of Adult Continuing Education, University of Wales Swansea**, we wanted to attract people to the course who would not normally participate in training or education.

For 39% of respondents the course was their first education or training since leaving school, and following the course 58% of these went on to do further study. 40% of these gained paid employment following the course.

Of the 61% who had received education or training since leaving school, 68% did further study and 49% gained paid employment following the course.

Analysed for gender, for 38% of women the course was their first training or education since leaving school, and 66% of women went on to do further study. For 43% of men the course was their first training or education since leaving school, and 57% of men went on to do further study.

If the course has been successful in attracting students who do not normally participate in Further or Higher Education, it is important to understand what first attracted them to the course.

We had anecdotal evidence that the students heard about the course by word of mouth, and wished to establish if this was in fact the case. The following table reveals that other methods were **equally or more effective**.

How did you find out about the course?	Female	Male
by word of mouth	21%	21%
newspaper advert	29%	30%
on a previous course	9%	7%
leaflet or local notice	15%	24%
recommended by friend	13%	7%
suggested by guidance worker	5%	8%

COMPANIONSHIP

We had anecdotal evidence that students had found the course important for social development and the survey showed that 48% of the respondents are still in contact with others who attended the course. We went on to ask about the level of contact, with 25% claiming to have casual contact, 23% claiming to keeping contact as friends and 1.4% (seven students) still meeting for course reunions. **50% of women and 41% of men who attended the course kept in contact with others who attended.** For 26% of women this was for course reunions or as friends, compared to the ‘casual contact’ sustained by 28% of men.

The development of a group relationship has been enhanced by the organisation of the course into small groups, which build up a relationship with one, or at most, two tutors. The tutors are all ex-students of the course, and are able to empathise with any difficulties faced by the students. This means that the provision is flexible, so if a student meets difficulties due to, for example, caring responsibilities a special arrangement can be made. This flexibility and peer support are important factors in the retention of students. Recorded comments include “**constant help and support**”, and “**friendly support and flexible tutors with an inclusive approach**”.

FEE PAYMENT FOR COURSES

The **European Social Fund** provided the fee element of the course, making it free to participants after a certain date. Earlier students paid a nominal fee.

We did not experience difficulty in filling the course and wanted to know whether this was related to the lack of fees.

9 respondents paid fees and this affected their ability to join the course. 91 students paid fees and this did not affect their ability to join the course.

146 students did not pay fees and this did not affect their ability to join the course. 128 students did not pay fees and this affected their ability to join the course.

To conclude, we asked if students would have been able to participate if they had been required to pay the full cost of the course. **82% of respondents would not have been able to participate if they had been required to pay the full cost of the course.**

STUDENT PROGRESSION

Embedded in the IT course was individual information, advice and impartial Educational Guidance. This was incorporated as an essential component of educational provision for women returners, in order not to raise expectations and then fail to fulfil them. This was appreciated by many participants, as shown in the following quotes from the questionnaires. ***“It was fun whilst being constructive and I found the tutors very keen to help everyone even after the course had ended”***

The course ***“gave me life purpose”*** and another person ***“life changing benefits”***.

64 % of respondents went on to further study following the course.

Analysed for gender, 66% of women and 57% of men did further study.

41% of women did further study in IT, and 36% of men did further study in IT.

23% of women and 19% of men did further education in subjects other than IT.

7% of women and men did Higher Education in IT

15% of women and men did Higher Education in subjects other than IT.

17% of women and 12% of men did training for/at work.

We wanted to find out why some students did not participate in any further courses after this course.

6% of women and 12% of men were “too busy.”

10% of women and men responded that they could not participate in any further courses because of their job.

5% of women and men could not participate in any further courses because of the cost. (The WIT/FIT/PIT course was fairly unique in being free at the time, although locally ‘Learning Networks’ have enlarged the free provision to many other courses recently.)

11% of women and 5% of men were unable to participate in any further courses due to caring responsibilities.

4% of women and 9% of men stated that they did not participate in any further courses due to lack of interest in further study.

7% of women and 12% of men did not participate in further study because they ‘couldn’t find a suitable course’.

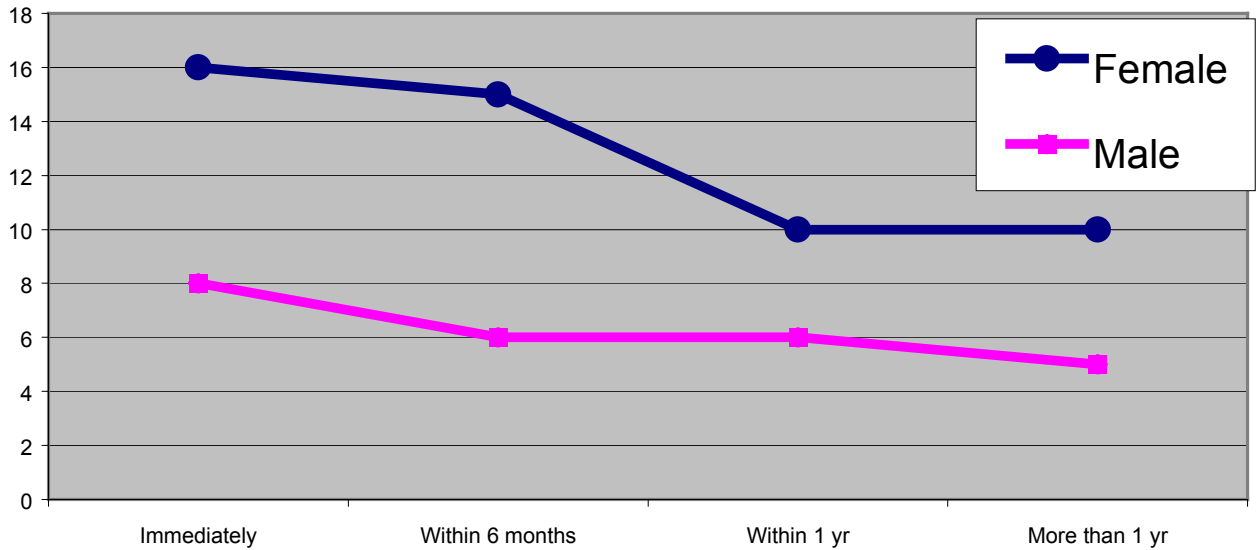
Work outcomes

51% of women and 27% of men found paid employment following the course.

However, these results were not necessarily immediate.

After how long?	Female	Male
Immediately	16%	8%
Within 6 months	15%	6%
Within 1 year	10%	6%
later	10%	5%

Time Taken to Find Employment



We asked for reasons why work was not found.

Why not?	Female	Male
Due to other commitments	17%	10%
No suitable paid employment available	6%	10%
Continued studying	6%	11%
Retired	7%	23%
Other	6%	8%

We wanted to know if the course content related to the employment found.

Did the course content relate to your employment?	Female	Male
Yes	50%	31%
No	33%	48%

Impact on individuals

Individual case studies have indicated that participation in the course has had a strong impact on the lives of individuals. We wished to investigate if this was a general estimation, and whether this varied for women and men.

We were also interested to find out whether the effects of participation in the course had been immediate, or whether students had ‘saved’ their new knowledge and skills and found them useful at a later date.

The responses to these questions were interesting to analyse for gender as we anticipated a difference in the way in which women and men viewed study as an ‘investment’. However, there was no significant difference in these figures.



We asked: “Looking back, do you think the effects of the course on your life were:

	Female	Male
immediate	66%	63%
delayed for a short time	32%	26%
delayed for a long time	21%	25%
short term	5%	8%
longlasting	35%	35%
life-long	36%	24%
unimportant	4%	4%
important	58%	44%
as expected	16%	21%

CONCLUSION

The research has been a learning process for the team involved. It has caused us to examine our practice, consider our objectives and assess more accurately the impact of our work. Some aspects of the research have revealed hidden wider effects of the provision of this community based course, while others have confirmed what we had anticipated. The focus groups in particular have proved a valuable tool in gaining direct feedback about the needs of students and perhaps even more importantly, the needs of those who have not yet become students.

There are three main aspects of the research results, which are pointers to policy makers:

- Community based learning is very effective in widening participation.
- Information Technology courses provide an incentive for those who do not normally participate in courses, but the course structure must be right with school hours and holidays, childcare and a non-school atmosphere created by staff and environment.
- Lack of transport is a barrier to participation and even provision in local community centres cannot overcome this problem for some. Future ESF bids will address the problem for this particular course provision, but the paucity of transport in the South Wales Valleys is a significant factor in the failure to undertake education or training by the very groups we are trying to reach.

The community centres of education and training where the courses are located are more than local providers, they are change agents in the fabric of the lives of their communities. We heard again and again that attendance on this course, in this centre, 'changed my life for ever'. But further than this, the focus groups demonstrated the belief that the centres providing the courses played an important role in their community, stimulating new areas of employment and acting as a focus or catalyst for innovation.

It is anticipated that our findings will inform the Community University of the Valleys' curriculum, course and student support services policy planning. Our increased understanding of the factors which have made this provision attractive to many as a first step back into education or work will be of interest and importance to all concerned with attracting and retaining mature students. The development of the database resource has emphasised the need for a student tracking system, which is effective across all providers in the Community University of the Valleys Partnership, and preferably across all providers in Wales.

Bibliography

- 1. Connecting Communities Cymru Project
FINAL EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT
Professor Michael Williams September 2001**

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APPENDICES :

- 1. Copy of Questionnaire (English and Cymraeg)**
- 2. Script of Focus Groups**
- 3. Script for Case Studies**
- 4. Paper and PowerPoint Presentation CD, presented at ECER International Conference, Lisbon University, September 2002**

- 5. Transcripts of Focus Groups held at TABS, Porth, DOVE, Banwen, University of Wales Swansea Campus and Amman Valley Enterprise.**
- 6. Case Studies (to follow)**
- 7. Paper and PowerPoint Presentation CD, presented at FACE conference, University of Glamorgan, July 2002 (to follow)**
- 8. Database in SPSS:names/centres (identifiers)edited**

