

Oatridge College conducted a study of the e-learning preferences for business development training in landbased SMEs in Scotland.

This summary presents key findings from the research.

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Special points of interest:

- No one teaching and learning delivery method will satisfy the demands of the different learners in the landbased industries
- A key factor is flexibility in delivery to suit the needs of employers and employees - avoiding the disadvantages of either purely online learning or wholly centre-based delivery
- A critical part of learner development is the provision of an online mentoring service, supporting collaborative communities of learning
- This research found that a mentored, blended learning service will provide a new means of satisfying the skills development needs of learners, and with the wider use of technology and e-learning reduce the barriers of geography and rurality.

Summary

Ensuring that lifelong learning and business development training are an integral part of business operations is a challenge for many small employers. This is particularly true of SMEs operating in the landbased sectors, often due to their rural location and the highly practical, outdoor nature of the work. For these micro-enterprises, accessing relevant learning and training can be extremely difficult due to lack of local provision and difficulty sparing time 'off-business'. The conclusions of the study are:

Learners within the landbased industries are generally :-

- Not provided for in terms of on-line-learning
- Not fluent in the use of innovative ITC tools but are confident in the use of internet, email and commonly-used software applications
- Not averse to using ITC for learning but enjoy the benefits of belonging to a learning group, and require learning to be tailored to the needs of the business/person

Landbased training providers should :-

- Be aware of the ITC limitations of users and be prepared to run programmes that explain to users how to learn through e-learning
- Provide bespoke flexible training and ensure the development of skills tailored to the individual needs – the end of the “one course fits all” approach
- Develop a fluid approach to mixed mode delivery. No single strand of learning delivery is so important that it cannot be replaced by other methodologies
- Mentor at all times – or provide an ongoing facility for learners. This is a critical component in the learning process

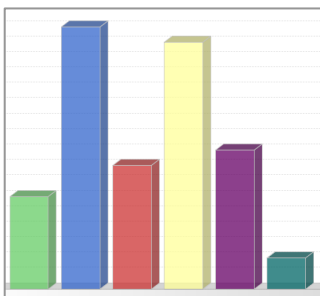
Policy advisers should consider the following points:

- Strategic developments in the landbased sectors, particularly in relation to the implementation of the Scottish Rural Development Programme 2007-13, place considerable emphasis on skills development as a route to business improvement, for example via the Skills Development Scheme. This may therefore be an opportune time to consider ways in which blended learning models can be adapted to meet the CPD needs of land managers in the 21st century
- Under the Harnessing Technology Strategy it is imperative that Becta and related policy advisers encourage and support the development and use of technology to support highly differentiated and self-paced mixed mode learning in rural landbased SMEs



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FIG.1 Preferred online tools



KEY

Webinar	
Online training course	
Online forum	
Online workbook	
All	
None	

"We need a new understanding of the pedagogies appropriate for a 21st century education system. Traditional methods have not achieved enough. The wider availability of new technology means that we have both the opportunity – and the responsibility – to explore new approaches to teaching and learning. The familiar and effective teaching methods will of course remain important. But our ... institutions ought to be advancing beyond the traditional formats that are still so prevalent."

"Harnessing Technology Transforming Learning and Children's Services"
Department of Education and Skills (2005)

E-learning in landbased SMEs

Various models of e-learning exist and methodologies are developing continually. As the technology advances, the factors already limiting uptake increasingly divorce landbased learners from the e-learning environment and ICT technology. Consequently the uptake of e-learning models is impaired.

No standard e-learning model exists which can be applied to all learners. The determining factors are not necessarily the technology so much as the training providers' ability to use and apply the technology and the learners' attitudes and learning preferences.

"Learning to e-learn" is core to the process; learners demonstrate a requirement to be informed and coached in how to utilise the technologies, online web-based media and associated software applications. This is supported by a key finding that employers currently prefer online training courses and workbooks, which are the electronic equivalent of training course notes and workbooks. Employers found it more difficult to perceive how more radical media such as webinars, online forums, and instant messaging could be applied to their learning environment (see Fig 1).

Online learning tools such as webinars and viral videos may still have a role to play as a supplementary learning aid in certain vocations, supporting upskilling in specific practical tasks

The strengths of e-learning appear to lie in providing theoretical learning at the current time, and in the acquisition of underpinning knowledge and understanding. Exemplars of where E-learning has been used to develop practical skills or action-based entrepreneurial skills needed for business diversification and development are incredibly sparse. Bearing in mind the that the Scottish Government's "Forward Strategy for Agriculture" focuses on business diversification and efficiency improvements, e-learning may need to be supported by a range of additional tools and support mechanisms to enable businesses to implement business change.

In the landbased sectors there is a clear need to create learning experiences that fuse on-line learning environments, whether formal, informal, structured or non-structured, with opportunities for learners to practice hands-on skills, essential to their business and to the wider sector. Central to this process is the role of the business learning mentor, as illustrated in Fig. 2.

We conclude that in the landbased industries blended learning offers an incremental approach which businesses require. Assuming that e-learning is a panacea for all learners does not wash in this sector. Younger employers and employees may make the transition to e-learning more readily than older generations. The primary issue of transferring practical skills and the skills required for bespoke business development are not addressed by current systems.

In order to create developments that will engage landbased industry personnel we perceive that a model of blended and supported learning would create a transitional staged development. The blend of a mentoring/ tutor service with mixed mode delivery systems would create opportunity to both develop learners and learning systems.

Improving access to learning

The main factors which influence the use of ICT in landbased SMEs were identified as income/socio-economic status; level of education; age; geographical location; cultural and social participation

Key factors limiting training uptake in general included cost, lack of flexible delivery, distance from training centres, and difficulty obtaining customised training matched to specific business needs. Significantly, respondents did express confidence in the ability of training providers to deliver the training and professional development they require.

Most respondents were comfortable working with ICT technology. Technical barriers occasionally hindered some learners from working effectively. Initial experiences when attempting to use online materials can deter the participant from considering e-learning.

Bearing in mind the nature of work environments in the landbased industries, the resultant benefits arising from e-learning must be significant, practicable and profitable in order to incentivise learning.

Employers considered current provision as having a rigid structure based on a) 'one-price per course' regardless of desired study period; b) a geographic focal point for delivery (a training centre); c) a prescribed inflexible delivery (prescribed course timetable); d) a "one-size fits all" approach to content, with little attempt to personalise learning to the learners personality, location, business, and specific learning needs.

In contrast the fusion of ICT and mentored learning creates a more fluid approach to delivery and business knowledge acquisition, providing bite-sized chunks of learning in the learner's own environment, with self-paced learning, within the learner's financial constraints, and tailored to the specific learning needs of the business and its future requirements.

A preference for online training courses and workbooks was identified. Although presenting a more interactive and engaging format, webinars and online forums failed to compensate for their limitations in terms of effectiveness at communicating skills and transferring knowledge. Respondents were less convinced of the benefits of webinars and online forums. They may have a role to play as supplementary learning aids, supporting an e-learning package based around an online course / workbook framework.

Learning providers should do more to exploit the educational potential of the new technologies, with the priority to accelerate the move to the next generation of blended learning activities and resources. We must support innovation in the market by improving our knowledge of where this form of learning works particularly well.



Learning preferences for business development training in landbased businesses in rural Scotland

An evolving scenario

It is evident that it is not practicable for all landbased learners to study *completely* online. The desire to exchange information and ideas, and interact with others in the learning environment, suggests that a range of delivery modes should be incorporated in learning programmes. A blended approach to workforce development may provide the most cost-effective and flexible answer, both for the beneficiary and also for the training provider.

This would incorporate periodic face-to-face meetings at local learning venues, technically supported access to online learning materials, effective e-mentoring provision, and an opportunity to develop a social community of learners. In future blended learning will need to incorporate instructor-led, web-based courseware, simulations, job aids, webinars, documents and the presence of an online real-time mentor to create total learning packages.

On-line learning must move to provide

- a range of choices and options
- engagement opportunities
- opportunities for social contact,
- business and personal relevance
- a fluid approach to delivery

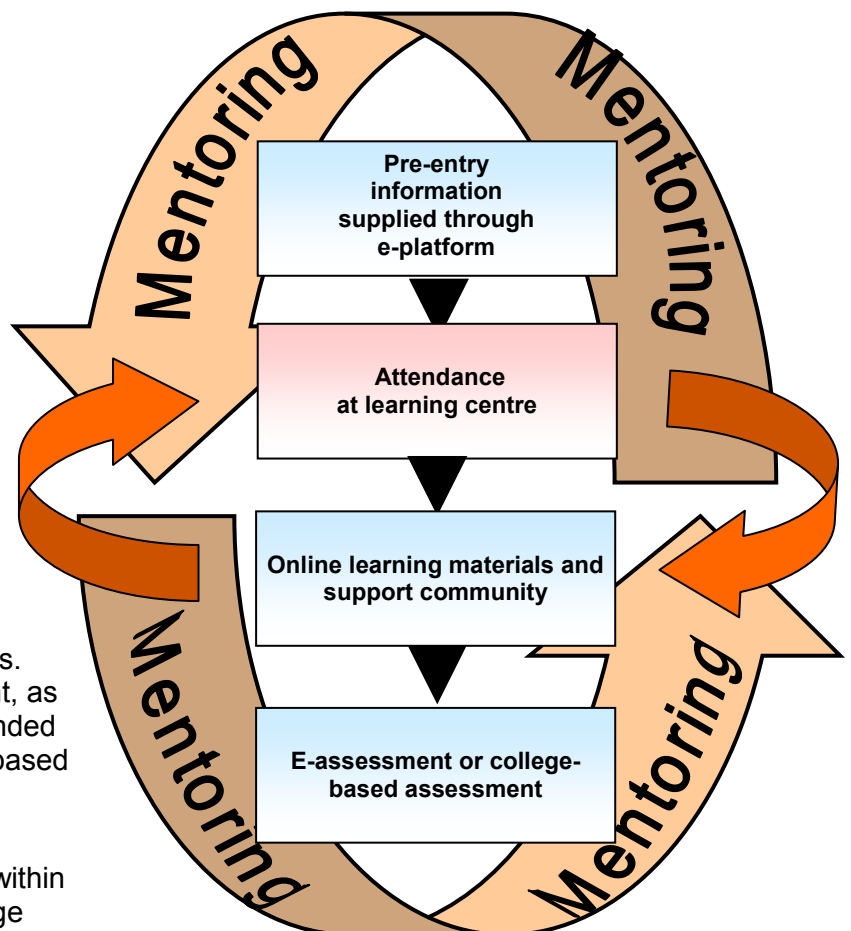
Different groups of learners will require different blends of learning media. Delivery organisations must become market-aware (as opposed to delivering to their own capacity) to provide the right product (format and content) in the right place (on-line and actual) to the right people at the right price and time.

Our findings confirm that landbased employers, and indeed the agencies which would be expected to meet any demand for online training, are still formulating their views and requirements. This is due largely to a lack of precedent, as there are few examples of online or blended learning in vocational areas which landbased employers can relate to.

Most examples of e-learning observed within colleges provide theoretical or knowledge based education. The demand for turnover and high level usage has essentially tuned the e-learning into mass market subjects. We find little evidence of provision for the landbased industries.

As the topics are not wholly transferable and require tailoring to the individual needs, and due to the fractured nature of the landbased industries there has so far been little development of e-learning for the sector. Equally, there has been little 'trial and error' experimentation through which landbased SMEs can determine which training format best suits their needs. They don't know what they don't know, and can't know about what they can't know about.

FIG.2
Blended learning model
for SMEs in the land-



Key policy recommendations

There is a basic need to enable employers to e-learn by coaching participants in the fundamentals of ICT-enhanced learning and assessment.

Demonstration models of the different online tools must be relevant to the sector to allow employers to gauge applicability within the context of their business. It is essential that online media are applied in a context relevant to the needs of the landbased sectors.

The lack of e-learning and blended learning services, and the low awareness of its potential for business and personal development, severely limits participation by employers and also makes it difficult for potential users to see the value of these systems. Provision must therefore be enhanced in order to address this deficiency both in supporting the development of blended learning and support mechanisms in the landbased sector if policy targets are to be met.

No one extreme delivery methodology would seem to satisfy the demands of the landbased industries – the traditional methodologies have to change to meet the demands of the sector, and e-learning is not yet so advanced to meet all the needs of the diverse audience of the landbased sector.

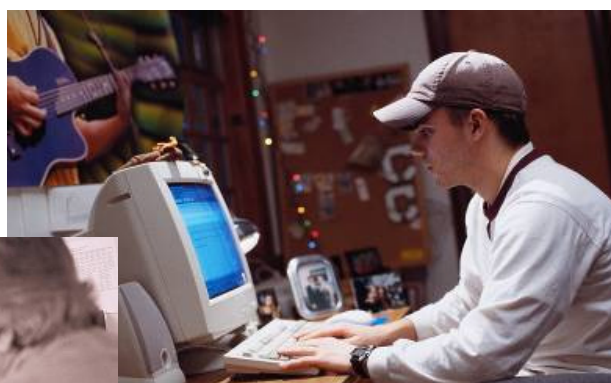
The key factor is flexibility in delivery to suit the needs of employers and their employees - avoiding the disadvantages inherent in either purely online learning or the wholly centre-based approach.

We recommend that provision of a mentored, blended learning approach would better meet the needs of the sector whilst the industry is undergoing significant structural change and e-enabled learning methodologies are rapidly evolving.

Investment in the development of sophisticated blended learning systems is required as a priority, in tandem with further research into how entrepreneurial and practical skills can be developed through a blended learning approach.

Development of the mentoring capacity to support e-learning in the landbased sector is essential in order to ensure a joined up approach between learning delivery, ICT methodologies employed, the mentoring service and the application of learning within rurally remote businesses. Effective delivery will require tutors and facilitators to transfer and apply these tools for learning in the landbased industries

In terms of awareness-raising and encouraging participation, the merits and useability of blended learning must be promoted and publicised to demonstrate the practical benefits to businesses, and to the providers and promoters of learning.



Case studies

Two representative landbased SMEs were selected as case studies illustrating employer perspectives on the merits and limitations of e-learning. These employers have engaged with business learning previously and possess a grasp of the issues and familiarity with ICT considered to be representative of the sector.

Case Study 1: West Moss-side Farm, Thornhill, Stirling

The farming and non-farming enterprises at West Moss-side are a good example of flexibility and responsiveness to change in the landbased sectors. The business has diversified from a mostly traditional farming enterprise into organic production, specialist livestock breeds and a fully-equipped IT centre capable of hosting workshops, meetings and other learning and networking activities. Key observations made by this case study in relation to e-learning for landbased SMEs include :-

- It is important to ensure that trainees come together as a group to learn and interact
- Need for ICT training to give trainees a basic level of competency and to ensure they feel confident using the technology. Start from the level the participants are at and build on their current use of the internet.
- At present the majority of ICT use by employers is linked to day-to-day management and operation of the business rather than learning and Continuous Professional Development
- Essential that “online media” are applied in a context relevant to the needs of the landbased sectors. Not all landbased vocations are suited to application of online delivery. However most will have used some elements – for example Google is likely to have been used to search for technical manuals and other business information. Business planning, management, website development, customer management and so on – these apply to all SMEs
- The ‘learning environment’ must be user-friendly and appropriate to the learner. Hence the development at West Moss-side, where the centre is based in a familiar rural environment whilst providing a modern, accessible and comfortable learning environment.
- Examples of different online tools must be relevant to the sector to allow employers to gauge applicability and context, thus requiring facilitators who are familiar with the transferability of these tools to the landbased industries
- Expansion of online learning could be used as an opportunity to encourage more young people (many of whom are very familiar with computers and ICT in a social context) into the industry and help address workforce/skills shortages in the longer term
- By encouraging the uptake of online and distance learning, this will help achieve rural development aims and objectives (for example lifelong learning and skills, rural SME growth and competitiveness)
- Blended learning should become the norm as the education and training sector seeks to reduce its carbon footprint. Online learning (where appropriate) and face to face delivery (where appropriate) will suit a world where travel is becoming less possible and desirable

Case Study 2: West Lothian Golf Club, Bo’ness, West Lothian

West Lothian Golf Club has enjoyed an active working relationship with Oatridge College dating back many years but particularly since the introduction of the Modern Apprenticeship scheme in 1994. During this time, apprentices have undertaken academic learning and ‘on the job training’ in partnership with the College to ensure that their underpinning knowledge and practical skills are sufficient to undertake the challenges presented by management of a modern sports surface. Key observations made by this case study in relation to e-learning for landbased SMEs include :-

- the concept of using an “online workbook” to deliver training, combined with online assessment, was suggested as a positive step
- this mode of delivery would require trainee access to a 24/7 online support resource. E-mail and telephone support would be essential
- demand for such training would be largely from older workers rather than young recruits (16-17 year olds). This reflects engagement in training generally within the sports-turf sector
- there is a lack of ICT ability particularly amongst younger greenkeepers. Training in the use of ICT would be required if online methods were to be adopted
- there is demand for an online qualification equivalent to HNC/HND level, irrespective of how long it takes to achieve the qualification.
- there was a perceived lack of ‘management-type training’ available. Short duration courses are not useful therefore the training must be more substantial and contribute to the HNC/HND (SCQF Level 7 & 8)
- the suggested model features an online workbook, with integrated online support and an annual telephone advice package

Further information

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