



University of the
West of England

Flexible Learning in Context: An Introduction to Business Planning for Housing

Introduction

This report should be read in conjunction with the CD that carries the same title. The disk contains the output of the project (the product). This report summarises the project's objectives and philosophy and considers what was learnt during the project period (the process). The main intention of this report is to provide guidance to those contemplating the development of flexible approaches to tenant and practitioner learning that incorporate modern methods of transmitting information and ideas about good practice.

The project sought to extend to housing practice an innovative approach to teaching and learning developed at the University of the West of England. This approach is called Flexible Learning in Context (FLIC) and was originally developed to enable people working in the construction industry to use the Internet to study and develop their skills and understanding of good practice. The project's tenant focus influenced how the materials are presented, the nature and scope of the associated activities, and the parallel support structures that are recommended to underpin the learning activities.

The project took two years and was from Innovation into Action. The Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) acted as a partner consultant and the programme of work was steered by an Advisory Panel composed of tenants, housing practitioners and academics. The materials were piloted in two stages by tenants and practitioners who were supported by the employers and academics on the panel. To widen the pilot pool, housing students at UWE were also asked to react to the materials. Feedback from the pilot activities has been incorporated into the final product and has influenced much of the comment and analysis of this report.

The substantive content of the project was chosen to reflect the growing interest in business planning amongst board members, tenant activists, practitioners and others who are becoming involved with monitoring and/or managing the activities of contemporary housing organisations.

General philosophy

What is FLIC?

FLIC stands for **Flexible Learning in Context**. It is a mode of learning designed to enable individuals to receive information and ideas via the Internet or in the form of a compact disk. The programme of work incorporates activities that require the student to put this learning "in context" by relating what they are studying to their activities as tenants or to their work as housing practitioners. FLIC packages use text, pictures, diagrams, information displays and sound clips. Participants are required to undertake activities as they study the materials and this makes the learning experience interactive and more interesting. The intention is not simply to provide information but to engage students in debate about the nature of good practice and to encourage them to look critically at the

practices of their own organisations. In this way it is hoped that participants will gain in confidence as well as becoming better informed.

How is FLIC flexible?

- The programme is topic based and each topic is broken down into digestible segments thereby allowing for a flexible approach to the time-management of their studies (i.e. it accommodates short periods of coherent study.)
- Topics can be studied at any time convenient to the learner.
- Students can study at their own pace.
- Topics can be studied at any location that has a PC capable of loading a CD or linking to the Internet.
- Topics are suitable for a range of students. They are designed to allow those with some knowledge of the subject to skip what they already know and focus on unfamiliar aspects.
- Learning is separated from assessment. This enables the material to be used either as a general self-tested introduction to the topic or as an element in an assessed award. Students can choose to study the topic without being assessed. If they do this, they can opt to be assessed at some later date.

Design principles

- The materials incorporate a range of learning approaches and a variety of presentation techniques. The screen-based text stimulates and directs other learning activities.
- An encyclopaedia of key ideas and terms is incorporated into the package. This can be modified and extended.
- 'Just in time', 'bite-sized' chunks of learning are delivered.
- Topic content is separated from assessment (which is optional).
- Instant feedback is provided on each activity allowing participants to compare their responses with the tutors' answers.
- 'Roll-on roll-off' principles apply. On completion of a topic (or set of linked topics) the student can stop or choose to carry on with other areas of study in the FLIC catalogue.
- Typeface and width of text complies with what research indicates is the most suitable for screen display.
- Careful sizing of diagrams and tables means no scrolling is required.
- The facility to print out large diagrams and long pieces of text is provided automatically.
- Resources are brought to students (e.g. links to other websites).
- Activities are designed to reinforce learning and not test candidates.
- There is a signing-off exercise at the end of each topic that is submitted electronically to tutors to ensure that students have grasped the main principles that underlie the topic. This approach enables students to gauge their own progress through a topic. This exercise is part of the learning experience (it is not assessment).
- The completed signing-off exercise tells the tutor that a candidate has completed a topic and allows for feedback to be given. Although not a 'qualifying test' as such, it has to be completed 'satisfactorily' for the student to be 'signed off'. If 'satisfactory', a certificate of completion can be awarded (e.g. from TPAS). If 'unsatisfactory', the student is invited to revisit the material and resubmit the exercise.
- Once successfully completing the topic the student can choose to be assessed on the material.

Specific observations on the liA project

Arguably the most significant lesson learned from the project is that tenants both appreciate and can cope with this approach to learning so long as effective support structures are in place (see below section ‘Student support’). At the start of the project questions were raised about accessibility. Concerns were expressed about the ability of some tenants to gain access to computer facilities and also about their capacity to cope with information technology (IT). These issues were monitored carefully by the Advisory Panel. The following transferable lessons were learned.

- The technical template should be robust. The materials have been specifically designed to be used on relatively low specification PCs. Although we have utilised sound clips we have avoided fancy screen designs and visual gimmicks. We have the capacity to utilise video down loads but these were not used on this particular project to avoid ‘streaming’ problems.
- The operation must be user-friendly. The screen logic is strictly linear. Students are required to work through the material in a way that is systematic and sequential. The screen buttons are limited in number and are designed to allow students to navigate with ease. We found that the uncomplicated nature of the programme design meant that students soon gained confidence in its use. Some tenants did say that they felt more comfortable using a printed version of the material. We now think that this fact should be incorporated into the design and that ‘ease of printing’ should be considered as a standard design feature.
- The first cohort of students engaged with the material on line. Although this worked in a technical sense, participants were concerned with the expense of staying connected. As a result, we produced disk versions of the topics. The second cohort used the disks and this proved to be popular. As a result, both modes of delivery are now incorporated into any FLIC activities aimed at tenants. Students do have to go on line in order to contact an external website (including are own).
- Navigation (how the student can move within the topic and know where they are) is a key to the ease of use of web based material. We have therefore designed the navigation system to be simple and clear and it involves the use of a limited number of control buttons. Students had no difficulty with this operational aspect on the pilot trial.
- External websites are unstable in the sense that they tend to become unobtainable or are altered as they are up-dated. Experience taught to use them selectively and to check them regularly. This is particularly a problem when seeking to direct a student to a specific resource located within a general site.

The Advisory Panel was a key feature of the project. It was composed of representatives (tenants and practitioners) from a cross-section of local social landlords. The Panel acted both as commissioning agent and support group, and it also provided an additional element of quality control over the output. At its last meeting it helped to brainstorm a marketing strategy. Some of the members agreed to stay associated with the University’s School of Housing and Urban Studies by joining the Employers’ Liaison Panel. This will bring continuity to the School’s future activities in the field of tenant training and education.

Resources and administration principles

The sponsored project is incorporated into our existing administrative arrangements. Work on the project reinforced our experience that this approach to learning requires high quality administrative support structures. This means that on-line ‘flexible learning’ should not be pursued for economic reasons. To do it effectively it has to be resourced appropriately and

it should not be regarded as a 'cheap' alternative to more traditional 'face-to-face' teaching and learning. Key features of FLIC administration include:

- An Advisory Panel to steer the project; identify sector specific needs; provide pilot students and support them; check the content; help to market the output.
- The commissioning of experts in the field to write the materials and devise the activities. An author's guide has been created and all new authors are required to do a short training course prior to contract.
- Full time support is available including technical expertise to convert the authors' work into the FLIC template and dedicated secretarial support to keep in touch with students and act as an accessible and friendly link between the students and their tutors.
- Material must be kept up-to-date. This requires the establishment of some form of monitoring machinery. All materials must display the date they were last modified.

Quality control

Establishing and maintaining the quality of the materials are essential aspects of the project.

- The Advisory Panel help to establish the need for the topics and provide general guidance on content.
- Peer review of new materials is carried out together with a rigorous editing exercise. This involves the establishment of systematic editing and review procedures.
- Resources have to be made available to allow the materials to be regularly up-dated. The last time the material was up-dated must be clearly displayed at the start of the topic.

Student support

We have found that high quality student support is essential. Without appropriate support the 'distance learner' can easily become the 'abandoned learner'. The following features are incorporated into the FLIC programme.

- A dedicated administrator can be contacted by telephone or by email at any time. Early response to email and voice mail queries is regarded as essential.
- Online guidance on the FLIC website advises students on how to study and undertake the assessment. Frequently asked questions (FAQs) on the website include an explanation of how to make contact and of computer requirements.
- If there are difficulties, students can use the 'contact us' button to send in their queries. We will normally reply by e-mail. A tutor can, if required, be requested to make telephone contact.
- It is possible to reinforce the electronic information by posting out other types of material (pamphlets, booklets, etc.).

Assessment

Formal assessment is optional. Prior to assessment, participants are required to provide details of their current employment or voluntary activities and past experience. This information then enables the appropriate level of assessment to be determined, i.e. that it will be neither too advanced nor too simplistic.

Assessment is a separate activity and assessment activities can be set at different levels (1, 2 or 3). The appropriate level is determined by the student's previous experience and knowledge of the subject. To qualify to do a level 3 assessment, we require evidence of an ability to access external materials and support mechanisms. In the case of this project, for example, we would encourage a tenant who is a board member of a housing association

(and who therefore has access to in-depth discussions about business planning) to do the level 3 assessment.

Conclusion

The pilot has proved the potential for effective delivery of tenant training with the FLIC format. Experience has shown that the philosophy outlined in this report can be adapted to accommodate a wide variety of specific personal and institutional needs. We anticipate that the materials will be utilised in number of ways.

- As a stand alone short course.
- As an induction programme (or to reinforce such a programme).
- As part of a personal development programme.
- Elements can be incorporated into existing courses and awards to introduce an additional learning mode.
- As follow-on activities to in-house training for those wishing to develop what they have learnt a little further.

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March 2005

Further information on FLIC

You can refer to the FLIC website
<http://flic.uwe.ac.uk>

