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## **Commentary Series**

### **Community Computers: The success of the Flexible Learning Centre in South Leytonstone**

**Alice Sampson**

# **Community Computers: The Success of the Flexible Learning Centre in South Leytonstone**

Alice Sampson

Centre for Institutional Studies  
University of East London

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Most of all we would like to thank all the Flexible Learning Centre students who participated in the research. Without them the research could not have taken place.

We received excellent co-operation from the project staff who went out of their way to facilitate the research process. Particular thanks go to Jan Dorkings and Festus Olaniyi. We would also like to thank representatives from all the other agencies who contributed to the research.

Alice Sampson  
December 2001

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **The research**

The research took place between January and April 2001, and included an analysis of the monitoring data, interviews with project staff and representatives from key partner agencies, and 101 face-to-face interviews with service users.

The sample was broadly representative of the users, 61 per cent are woman and 80 per cent are from minority ethnic groups (White people are under-represented in the research). The response rate was 56 per cent. The overwhelming majority of the respondents had formal education qualifications and almost a quarter (23 per cent) had a University degree. Most of those in work had unskilled jobs.

### **Local context**

The SRB is located in an area with higher than average unemployment, but where some residents find it difficult to obtain suitable work and many would like to learn, and improve, their ICT skills.

### **The project**

The Flexible learning Centre (FLC) is located in same building as the local library and is managed by the local authority's Libraries and Cultural Services Department.

The FLC opened in 1997. It aims to attract women and minority ethnic residents in particular, and works closely with the local Job Bank and colleges.

The project provides computer based learning packages, IT courses and internet facilities. Students have the opportunity to search for jobs, receive careers guidance and assistance with CV preparation.

All the facilities are provided free of charge and students can learn at their own pace.

Since April 1998 1,055 students have registered with the Centre and 281 have obtained work as a result (27 per cent). A high proportion of students are women and minority ethnic residents.

### **The research findings**

Locating the FLC in the local library has many advantages. It is in easy walking distance for residents, it gives students easy access to books, and the publicity in the library attracts many library-users to the project. Its location is particularly beneficial for those with children and those with health problems and disabilities (1 in 5 research participants).

The FLC is well run, valued by users and partners alike, and provides a high quality, friendly service. The project has a good reputation in the community and almost all the users recommend the facilities to family or friends.

The project co-ordinator plays a vital role in the success of the project.

The overwhelming majority of students who participated in the research were satisfied with the computer equipment and appreciated the availability of a wide range of computer packages.

Many students were learning computer skills for the first time. Students typically attended regularly, between two and three times a week, and for at least six months. Many attended for over a year.

The majority of students were intrinsically interested in learning, and improving their ICT skills. Comparatively few were interested in using the facilities to gain qualifications or obtain work; in the survey of users, 11 students had obtained qualifications and 18 were looking for work.

Three quarters of the students said that their computer skills had improved as a result of attending the FLC and over half said that their CV writing skills and interviewing techniques had improved.

The majority found the project useful for finding jobs.

Almost three quarters (74 per cent) said that they had gained in confidence as a result of attending the FLC and the majority felt more confident about their future job prospects. Some planned to find employment (29 per cent), whilst others planned to go on to further education (15 per cent) or change jobs (11 per cent).

### **Issues for consideration**

The project finds it difficult to achieve its 'training into jobs' SRB targets. However the value of the project is that it provides free ICT facilities for all residents, including those who are retired and cannot work through ill health and disability or choose to look after their family. These life long learning skills have other benefits however, for example, improving the quality of life of residents.

SRB funded projects and other local initiatives to assist local residents find employment do work together. As unemployment falls nationally, they are supporting fewer people. Developing a tightly co-ordinated action plan to access these people and to meet their needs is likely to be timely, particularly as the SRB has one more year to run.

The lack of childcare facilities are restricting the use of the FLC for some women. This issue needs to be addressed.

It appears that there are group of well qualified minority ethnic residents who have high levels of formal education are under-employed in unskilled jobs.

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## INTRODUCTION

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This report presents the findings from research into the impact of the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) project which is an initiative within the South Leytonstone 'Contract for Change' Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme. The SRB programme has been operational since 1996 and the FLC received capital funding in the first year and since then has received both capital and revenue SRB funding as well as monies from the local authority and funding from Newham College for Further Education until 2000. At the time of the research the project was therefore well-established and due to be mainstreamed by the local authority at a time when in general the local authority is cutting services. The co-ordinator is a full time local authority employee.

The research focuses on the impact of the scheme principally from the perspective of the user and finds out, through face-to-face interviews, why local residents use the scheme and what benefits, if any, they have accrued from using the facilities. Interviews with partner agencies were also undertaken to understand more about the implementation of the project and its effectiveness. It is envisaged that the findings from this research will be fed back to the SRB Partnership in order to help develop existing services for unemployed people in the area and to contribute more widely to the debate on how to successfully provide opportunities for people looking for work and for those wishing to improve their skills.

### **The SRB and FLC**

The SRB area was selected for its obvious signs of urban decay, including high levels of unemployment, poor housing and high crime levels and includes two wards, Cathall and Cann Hall. According to indicators for deprivation derived from the 1991 census these wards were, at the start of the SRB programme, amongst the most deprived in London and Cathall was the most deprived ward in Waltham Forest and Cann Hall the third most deprived. The unemployment rate in Cathall was 18.6 per cent in Cathall and 17.6 per cent in Cann Hall at the start of the programme which was higher than the average for the borough (12.6 per cent) and for Inner London (14.8 per cent).

Both wards have a high proportion of their population from minority ethnic groups; 43 per cent in Cathall and 35 per cent in Cann Hall (SRB Bid Document).

The SRB aims to regenerate South Leytonstone through four complementary programmes of work:

- Quality of Life
- Economic competitiveness and business confidence
- Housing
- Administration, monitoring and evaluation.

Within each programme there are a number of projects. The FLC is situated within the economic competitiveness programme and is one of five projects contributing to the achievement of strategic objective one (SO1) to 'enhance the employment prospects, education and skills of local people, particularly the young and those at a

disadvantage and promote equality of opportunity'. The local labour agency and the business competitiveness scheme aim to create jobs and opportunities for jobs whilst the Open Learning Centre, Leytonstone Educational Achievement Project (LEAP) and the FLC all aim to provide better education and training. The Partnership intends to assess the achievement of SO1 through the use of data for overall unemployment and youth unemployment. The assessment of the FLC by the UEL research team gives the Partnership a more comprehensive understanding of how the FLC is contributing to the regeneration of South Leytonstone.

The FLC is managed by the Lending Manager who works in the Local Authority's Libraries and Cultural Services Department and who developed the SRB funded project along similar lines as a computer-based learning scheme that was successful at Wood Street Library. The FLC is located at Harrow Green Library and provides computer based learning packages to increase and enhance the skills of residents living in Cann Hall and Cathall wards to improve their opportunities to finding employment. This is achieved through providing IT courses, facilities to enable students to search for jobs on the internet and by offering students careers guidance, and assistance writing and presenting CVs.

Use of the facilities are free and students can learn at their own pace and at times that are convenient to them. A project co-ordinator is available to provide ongoing guidance and support and at their first visit to the centre students are informed about the facilities available to them and have one-to-one assistance from the project co-ordinator at every visit to the centre.

The centre is in a self-contained room next to the library and in 1996 work began on refurbishing the room and equipping it with computers and software packages. The centre was opened to the public on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1997 and since then the initial six computers have been increased to eight and more recently a larger room has been refurbished and equipped with 16 computers. This room opened to the public March 2001. The original room will be used as a test centre for the European Computer Driving Licence. It is perceived that being located in a library give students easy access to books to support their learning. At the beginning of the project books that supported the training courses were purchased.

The opening hours have also been increased from 30 hours to 36 hours a week and opens Saturday mornings and two evenings until 7pm. The centre is shut on Tuesday so that the project co-ordinator can deliver leaflets to households, visit local community organisations and agencies providing services within the area. Securing the participation of disadvantaged people within the community, including Black and ethnic minorities, women and children, and those out of work, are a priority for the project and the publicity is aimed at attracting these groups. The software packages have positive images of people from black and minority ethnic communities and the centre is accessible to those with disabilities (Project Appraisal forms 1996 -2001). A new lift was installed in the building at the beginning of the project.

At its initial appraisal the importance of the centre building links with other agencies was recognised and the staff have established strong working relationships with Newham College for Further Education (NCFE). The FLC has distance learning packages from NCFE and students are encouraged to obtain formal qualifications. NCFE provided funding one day a week and alternate Saturday's to paid for the salary of a second member of staff to provide support to

students up until September 2000. Waltham Forest College runs basic skills training courses from the centre on Wednesdays. Stronger links have also been made with the Leyton Job Bank, the Career Advice and Placement project and community development workers. The FLC in conjunction with Leyton Job Bank have run a job search and internet programme for those out of work. Students for these courses were recruited from the Job Bank, the FLC and included self-referrals.

### *Funding*

Between 1996 and 2000/01 setting up and running the FLC has cost almost £200,000. During this period the majority of the SRB funding has been for revenue, just over £95,000. Matched funding was provided by the local authority who have now taken over funding the whole project and integrated it into their main stream services. The SRB monies enabled the local authority to operationalise two rooms adjacent to the library and to buy the computers. The majority of the cost of main streaming of the service are salary costs.

### *Monitoring data*

The project co-ordinator maintains a comprehensive database on the students who use the centre. For the last three years more women have used the centre than men, and between 51 and 58 per cent of the students have been out of work. Nearly two thirds of the students (61 per cent) were from minority ethnic groups in 1999/2000 compared to 57 per cent in 2000/01. The project has therefore successfully attracted women and those from minority ethnic communities.

**TABLE 1**

**Numbers of registered students and their economic status**

	April -March 1998/1999	April -March 1999/2000	April - January 2000/2001
Total of student registered	297	396	362
Male	122	168	152
Female	175	228	210
Male unemployed	65	90	85
Female unemployed	86	129	126

FLC database 1998-2001

In 1998/99 the majority of out of work students (59 per cent) found employment and since then this percentage has steadily declined to 43 per cent in the year 2000/01 with fewer out of work people securing jobs. This decline is to be expected as the rate of unemployment falls and fewer people are out of work in the area. Over half of those obtaining work are women and those from minority ethnic groups which meets the aims of the project.

**TABLE 2**  
**Students who obtained work**

	April - March 1998/1999	April -March 1999/2000	April -March 2000/2001
Total of people who got jobs	(n=89)	(n= 101)	(n=91)
Male	31	Not available	33
Female	55	Not available	58
Black	32	43	37
White	36	39	38
Asian	4	4	12
Indian	2	2	0
Pakistani	2	2	2
Other	13	11	2

Data from the FLC data base

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## THE RESEARCH

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The research took place between January and April 2001. The project co-ordinator provided the researchers with a comprehensive database containing details of the participants and the courses they had attended from 1998 to 2001.

A sample of students were selected for a survey in terms of gender and ethnicity for the years 1998/99, 1999/00, 2000/01. A total of 181 names were selected in order to reach our target number of interviewing 120 students. The years 1996/97, 1997/98 were not sampled because it was felt that it would be very time consuming to interview these people as many were likely to be difficult to contact.

In the year 1998/99 details of 297<sup>1</sup> service users were on the database of whom 39 people had no telephone numbers and were therefore excluded from the sample. Eighty people were then randomly selected for interviews. Of these 39 people were interviewed successfully.

In 1999/2000 details of 388 service users were on the database of whom 58 people did not have telephone numbers and were therefore excluded from the sample. Ninety seven people were randomly selected for interviews of which 42 interviews were successfully achieved.

From April 2000 to January 2001 details of 345 users were registered on the database. Thirty three students did not have telephone numbers and were excluded from the sample. Forty were then randomly selected for interview and 20 were successfully interviewed.

### *Representativeness of sample*

Those interviewed were randomly selected from lists of students with telephone numbers. The response rate was 56 per cent. The monitoring data shows that 58 per cent of their clients to the FLC were women whilst the research sample was 61 per cent women. The ethnic identity of those on the database used for the research and the ethnicity of those who participated in the research are shown below and indicate that white people are under-represented whilst the ethnicity of other students are broadly comparable.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the data used for selecting the sample were less than the project's monitoring data as some details of students were missing from the data and therefore had to be excluded from the selection process.

**TABLE 3**  
**Ethnicity of students and research participants**

	FLC Monitoring data % <sup>2</sup>	Research participants %
Black African	24	25
Black Caribbean	13	15
Black other	2	8
Asian (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian)	17	9
Asian other	2	10
White	34	19
Other	8	14

Recognising that those who participated in the research had telephones, and this was the majority of the students, the sample is comparable in terms of gender and in terms of ethnicity except for White people. Thus we can be reasonably confident that the findings reflect the circumstances and opinions of the majority of users.

The students were interviewed at the Flexible Learning Centre. The interviews were face-to-face and took between twenty minutes and three quarters of an hour. Most students were very willing to talk to the researchers and offered more information about themselves than required. This information has been included as part of the overall assessment of the project.

In addition the project co-ordinator was interviewed and his comments on the first draft of the report have been included in subsequent drafts. Three representatives from partner agencies were also interviewed and their views on the management of the project, its effectiveness and how it operates within the area, have been taken into account in the report.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that in all tables in this report where percentages have been used they have been rounded to the nearest whole number. The total percentage may therefore not equal 100.

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## FINDINGS

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### *Background of those who were interviewed*

A total of 101 people were interviewed, 39 per cent of whom are male and 61 per cent female. As the findings presented above in table 3 show the majority of those participating in the research were from minority ethnic backgrounds (80 per cent).

The main minority group who participated in the research are Black African (25 percent), Black Caribbean (15 per cent), and those who describe themselves as from another ethnic group (14 per cent) and include Turks, Palistinians, South Africans, and Greeks (see table 3). Twenty-eight different languages are spoken at home by the participants in the research and include Greek, Hindi, Urdu, Somali, Ghanian, Russian and French. Almost one in five of those interviewed had health problems or disabilities and for nine people this means that they are unable to work.

The majority of participants are over eighteen and most were aged between 31 and 40 years.

**TABLE 4**  
**Age of research participants**

Age	%
under 18 years	2
18 to 30 years	30
31 to 40 years	39
41 to 50 years	15
51 to 60 years	8
61+ years	7

Over a third of those interviewed are married (37 per cent) and over half (53 per cent) have children living at home. The majority of participants (43 per cent) described their housing tenure as owner occupied, 22 per cent live in privately rented accommodation, 21 per cent said that they live in local authority accommodation whilst 13 per cent live in housing association accommodation. Just over half (51 per cent) were in employment at the time of the interview.

### *Finding out about the FLC*

Most of the students who participated in the research heard about the FLC through the library (41 per cent) from leaflets (19 per cent) and through family and friends (17 per cent). Fewer had been informed about the centre by the job centre (5 students), O'Regen (5 students), Leyton Job Bank (2 students) and a local community centre (2 students).

Locating the centre in the same building as the local library has proved to be an advantageous way of attracting students. According to the project co-ordinator the library staff are very helpful and encourage library users who make enquires about

the centre to 'knock on the door' down the corridor, and this makes it easier for people to make enquires. The regular leafleting by the project co-ordinator has also paid dividends. Quite often leafleting by SRB funded projects is intermittent and often leaflets get 'bined' along with other 'junk' mail which suggests that regular leafleting and visits to agencies by the project co-ordinator - every Tuesday - may be the key to the success of this strategy. Information about the project spread by 'word of mouth' has also been an effective way of attracting students. The overwhelming majority of students (98 per cent) said that they would recommend the FLC to someone and most of these students have actually done so to friends and family (88 per cent). Since most people have recommended the centre to several people this is clearly an effective and cost free method of publicity for the project.

At a Partnership Board meeting some concern was expressed that the availability of a lift and the library itself could be better advertised. Signage could be improved for example.

### *Students' expectations*

The majority of students came to the centre wanting to learn ICT skills (74 per cent). Others came hoping to have assistance with the preparation of CVs and job hunting (18 per cent) or to receive training using computers (14 per cent). Hardly anyone came hoping to receive assistance with literacy (two students) and numeracy skills (two students) or to have careers advice (three students).

Most of the students came with high expectations of the quality of services as frequently the FLC had been highly recommended to them. The overwhelming majority of students were not disappointed; 93 per cent said that the FLC met their expectations. High levels of satisfaction were found with respect to the computer equipment; 77 per cent said that they were excellent or very good and 85 per cent said that there was no other equipment that they would have liked. The few who did want more equipment were mainly interested in using scanners and coloured printers.

### *Attendance*

The first time people attend the centre they meet with the project co-ordinator to discuss their training needs and to learn about the computer packages available for their use. The overwhelming majority met the project worker during their first visit (97 per cent) and found the meeting very useful or useful. Students found the explanations of the programmes by the project co-ordinator particularly useful (87 per cent). All except for two students thought that their training needs were taken into account as a result of this meeting.

Students attend the FLC frequently; the majority attend twice or three times a week (71 per cent), some once a week (18 per cent) and the others more than three times a week. The opening times are 'very convenient or convenient' for the overwhelming majority (94 per cent), which is likely to account for the students' regular attendance. Two other factors affect attendance rates. Firstly the overwhelming majority of students found the FLC very conveniently located (92 per cent), and indeed most walked to the Library (69 per cent). Secondly the fact that the service

was free was rated highly and encourages attendance, only a small minority said that they were prepared to attend if there was a charge, many said that they could not afford to pay anything.

Students typically attend for at least six months and often over a year. Of those who had stopped using the FLC - over two thirds of the sample - only 18 per cent (12 students) had used the centre between one and six months. Most had used it for over a year (42 per cent). Nearly half of the current users (45 per cent) have used the centre for over a year.

One of the 'selling points' of the FLC is that people can learn at their own pace. This particularly appealed to one in five students. Only a few students commented that they preferred a classroom setting 'with a teacher'.

Those who have stopped using the centre have mainly done so because they have progressed on whilst some stopped due to illness and family or childcare problems.

**TABLE 5**  
**Reasons why students stopped using the FLC (n=65)**

	% (no)
get a job/start own business/ work commitments	45 (29)
use computer facilities at college/work/home	22 (14)
illness/personal or family problems	15 (10)
lack of childcare	11 (7)
other reason	8 (5)

Note: 'other reason' includes; centre not open when the person has finished work, a student had finished the course they were on and another went travelling.

### *Computer packages used*

The students are offered the opportunity to learn different skills, and obtain information, from over 15 computer packages which include basic typing skills, power point presentation, front page and HTML Web Design programmes and careers advice, MCSE windows 2000, Word, Excel, Access, Photoshop and so on.

The most commonly used computer packages used by the students are summarised below. The most frequently used one is Word for Windows.

**TABLE 6**  
**The most commonly used computer packages**

	%
Word for Windows	78
Basic skills training courses	54
Surf the net and e mail	37
Access database	24
Excel spread sheet	21

Less than 20 per cent of the respondents used the other packages, including power point, basic typing skills training course, and web design programmes.

The high use of the word for windows and basic skills training courses suggests that many students are learning computer skills for the first time. The use of the net and e mail by just over a third of students suggests that in an age where communication is increasingly electronic, the centre is providing local residents with the opportunity to keep abreast with technological innovations.

Participants in the research were asked if they would like the FLC to provide more packages or information on the programmes that were already available. A few students wanted more on ICT skills (15 students) and a few students would have liked more basic skills training (7 students). Almost a quarter (23 per cent) said that they would will more access to qualifications and opportunities to take examinations. A few students would like more assistance on CV preparation (3 students) and on searching for jobs (11 students). Eight students requested childcare facilities.

### *Changes in skills' levels and attitudes*

Students were asked to describe if their ability in certain skills had improved, remained the same or got worse since attending the centre. The majority said that their skills had improved and many of these students said that the improvements were due to their attendance at the centre.

**TABLE 7**  
**Changes in skills and attitudes**

	Improved % (no)	Improved as a result of FLC training % (no)
Basic skills	90 (91)	73 (74)
Computer skills	90 (91)	75 (76)
Attitude towards work	78 (79)	63 (64)
CV writing	68 (69)	56 (57)
Job searching skills	74 (75)	59 (62)
Interview skills	71 (72)	58 (59)
Confidence	90 (91)	74 (75)

The majority of students benefit from attending the FLC and improve a range of computer and job search skills. The findings suggest that the centre is a positive learning environment for many students, as a result of which they feel more confident and more positive in their attitude towards work.

### *Obtaining employment*

From the perspective of the SRB programme the ability of projects like the FLC to assist people find work is particularly important. The findings suggest that initially the majority of people (75 per cent) came to the centre because they were intrinsically interested in learning and improving their ICT skills rather than using

the centre as a means of finding employment. Eighteen people initially attended the FLC for assistance with CV preparation and to look for a job.

Nevertheless once students found out about the facilities the majority thought that the centre provided the potential for assisting with job search, should they wish to do so. All those interviewed were asked to rate the FLC in terms of helping them find employment. Most said that they found it very useful (54 per cent) or useful (22 per cent). As the findings presented in table 7 suggest many of the students had in fact benefited from using the job-related facilities and the majority had found them useful. Those in work are mostly administrators or secretaries and presumably could use their new computer skills at work. Others have unskilled jobs and are cleaners, catering assistants, or security guard or shop assistant. A few were professionals. Thus for many learning new ICT skills could be a way of improving their skills whilst in employment or provide a route to obtaining higher skilled, better paid jobs. Although we found little evidence of students changing to better paid jobs as a result of attending the FLC (one student) but this is likely to be a longer term outcome. Nevertheless when asked what they had done, or intended to do, at the end of a course, many students said that they would find employment, change jobs or go into higher education.

Students were asked about their job search activities in the past and their current job search activities. When they initially attended the FLC, which may have been over three years ago, many students were out of work and of those who successfully found work (64 per cent), half said it was as a result of using the FLC. Interestingly even when people do get jobs they often continue to use the FLC suggesting that people still have a need to use the computer packages.

At the time of the interview 18 students were actively looking for employment typically in the immediate vicinity as well as more widely in Central and Greater London. Four students said that they had obtained interviews as a result of attending the FLC and four students said that they had had job offers, one of whom said it was a direct result of being a FLC student. Of these 18 students actively looking for work 10 were using or had used other job search methods including looking in local and national newspapers, going to the Job Centre and using friends and family as contacts. Half of these 10 students thought that the FLC was better at helping them find a job than other methods or agencies, two thought that they provided a similar service and three did not have an opinion. Interestingly four students looking for work thought that they were having difficulty finding a job due to their lack of ICT skills and two thought that they lacked basic qualifications. Three said that low wages are a barrier to them finding work.

The majority of those who are not in work are not looking for employment (32 students). The reasons they gave vary, and can include more than one reason. Most are training or studying (13), looking after children or their family (9) or cannot work due to sickness or a disability (8). A few are retired (3) or think that it is not worth coming off benefits (3).

### *Qualifications*

The FLC appears to attract students who have formal qualifications (94 per cent) which is high for a disadvantaged area. The majority of students had left school with GCSEs (41 per cent) or A levels (23 per cent) and had left school or college over

four years ago (73 per cent). Almost a quarter (24 per cent) have University degrees, post graduate qualifications or professional qualifications which is higher than may be expected for such an area.

At the time of the interview seven students were in full time education and 28 in part time education. It is perhaps not surprising that only two students said that the reason for them coming to the FLC was to gain a qualification. Nevertheless once people had joined the FLC more people signed up for a qualification and at the time of the interviews 10 were taking qualifications.

**TABLE 8**  
**Students in full time and part time education (n=35)**

	Number
Flexible Learning Centre	10
College (usually Newham or Waltham Forest)	10
University	6
Local projects (eg Nexus Centre)	4
Other	4

Note: information is missing on one student.

The students over 50 years of age (15 people) were using the basic skills training course and learning to use Word for Windows. None of them had used the packages to improve their CVs or look for work. Three were learning to surf the internet and use the e mail. Those studying locally are typically studying for GCSEs and NVQs levels one to three.

Eleven participants had attended more than one course at the FLC, five of whom had gained a qualification including GCSE English Language and word processing (2), basic skills and literacy (2) and a certificate in Access.

### **Future plans**

All the research participants were asked how they felt about themselves more generally and their job prospects. Since attending the FLC 91 per cent felt generally better about themselves, 93 per cent felt more confident about their future and 93 per cent felt more confident about their job prospects. These findings suggest that students attending FLC gained in confidence which is supported by the findings that most students went on to, or planned to go on to further education, to find employment or to change employment after they finished their FLC course. The suggestion from findings sited earlier is that some of these increased aspirations have arisen from their participation on the FLC project.

**TABLE 9**  
**Intentions at the end of a FLC course (n = 93)**

	% (no)
find employment	29 (27)
go into further education	15 (14)
become self-employed	14 (13)
go into higher education	12 (11)
change job	11 (10)
start a new course	6 (6)
other	13 (12)

## Discussion

### *An initiative in demand*

The FLC is a well-run initiative valued by residents and partners alike. Its location in the library building and at the centre of the SRB area has proved advantageous for users, attracting residents from both wards. The friendliness and approachability of the library and project staff, and the evening and Saturday morning opening hours, have made it easier for residents to access the computer facilities. The supportive learning environment enables students to learn new computing skills and grow in self-confidence. The quality service provided by the staff at the Centre means that students regularly use the facilities invariably for a year or more, and this has contributed to the centre's good reputation within the local community. This positive reputation serves as an effective method of attracting new students.

Learning new computer skills and improving existing ones is clearly in demand within the local community with an average of 351 people using the project a year for the last three years (FLC monitoring data). An opportunity to learn these skills within walking distance of their home and without charge is welcomed by students. Over half the students who participated in the research had children and 1 in 5 had health problems or disabilities, making the local location particularly valued. The convenience of being able to attend at a time which suits family commitments and on 'good days' for those with long term health problems and disabilities makes the project attractive for these residents and further emphasises how the project is meeting the needs of the community.

### *Achieving SRB aims and broader benefits*

Project information shows that women and those from minority ethnic communities are the main users of the service and that in keeping with its SRB outputs the FLC has consistently assisted students obtain employment. Unemployment has declined at a greater rate in Cann Hall and Cathall Wards than for Waltham Forest as a whole demonstrating the FLC along with other SRB funded projects such as the Job Bank and the other local employment initiatives including East O'Regen have contributed to achieving the SRB objectives. Since 1996 unemployment has fallen by 7.5 per cent in Waltham Forest compared to a 11.6 per cent fall in Cann Hall and a 12.6 per

cent fall in Cathall. In April 2001 617 residents were out of work in the SRB area, compared to 1,867 at the start of the programme.

The FLC has found it harder to meet the targets of getting trained people into work and although not meeting such targets is problematic within an SRB framework, residents benefit from using the computer facilities are more broad ranging than those measured within the SRB programme.

The research data reveal that students attend the FLC for a host of different reasons and are not necessarily interested in obtaining qualifications or finding employment. The majority of those using the FLC are older residents, over 30 years of age, and have GCSEs and 'A' levels and some have had a university education. Not surprisingly these residents typically use the library. Whilst the majority of users are in employment, many have unskilled jobs suggesting that many of the talents and skills of local residents are under utilised. The research findings suggest that in the future these students may be able to gain promotion or change their jobs to obtain higher paid work as they have new computer skills and greater confidence. Others may also use their new found skills to obtain a place on a training or education course. Thus it is likely that the FLC facilities are providing a route to better employment for some students.

For other students using the Centre to take a formal training course or to find employment or as a method of achieving higher status employment is of little interest. Learning new computer skills for personal interest, using the facilities to complete some work or finding out information on the internet or communicating with a friend via the e mail, meet their needs. The use of the FLC by these residents has benefits which are not highlighted within the SRB framework and include enabling residents to learn ITC skills and contribute to their general well-being.

### *The FLC and other local initiatives*

The FLC works with a range of agencies and together they are able to provide residents with more opportunities to train, obtain qualifications and find work. The centre provides an outreach location for local colleges in Waltham Forest and Newham enabling them to teach students. Joint work with other agencies assisting residents find employment has included running courses together and referring individual clients. Whilst there appears to be some duplication of services such as job search on the internet, the residents may receive a better service if there is more than one organisation providing similar services within an area. Furthermore the FLC does offer a specialist service, training in using computer packages, and such specialisms do provide residents with additional opportunities to learn new skills.

The FLC tends to attract older residents and as long as this continues it will not be directly competing with the 'Click' which typically attracts young people. Whilst it is important not to develop two competing centres, located close to each other, the Harrow Green Library does appear to be developing as a well used location and this provides opportunities for other types of services to directly link to the library and FLC such as health projects, which are also in demand, for example.

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