

# MALE Project: Executive Summary

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## **Introduction**

The MALE project was funded for one year from August 2006 to July 2007 by the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum. The project focused on issues of male and female participation rates in further education, including in community based learning centres, and issues of transition from community based learning into main college campuses.

Project aims:

- to explore and deepen understanding of participation rates for men in further education and community based education
- to explore issues associated with the successful transition of students between community based further education and main college campuses

Project objectives:

- To examine issues associated with male participation and non-participation in further education
- To examine issues associated with transition between community based learning centres and mainstream colleges
- To work with staff in selected colleges to establish mechanisms that facilitate improved rates of male participation and transition

A total of 30 interviews were conducted – 25 learners and 5 members of staff. Most of these were men, and most of the learners came from working class backgrounds. Two colleges took part in the study – Anniesland College and James Watt College, with 3 community learning centres linked to these colleges. As part of the project, a pilot mentoring scheme was established in one of the CLCs between February and June 2007. The other CLCs are planning to implement measures next session to enhance male participation rates.

## **Summary of Research Findings**

- Perceptions from participants suggest that a strong gender division of labour continues to characterise working class families and the workplace and this is seen to impact on the types of learning opportunities available and the nature of engagement with education
- The nature of male and female cultures are perceived as different and these are seen to affect the ways in which men and women find out about learning opportunities and whether or not they take up those opportunities

- Increased financial independence and greater opportunities for women are seen to have given women more social confidence in terms of pursuing their aspirations and ambitions through learning
- Men are perceived as being more instrumental in their learning – they appear to want courses that are short-term, and clearly focused on vocational skills. There was a perception among respondents that education and training currently caters better for the needs of women than men (e.g. in the type of subjects available and the provision of crèche facilities, etc)
- Men are more likely to return to learning as a direct result of a life changing event such as redundancy, retirement or ill health
- Different experiences for men and women in school are seen to affect how men view learning later. Men felt that as boys they were ‘picked on’ by teachers and therefore came away with negative experiences of school
- Some men indicated that they might feel more comfortable returning to a main college campus rather than to a CLC. A main college campus was seen to offer courses better tailored to the needs of men and to offer a degree of anonymity not characteristic of a CLC
- General perceptions of colleges suggest they cater best for younger and female students (e.g. as portrayed by advertising imagery) and it was suggested this might deter especially older men from returning to learning
- Male work patterns were identified as being a major barrier to returning to learn. Men are more often found in full time employment or working shifts which makes attendance at classes difficult and disrupts private study patterns. Giving up work to return to learning was not seen as an attractive option – men (especially with families) are reluctant to surrender financial independence particularly as they are still often seen as the main ‘breadwinner’
- Learners claiming benefits perceived a possible conflict of interest between the role of job centres and that of colleges. Job centres concentrate on getting people directly back into employment and only approve attendance at certain training courses. Colleges are interested in attracting people into part-time and full time education and seeing people progress from non-advanced to more advanced courses
- The prospect of transition for learners was initially daunting. Main college campuses were perceived as ‘big’, ‘scary’, with ‘too many people’. Making transitions at the same time as peers was seen to be desirable.

- Women had particular concerns about transitions – about class times fitting in with times to deliver and collect children from nursery or school, and about whether the college itself provided crèche facilities. There was concern that colleges should acknowledge and cater for this additional social role of child caring played mainly by women
- In terms of actions for improving male participation rates, it was felt, firstly, that current advertising imagery favoured young, female figures. This was seen as a potential deterrent to men, especially if they are older. Word of mouth was agreed to be the best means of communicating information and it was felt that colleges should try to exploit this more by using existing students in promotion strategies
- Local radio, libraries and newspapers were felt to be good means of advertising.
- It was felt that college/CLC Open Days could include more events / activities aimed at men – e.g. car washes, barbers, ‘beat the goalie’ competitions, etc

### **Implementation of measures to improve male participation**

Only one centre was able to set up a pilot mentoring scheme during the life of the study, but the other CLCs are planning to do so next session. At the Three Towns Learning Centre the mentoring scheme ran very effectively in terms of providing learner support, promoting opportunities at the CLC to outside agencies and providing a strong role model for learners wishing to make transitions to the main campus.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

It should generally be acknowledged that men and women may have different motivations for returning to learn and therefore different needs. The belief of interview participants is that currently, women’s needs are being met by CLCs more effectively than men’s needs. This is expressed in the types of courses available, the provision or non-provision of certain facilities for men and women, and by the nature of advertising used to promote colleges.

It was also felt that current government rhetoric about getting people off benefits and back into work failed to acknowledge the reality for men returning to learning – i.e. that for most men (and women) the primary aim in returning to learning was ultimately to secure (full time) employment. An important role for education is seen to be making people ‘work ready’ – not only in terms of equipping them with more up-to-date vocational skills, but in improving confidence, self esteem and personal and social skills.

On the basis of evidence from the study, there are clear questions about the role that CLCs play in improving male participation rates. This and earlier research by the

CROLL shows that CLCs are generally very good at attracting and retaining women learners, a role that has fulfilled a particular need in mainly working class communities for a number of years. According to the perceptions of interview participants it may not always be appropriate to expect that CLCs will additionally be a major source of enhanced male participation rates; instead, men themselves may prefer to attend main college campuses and it is perhaps here that any changes should be focused.

On the basis of these findings there are a number of recommendations:

- Firstly, that recognition is given to the fact that most men returning to post compulsory education do so out of a clear desire to secure full time employment at an early opportunity.
- Secondly, that in this context, opportunities should be explored for colleges, job centres, LECs, SSCs, and welfare agencies to work more closely in developing appropriate types and length of courses that can be approved without loss of benefits specifically to meet the needs of men.
- Thirdly, that some of the broader issues about the relationships between the labour market, welfare systems and post compulsory education should be discussed at a Scottish and UK level with a view to smoothing out apparent conflicts of interest.