

Section 1 *Aspire* Programme Evaluation

1. This interim report provides an overview of the activities and impact of the *Aspire* programme activities over the period from May 2005 to February 2010, prepared for the *Aspire* programme External Evaluator. Along with subsequent input from the *Aspire* External Evaluator, the contents herein will be used as a basis for a final report to HEFCE to support their sector-wide evaluation of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning initiative and to inform planning of Harper Adams' activities beyond the end of the special funding period, in May 2010.
2. This report consists of an overview of the cross-theme activities, prepared by the *Aspire* Director and the *Aspire* Programme Administrator, and from the Co-ordinator of each of the four key *Aspire* themes (of learner support for students with a disability or specific learning difference, placement learning, work-based learning and e-learning) in relation to the overall aims listed in paragraph 3d. below and the associated goals and achievements within each theme. The work associated with transferable, professional skills was subsumed into a range of colleagues' responsibilities, following the retirement of the Professional Skills Coordinator in September 2007, and aspects related to the support of students' transferable and practical skills are also reported in a separate section of this report.
3. The components of this report each aim to cover the following aspects:
 - a. Aims, objectives and intended outcomes within the *Aspire* theme.
 - b. Evaluation of the extent to which these have been met using quantitative data, qualitative data and anecdotal evidence based on discussion, noting evidence sources
 - c. Unintended outcomes – new objectives that emerged; impact that incidentally occurred but that was not explicitly planned for; lessons learned about how 'best to do/not to do'.
 - d. Contribution of theme work to the overall *Aspire* aims as follows:
 - Create a physical centre in the heart of the campus that, within the context of a curriculum related to the changing needs of the rural economy and food chain.
 - Fellowship and Staff Development Programme to encourage and reward staff who engage and disseminate outcomes of planned CETL developments.
 - Provide the specialist support, staff development, time and rewards to encourage and facilitate staff and students to develop and evaluate learning and teaching innovations
 - Harness the imagination and creativity of all academic staff to develop and reflect on innovative approaches to learning and learner support, through *Aspire* fellowships.
 - Support staff to disseminate their evaluation findings, internally, and externally through speaking at learning & teaching events, contributing to research-based publications and by providing opportunities for inward secondments.
 - Improve our IT platform so that learning technologies can be fully exploited in improving both the learning environment and support for campus-based and distant students.
 - e. The extent of collaborative working/ developing and sharing of good practice between colleagues (internally and externally) that probably wouldn't have otherwise happened.
 - f. Key achievements of work (materials, systems, community, understandings) in relation to benefits for:
 - Students
 - Staff
 - Staff and students in other universities and colleges
 - Employers of our students or graduates

- g. Extent to which this work, and its impact, will continue after HEFCE funding of *Aspire*, including any supporting structures/organisation, so ensuring the 'legacy' of the *Aspire* programme will continue.
 - h. Any messages about work to relay to Harper Adams' managers or HEFCE – successes, disappointments, difficulties of work, impact, future work needs in this area of activity.
4. The evidence base on which this evaluation is drawn includes student assessment records and feedback from successive annual course monitoring surveys across Harper Adams, placement and new student surveys (with survey forms included at appendices 1, 2 and 3), all collected as a matter of course, with modest adaptation since 2005 to meet the monitoring and evaluation needs of the *Aspire* programme. Some mainstream staff development records have been referred to. Regular requests for staff development and dissemination activity information have also been made to staff since the commencement of the *Aspire* programme, as reflected in successive biannual reports to the Steering Group. Successive External Evaluator Reports, drawing on *ad hoc* meetings with identified staff and student groups along a particular theme, have also been incorporated into this evaluation. In January and February 2010, an online staff survey was launched to enable the *Aspire* team to gauge the impact of the programme from the perspective of staff across Harper Adams. Sixty six staff members responded to the questionnaire, of which 40 classed themselves as academic staff, 12 academic support, 16 as administrative support and 4 as 'other'. The questionnaire and associated data are at appendix 4. Much of this data reinforces the informal but frequent contact between colleagues and also that contained within some of the reports of the earlier, and completed, *Aspire* development fellowship projects. The *Aspire* Work-Based Learning Developer also interviewed ten staff on a more in-depth basis, primarily, but not exclusively, in relation to that theme of activity. The summary discussions are recorded at appendix 5. A feature of the programme has been regular reporting on Key Performance Indicators to both the Steering Group and the Academic Board of Harper Adams University College and the most recent data set is included here at appendix 6.

***Aspire* Cross-Programme Activity** (drafted by Abigail Hind and Kath Leigh)

Achievements against the programme aims

- 5. The following provides an overview against each of the six overall programme aims listed in paragraph 3, where emboldened text links directly to these aims.
- 6. **The *Aspire* Centre**, a refurbished building, which provides a base for key (but not all) members of the placement, work-based learning and learner support teams is situated in the heart of the campus. It is widely used by a cross-section of staff and students, including work-based learners. There has been plenty of anecdotal evidence of (1) improved profile and working environment for the learner support team and some placement managers; (2) facilitation of improved cross-function liaison as a result of co-location (and relocation of e-learning team to better communicate with rest of IS team); (3) 'a buzz to the place' which provides a much needed and relaxed social learning space. In the *Aspire* Staff Survey, colleagues were asked 'How important has the *Aspire* Centre been for each of the following...?'. Table 1 provides the collated responses.

Table 1: Staff response to question ‘How important has the *Aspire* Centre been for each of the following?’

<i>Aspire</i> Centre Importance	Response: Very Important or Important
Providing a one-stop-shop of better integrated support for students	67% (91%*)
Enabling people from different departments to come together to work more closely	49%
Acting as a hub of information or support to support your own practice	49%
Symbolising the importance of learning and teaching at Harper Adams	78%

* academic staff response

Comments from individual staff interviews on their impressions of the *Aspire* Centre include:

- A ‘Creative hub’
- ‘Vibrant with student traffic’
- ‘Students associate the building with the brand. The brand signifies help, a place to get help’
- ‘Appealing and professional centre which conveys a good image of Harper’
- ‘The name is even inspiring! It sets a good tone for discussions and meetings’
- ‘Useful hub for external clients – allows us to appear professional’
- ‘It looks business like and efficient – it gives a good impression that we are a modern institution with a range of facilities.’

7. As a consequence of growth, a new Student Services Centre is in the process of being built and, in several ways, attempts to replicate, on a larger scale, the benefits of the *Aspire* Centre. It is also located in the heart of the campus and will provide a focus for a range of student-facing services, including those of relocated learner support and placement support, which will continue to be co-located on the same floor of the new three-story building, along with the Career Advisor, International Student Advisor, Chaplaincy and Registry. Additionally, these services will be co-located alongside other student services, such as the Counsellor, Accommodation and the SU Office, and a large social learning area, café and shop, on the lower floors. The released space in the existing *Aspire* Centre is intended to re-house colleagues working on the development of work-based learning. Currently, because of space restrictions and the growth in this area of work, these colleagues are not co-located, with only a minority based in the current *Aspire* Centre. A number of colleagues have suggested that at least that part of the Student Services Centre which will house Learner Support and Placement staff should be branded as the ‘*Aspire* Centre’, in light of the currency that is attached with the title.

8. The *Aspire* programme supports staff with funding for the *Aspire* Development Fellowship and Partner Development Fellowship Awards to **encourage and reward staff** to engage in developments in both on and off campus learning at, and through, Harper Adams and partner HE/FE colleges. Funding for Development Fellowship awards have been made up to a value of £10,000 and for Partner Development Fellowship Awards up to £4,000. Table 2 shows there was a dip in interest in the award scheme in the middle of the programme period. Minor adjustments were made to the funding rates and payment arrangements to make the scheme more attractive to departments to release staff time to commit to development. This probably contributed in part to the pattern of uptake. The dissemination of earlier projects to colleagues is also likely to have encouraged others to have put forward later proposals for development ideas.

Table 2 Aspire Fellowship Awards Summary

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Development Fellowships	6	3	0	6	9
Partner Development Fellowships		1	2	0	4
Staff Excellence Nominations (awarded)		30(8)	67(9)	64(15)	n/a

See: www.harper-adams.ac.uk/aspire/fellows.cfm and www.harper-adams.ac.uk/aspire/excellence.cfm

9. The Development Fellowship Scheme has supported 27 projects, and in doing so has harnessed the creative imagination of 40 colleagues to **innovate** through their direct involvement in projects. The extent to which the scheme can be seen as a **reward**, to those involved is difficult to defend categorically, given the additional **time burden** that has often been imposed on the individuals involved, in spite of the intention that Development awards should provide time and space to innovate. Through the staff survey, colleagues were asked, ‘How effective do you believe that the Development Fellowship Scheme has been on...?’. Table 3 would indicate that the scheme has been largely ineffective in freeing up time although is perceived to have been effective in achieving its other ambitions to support student learning, enable innovation, promote collaborative working and spread good practice.

Table 3: Staff response to question, ‘How effective do you believe that the Development Fellowship Scheme has been on...?’

Development Fellowship Scheme	Response: Very or Fairly Effective
Student learning	52%
Spreading good practice	52%
Enabling innovation	52%
Promoting collaboration between staff	52%
Freeing up time for participating staff	22%

This difficulty was illustrated by some, although not universal, views arising from interviews with ten staff members, as illustrated: ‘*Development Fellowship awards are good as they inspire innovation but they are taken up by the people that would probably do it anyway. Also though, the Fellowships do not allow time to be freed up because of workload issues so it is work on top of work rather than released time. No real time is allocated for Fellowships. This is the main problem.*’ Another interviewee indicated that, ‘*They have allowed me to develop new skills and progress an idea, but not through the provision of time,*’ and another that, ‘*The Fellowship Scheme is a driver for innovation but it must be changed so that sufficient time is really freed up.*’

10. The contributions of **colleagues to support** others in innovation have generally been welcomed. Each of the e-learning, placement, learner support and work-based learning themes have benefitted from additional staff capacity and capability. These appointees and secondees not only pursued their own activities to support students, but have also provided a source of guidance and encouragement to others. Quotes from some of the ten interviewees are as follows: ‘*Some innovators within the College see Aspire as unnecessary; they can get on without it, but for others (like me), the set up enables me to get things done, because I can draw upon expertise that otherwise I wouldn’t have access to,*’ and ‘*Some staff will continue to need (or benefit from) the ‘creative people’ in Aspire, to progress new ideas and push boundaries.*’ Another commented that, ‘*The Aspire staff all seem to work to boost others and this helps get things off the ground I think, like with the Fellowship Awards. They are a good way to get things started.*’ The work of the e-learning team is particularly focused on collaborative working to enable others to make more effective use of technology enhanced learning, without and out with Development project plans. The Moodle training sessions run by the team are also seen as one of the most effective ways of supporting staff in this area (paragraph 13).

11. The *Aspire* programme funding has provided additional funds for **professional development** in the theme areas. A database has been kept throughout the programme to capture activity of staff in relation to the *Aspire* themes and any external activities related to the programme, as summarised in Table 4. The data covers staff directly involved in the *Aspire* programme, and all staff involvement in Learning & Teaching Forum sessions, and other internal and external events or publications related to an *Aspire* theme, which has been funded by the programme. The data on the first two rows gives an overview of the extent to which colleagues have engaged in professional development, either delivered internally or externally. There are difficulties with capturing College wide data on staff development and dissemination, which mean that activity is probably understated.

Table 4: Summary of Development and Dissemination Activity since May 2005

	<i>Aspire</i> programme	Learner support	Placement	Work-based learning	e-learning	Professional skills	Totals
Development days (no days)	26	107	77	16	14	55	295
Dissemination (to internal participants)	2081	435	139	162	453	198	3468
Dissemination (to external participants)	1598	289	461	310	545	1411	4614
Other external activity (no events)	9	2	4	9	3	41	68

12. There has clearly been significant professional development provided through the programme, and whilst this is reflected in feedback from the staff survey which indicates that most people feel well equipped to support students, a significant minority need further assistance. Table 5 summarises the responses. Unsurprisingly, given that it is the newest area of provision, some staff have less confidence in their ability to support work-based learning.

Table 5: Staff response to question, ‘How well equipped do you feel to support students in...?’

	Very well equipped	Fairly well equipped	Not well equipped	Unequipped	Not sure	Response count
With different learning support needs	9	20	2	1	3	35
With technology enhanced learning	5	25	2	1	2	35
Through the placement process	10	17	3	0	4	34
In work-based learning	5	14	4	1	9	33
To develop their professional or transferable skills	8	21	1	0	5	35

13. Feedback through the staff survey also indicates that many staff feel better prepared to support the various areas of work than before the commencement of the programme, with ‘improved confidence’ in decreasing order of magnitude as follows: technology enhanced learning,

placement learning, learner support, professional skills and work-based learning. A minority of respondents (one to three only, for each area) felt less well equipped than previously, with the remainder either unsure or unchanged. In declining order of perceived future development need, respondents identified that they would benefit from future support in: technology enhanced learning (58%); work based learning and learner support (each at 49%); placement learning (16%) and 'other' (19%, where respondents indicated format of sessions such as external events, Learning and Teaching Forum sessions or more team teaching). The declining order of perceived effectiveness of the means by which development has been achieved, was reported as follows (based on the ratio of effective compared with not effective): Moodle training; Development Fellowship project; working alongside a colleague on a project; Learning and Teaching Forum; mentoring; attendance at external events; other. The first three support mechanisms listed clearly are more effective at eliciting 'action', compared with attendance at events which focus on raising awareness, interest and / or desire to take action.

14. The Staff Excellence Fellowship Award Scheme (www.harper-adams.ac.uk/aspire/excellence.cfm) has run since 2006 and has provided a means by which staff and students can make an online nomination for a member of staff to be **recognised and rewarded** for their contributions to supporting learning. The Excellent Practice (five awards annually) and Developing & Sharing Excellence (five awards annually) were available in 2006-07 & 2007-08 with an additional award for Supporting the Wider Student Experience (5) in 2008-09 and 2009-10. Individual tax-free cash awards have been set at £500, although some awards have been given jointly between members of staff.
15. Table 2 summarises the numbers of awards made. Although recipients of the Excellence awards are clearly pleased with the **recognition and reward**, (as are some nominees who are not successful), the extent to which the Scheme has a motivating effect on all staff to encourage greater levels of learning development is not clear-cut. Respondents to the Staff Survey reflected the overall staff population in that 40% of respondents had been nominated for an Excellent Practice or Developing and Sharing Excellence Award, with approximately 22% of potential recipients (based on job roles) actually having received an award. Table 5 summarises responses to the question: 'What effect has the Staff Excellence Scheme had on your motivation to...?'

Table 5: Staff response to question, 'What effect has the Staff Excellence Scheme had on your motivation to...?'

Staff Excellence Award	Response: Very or Fairly Positive Effect
Improve the student learning experience	30%
Improve learning resources	22%
Broaden your approaches in support of learning	24%
Provide an exceptional service to colleagues or students	22%
Engage in mentoring and sharing approaches	18%
Contribute to college or national initiatives to facilitate learning?	16%

16. 50% of staff indicated that the Staff Excellence Scheme had no real motivating effect, 'one way or the other', in relation to the included aspects and one or two members of staff said it had a negative

effect in relation to each aspect. There were a number of comments to suggest that whilst not a direct motivator it is 'good to have one's efforts recognised'. Other comments reflected the view that, 'Awards for staff are valuable. There aren't many systems through which we, the people on the ground, can get recognition as the rewards tend to be placed with managers so these are a welcome way of recognising the people who are working well'. A couple of survey respondents did not perceive that the scheme was transparent, although the criteria by which nominees are judged are published and are those against which nominations are made.

17. A key aim of the programme has been to **support staff to disseminate** their development work, internally and externally, through speaking at learning & teaching events, contributing to research-based publications and by providing **opportunities for inward secondments**. Table 2 shows that seven external colleagues have taken up the Partner Development Fellowship Scheme, which provides funded time to work on projects of mutual interest with colleagues based at Harper Adams. The uptake of the scheme has been a little disappointing as a target of 20 was set out in the initial project. A similar number of expressions of interest and bids were made but did not eventually come to fruition, largely because of the changed roles, employment or increased workload of those who had successfully secured funds. Whilst the collaborative working opportunities the scheme has created have been useful, to both partners, it is not possible to indicate the extent to which these projects have affected student learning in other institutions.

18. Table 4 summarises the extent to which colleagues have disseminated their approaches to supporting students and the associated learning from this. The bottom two rows of data show a significant level of activity and appendix 7 highlights that there are a small number of staff who are involved in sharing their experiences on an external (national and international) stage.

19. A successful one-day *Aspire* Conference was held in April 2008. It was attended by 56 external delegates and 34 internal staff. Developments were shared in three parallel sessions on the following themes:

- Work-Based Learning for Part-time Students
- Employability Skills for Full-time Students
- Supporting Students with People and Technology

The conference is judged to have been a success in terms of the feedback received from, through a post-event form, participants although it did not generate much interest in the Partner Fellowship Scheme, as had been intended. Internal colleagues provided positive feedback on the buzz and excitement that had been created and the view that external participants were left with a very good impression of Harper Adams and its work to support students.

20. The *Aspire* web pages have been a successful platform to disseminate programme events and activity both internally and externally. Figure 1 shows visit data for the *Aspire* web pages from November 2007 to February 2009 (data to be updated for final report). The graph shows increased activity in the months before and after the *Aspire* Conference in April 2008.

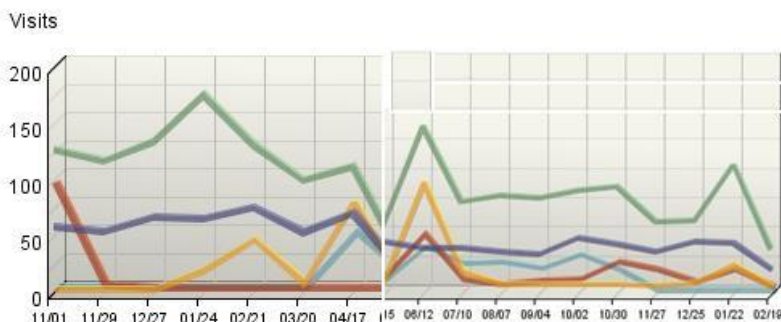


Figure 1: Visit data for *Aspire* web pages from November 2007 to February 2009

21. Another key aim of the *Aspire* programme was to **improve the IT platform** so that learning technologies can be fully exploited in improving both the learning environment and support for campus-based and distant students. The initial capital programme included upgrades to the network and some enhancements to teaching rooms, most of which has now been superseded by subsequent investment. Since 2005, all teaching rooms are equipped with networked, PC supported data projection. Moodle was introduced in 2006, as an alternative to WebCT, as the former was evaluated as offering a number of advantages over the latter, including in relation to cost. The VLE sits at the heart of a managed learning environment. Following the catastrophic loss of VLE data in 2008, and consequent revisions to the organisation of systems, the Moodle installation has been very stable (0.05% downtime, 24/7).

22. The *Aspire* programme is considered by colleagues, including the Head of IS¹, to have facilitated a faster implementation of the Harper Adams information strategy and the effectiveness of technology-enhanced learning. This has been achieved through the complimentary objectives shared through the Information Strategy and *Aspire* programme, and the provision of additional people and financial resources to support implementation. This has been based on a shared vision with innovative approaches to learning and widening participation using technology. The *Aspire* programme funding secured £0.96 million of additional capital funding, some of which, along with institutional funds, was invested in development of the IS infrastructure, including in the following: portal development; extension of the wireless network; extending the number of student-facing computers; software acquisition; learner support laptops for loan to students; virtualisation of servers; purchase of online learning resources; additional audio visual capacity so that all classrooms were equipped with data projection; and the purchase of video-conferencing equipment. Table 6 provides a summary of the change in provision.

Table 6: Technical data relating to IS infrastructure over time

Description	2003-4	2008-9
College student facing computers	291	425
Wireless based student own computer connections	40	750
Total computer connections on campus	331	1175
Students per connected computer	4.39	1.52
Engineering workstations processor	2.8 GHz	Xeon2.93GHz
Engineering workstations memory	0.5GB	6.0GB
Engineering workstations disk	80.GB	250.0GB
Network availability (% of 24/7)	72.0	99.98
Local network bandwidth	100MBps	1000MBps
JANET link bandwidth	<10MBps	310MBps
Data storage capacity	1.7TB	14.0TB

¹ Internal report by Head of IS: Strategic developments in IS between 2003-4 and 2009-10

23. Whilst there can be no doubt from the data in Table 6 that the IT platform has been strengthened to support much greater use by on and off-campus based learners, including external access to email and network files over the period, the growing demand for use means that, on occasion, the infrastructure still struggles to supply services speedily at busy times. There have also been problems with enabling access to the network when insufficient notice of enrolment is provided to the IT team for work-based learners. These challenges relate to greatly increased expectations of a much larger and much more diverse group of users. Notwithstanding these remaining challenges, substantial development has taken place both in the technological infrastructure of the College and through innovative systems developments in a wide range of areas, on which it is considered the *Aspire* programme has helped to catalyse progress.
24. **Collaborative working** has been achieved through the supporting role play by key *Aspire* team members and also through the increasing number of Development Fellowships that have been based on team efforts, rather than the work of individuals. For instance, none of the 2005/6 awards were team-based, whereas eight of the nine made in 2009/10 are. The ways in which colleagues share their learning, either through show-casing their work for others to learn from in a formal event, or by 'just showing' somebody how to solve a particular problem, have also been valued by colleagues, as evidenced through attendance in scheduled events and through the staff survey feedback.
25. **Key achievements** are outlined in relation to each of the theme areas in sections 2-6 but, on a cross-programme basis, the focus given to supporting students in a way that not only differentiates Harper Adams from other universities, but does so in a way that prepares students for future success is key. Staff feedback on the predicted legacy of the programme was varied and included: the *Aspire* Centre as a focal point for excellent learner support services (and to be replicated in the new Student Service Centre); developments in work-based learning and the REEDNet programme; strengthened placement support systems; encouragement for and support of innovation, including in e-learning. The awards schemes were generally considered desirable but with some caveats around needing to find the ability to release time for project work and being more transparent in making Excellence awards. The KPIs reported in appendix 6 are undoubtedly grounded in work associated with the programme, although it is difficult to make direct causal links, given the inter-relationships between the work of the *Aspire* programme and many other College activities. The KPIs are, nonetheless, pleasing in the context of both increased student numbers and diversity of student base over the period of the programme.
26. Feedback from the New Student Survey for successive years has prompted new students to answer an open question: 'Please tell us, in a few words, why you came to Harper Adams'. Review of the responses to these questions over a five year period indicates that the overall reputation of Harper Adams, including in relation to its learner support arrangements, commitment to placement support, and its link with employers, have played an increasing role in students' considerations. (This data will be subject to computer-based semantic analysis, when time permits, to establish a substantiated change over the five year period, rather than one based on subjective impressions alone). In the staff survey, colleagues were asked if they felt that the *Aspire* Programme has helped raise the profile of Harper Adams as a Centre of Excellence for Teaching & Learning. Up to 38% of staff felt it had predominantly for staff and campus-based students but to a lesser extent also for work-based learners, employers, short course students and pre-applicants.
27. The work of the *Aspire* programme is mainstream and will continue in one form or another, even if some staff are relocated to allow for growth in work-based learning. It will be pleasing to enable

the staff and students associated with employer engagement initiatives to benefit from the co-location that has been helpful to the placement and learner support teams, and which will be replicated for them, with slightly increased space, in the new Centre.