Adult informal learning

Policy recommendations

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Aim of this report

This policy recommendations report is intended to provide guidance for policymakers on maximising the beneficial impact of digital technologies on adult informal learning. It provides a concise summary of the main challenges facing policy-makers, shows where there may be gaps in current policy and highlights areas of concern and need in relation to adult informal learning and technology[1]. It suggests a number of recommendations which will help to address those concerns and needs and meet the challenges currently being faced in this area. The report is not intended to provide definitive and exhaustive evidence for a comprehensive programme of policy intervention or to provide detailed in-depth information about implementation and costs of proposals. Instead it aims to present key recommendations to support and develop the use of digital technologies to deliver and enhance valuable forms of adult informal learning across a variety of locations.

Summary of key challenges

There is much debate about the exact definition of adult informal learning. In this report we refer to adult informal learning specifically as self-directed learning that happens outside the curricula of formal and non-formal educational institutions and programmes[2]. However, we have also chosen to address non-formal learning (eg adult educational programmes, courses or classes occurring outside the formal school and university system) alongside any policy recommendations for further improvement of adult informal learning. This is because successful policy interventions need to consider adult education as a learning journey which may involve multiple episodes of both informal and non-formal forms of learning[3].

Raising the profile of adult informal learning: There is strong evidence citing the benefits of informal learning for society as a whole as well as for individuals. Research suggests that recognising the value of adult informal learning can improve social inclusion and cohesion and that adult's lives can be significantly enriched by engaging in both informal and non-formal learning activities[4]. Adult informal learning is often hidden, however, and is not

well understood; many people do not recognise either when they are engaging in such learning or the value that it holds[5]. This lack of understanding constitutes a key policy challenge which needs to be addressed. Digital technologies can play an important role in raising the profile of adult informal learning – they can provide information and guidance, light the spark of interest in a particular area that leads to adults becoming lifelong learners, and can help to engage the adult learners of the future[6].

Highlighting the added value that digital technologies can represent for adult informal learning: Digital technologies have the potential to add significant value to adult learning of all types. They can enhance, complement, support, boost and deliver the learning that takes place in a variety of locations; from the evening class to the home. However, the potential of digital technologies in this area is not always clearly recognised and there is a continuing need for policy to champion this added value[7].

Supporting and providing guidance for diverse, sustained and connected learning journeys: Digital technologies have an important role to play in providing access to information about a wide range of opportunities for learning and in enriching and diversifying adult learning journeys. However, research identifies a need for policy to support interconnectedness and signposting between different learning episodes, between different locations for learning and between different sorts of technologies which enhance learning[8].

Opening public spaces and enabling access to technology and learning: A recent report on digital inclusion found that those who suffer deep social disadvantage are up to seven times more likely to be disengaged from the internet than those who are socially advantaged[9]. This highlights the continuing policy challenge of improving access to technology and to the resulting opportunities for technology-enhanced learning[10]. Opening public spaces to create more venues for such learning and ensuring that people have access to technology in their own home are both important measures which will support adult informal learning.

Embedding digital literacy and digital participation:
Digital inclusion is about more than access to technology and the development of functional ICT skills, however. It also requires that learners are equipped with the skills, knowledge and motivation that will enable them to be active citizens, effectively participating in the use of digital technologies for a wide range of purposes, including for adult informal learning. This means policy interventions need to include measures to embed digital literacy so that people have the competencies which will allow them to use technologies to communicate and interact with others as well as to create, critique and evaluate a wide range of digital texts and digital media[11]. Policy needs to address the challenge of supporting digital literacy and digital participation are therefore needed if technology is to be used successfully for adult informal learning.

Supporting the use of technology to transform learning:
It is important for policy to recognise that effective use of technology can have the effect of transforming learning so that it becomes more than the simple transmission of information or skill[12]. Policy needs to provide support to enable technology to be used for adult informal learning in such a way as to facilitate the deep and meaningful sorts of learning which can arise from the learner's active participation in the collective construction of meaning[13].

Promoting and supporting technology as a learning medium and delivery mechanism for adult educators:
Digital technologies can increase the options and resources available to adult education providers, assisting them in their facilitation of high-quality and effective adult learning. They can open up interaction between adult learners existing in different locations throughout the world and widen accessibility to learning by offering alternative pedagogical approaches. However, the effective use of technology may also present additional demands for practitioners. Embedding the use of technology into practice may require, for example, additional resources, time, management,

learning materials, skills, knowledge and imagination. Policy therefore needs to support adult educators to use technology as a learning medium and delivery mechanism[14].

Recommendations
The following recommendations have been developed as suggestions for focused practical developments and activities necessary in order to fully exploit the potential of technology to support, enhance and deliver adult informal learning.

Extend the scope and remit of Myguide to provide a safe and supported route to online and networked learning environments
This would allow Myguide to support and link to informal collaborative online learning in order to promote informal adult learning as well as supporting increased digital literacy. Myguide and the DIUS-led adult informal learning portal could then link into each other, bringing together provided content, self-generated content and broadcasting material to ensure that these resources together embrace the broadest range of opportunities for innovative technology-enabled adult informal learning.

This has the potential to impact on challenges 1, 2, 3 and 5 above.

Capitalise on the opportunity provided by the Technology Improvement Leadership Tool (Generator) developed by Becta with FE partners
This will enable colleges and providers to assess their use of technology and develop whole organisational improvement plans to enable them to harness technology for the benefit of all learners.

This has the potential to impact upon challenges 2, 6 and 7 above.

Provide materials and resources to support technology-enhanced informal learning as part of the roll-out of the Home Access scheme

This would help to maximise the learning of the adult members of families who will receive home access under the scheme. It would also raise awareness about the value of informal adult learning, encourage adults to recognise the ways in which technology can be used for informal learning and increase their ability to access and use online community networks of learning. It would allow specific informal adult learning guidance to be targeted at the most socially disadvantaged so adding value to the potential for Home Access to tackle the digital divide.

Alongside this, the Home Access scheme can also be used as a vehicle to generate case studies of communities that have transformed themselves through using technology to learn. These case studies would demonstrate how technology can support learning and development in communities and could later be used as part of a national celebration of technology-enhanced informal adult learning.

This has the potential to impact upon challenges 1-4 above. If carefully implemented, it also has the potential to impact upon challenges 5 and 6.

Develop case studies to demonstrate the business benefits of adult informal learning for employers

These case studies could be used in Becta's Next Generation Learning@Work campaign to raise awareness and recognition of the value of encouraging technology-enabled informal adult learning both inside and beyond the workplace. This would produce evidence of how online environments have been used to support informal learning, which has then led to increased productivity and performance for businesses and employers.

This has the potential to impact upon challenges 1 and 2 above.

Provide an online informal learning portal

The above recommendations would be further advanced by the development of an online adult learning portal, which is already under consideration by DIUS. This should include a national content bank of resources for adult learning, a space for user-generated content about specific learning areas, information about access to spaces, places and technology for learning and guidance on informal and non-formal learning opportunities both online and offline. Potential learners could be brought into the portal via their involvement in specific interest groups and social networking sites. This would enable the portal to attract potential learners through their interests and gradually lead them to finding ways to further these interests through learning opportunities in informal, non-formal or formal settings and both on and offline.

This has the potential to impact upon challenges 1-4 above.

Notes on method

This report is part of Futurelab's adult informal learning project, funded by Becta. More details about this can be found at www.futurelab.org.uk/projects/adult-informal-learning. Researchers used a wide variety of methods to gather the information contained in this report. An extensive programme of desk research was undertaken to inform the report and Futurelab also commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a survey on adults' use of technologies for informal learning. Futurelab researchers hosted an open space discussion with key stakeholders on digital technologies and adult informal learning in October 2008 and several informal meetings and discussions were also held with experts in the area. Finally, Futurelab held a seminar in February of 2009 to bring policy makers from different government departments together to discuss the use of digital technologies to support adult informal learning.

References

1 Adult informal learning is currently a priority for the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) with a Command Paper due to be released in March 2009. Policy which supports the use of technology for adult informal learning has the potential to further many of DIUS's Departmental Strategic Objectives, in particular DSO2, DSO3 and DSO5. For further information see www.dius.gov.uk/~/media/publications/DIAGRAM-DSOs_PSAsandINDICATORS-April2008onwards_v5

2 Schugurensky, D (2000). The Forms of Informal Learning: Towards a Conceptualization of the Field. NALL Working Paper No.19, University of Toronto. www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/19formsofinformal.pdf

3 Knowles, MS, Holton III, EF and Swanson, RA (2005). The Adult Learner. Elsevier

4 See for example Gorard , S, Fevre, R and Rees, G (1999) 'The apparent decline of informal learning', Oxford Review of Education 25: 5; Feinstein, L, Budge, D, Vorhaus, J and Duckworth, K (2008) The Social and Personal Benefits of Learning: A Summary of Key Findings, Institute of Education; Field, J (2008) 'Adult learning and mental well-being', paper submitted to the Commission of Inquiry into Lifelong Learning.

5 Livingstone suggests that adult informal learning can be likened to an iceberg – mostly hidden beneath the surface but with the potential to make a huge impact on learning as a whole. (Livingstone, D., (2000) "Researching Expanded Notions of Learning and Work and Underemployment" International Review of Education 46: 6: 499)

6 Becta, for example, highlights that three quarters of young people currently use social networking sites and 90% use e-mail or instant message services. partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=es&catcode=_es_ba_ht_03

7 A recent Ipsos-MORI poll commissioned by Futurelab found that nearly a quarter (23%) of adults were unable to cite any benefits of using technologies for learning.

8 See, for example, Pachler, N and Cook, J (2008) 'Mobile, informal and lifelong learning: a UK policy perspective', paper presented at Mobile Communication and the Ethics of Social Networking, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 25-27 Sept 2008.

9 Helsper, EJ (Oct 2008) Digital Inclusion: An Analysis of Social Disadvantage and the Information Society Oxford Internet Institute and Department for Communities and Local Government.

10 In the Ipsos-MORI poll commissioned by Futurelab, more than two in five adults reported that they experience barriers in using technologies for informal learning.

11 See, for example, Selwyn and Facer (2007) Beyond the Digital Divide: Rethinking digital inclusion for the 21st Century Futurelab.

12 Mitchel Resnick (2002), for example, draws our attention to the fact that "while new digital technologies make a learning revolution possible, they certainly do not guarantee it" and suggests that we need to ensure that digital technologies are not used to reinforce outmoded approaches to learning where learning is simply regarded as the tranmission of information.

[13] See, for example, Park, Mi Hee & Lee (2007) who give the example of using a blog as a learning diary. This enables learners to write posts reflecting on their learning and comment on each other's posts, thereby participating in the collaborative construction of shared understandings. This is a very different model of learning than simply being given a list of information to learn
(linc.mit.edu/conference/presentations/young_park.ppt).

[14] Evaluations of programmes to promote technology to enhance adult community learning have cited multiple benefits of using ICT and other technologies in non-formal adult learning. They have also identified several difficulties that may be encountered and the resulting need to ensure that staff are given the necessary skills and tools to enable them to successfully make use of technology as a learning medium and delivery mechanism. See for example Atwere (2006) Technology to Enhance Adult Community Learning (TrEACL) and Content for Adult and Community Learning (CACL) Projects: Evaluation Report: LSDA and NIACE).

About Futurelab

Futurelab is passionate about transforming the way people learn. Tapping into the huge potential offered by digital and other technologies, we are developing innovative learning resources and practices that support new approaches to education for the 21st century.

Working in partnership with industry, policy and practice, Futurelab:

_ incubates new ideas, taking them from the lab to the classroom

_ offers hard evidence and practical advice to support the design and use of innovative learning tools

_ communicates the latest thinking and practice in educational ICT

_ provides the space for experimentation and the exchange of ideas between the creative, technology and education sectors.

A not-for-profit organisation, Futurelab is committed to sharing the lessons learnt from our research and development in order to inform positive change to educational policy and practice.

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