

## EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR ADULT LEARNING

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### Digital Learning and Digital Skills

#### The Digital Landscape

The Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) reviewed skills across OECD nations in 2013 and found that an average of 14.9% of adults across OECD countries possessed either no or basic levels of ICT competence<sup>i</sup>, but that this varied from 6.4% in Sweden to 26.9% in Italy. In the UK, there are approximately 9.5 million people aged 15 and over, who do not have Basic Online Skills<sup>ii</sup>, so cannot use technology to communicate, find, retrieve and publish information, while keeping safe online - essential skills to participate in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. These people are also less likely to find and gain employment. By 2015, 90% of jobs in the EU will need at least basic computer skills, but around half of adults in the UK do not have these skills, with 62% of employers concerned about the level of IT skills in their current workforce.<sup>iii</sup>

Many adults without basic digital skills have had little formal education or achieved little educational success in earlier life.<sup>iv</sup> Technology could transform their access to learning, overcoming geography, physical condition and finance and changing what, where, when and how they learn. However, technology could present barriers, where those most excluded from learning are further excluded. As more learning moves online, many who could benefit most from learning could be left behind.

The use of technologies in informal and community learning differs significantly from other forms of post-16 education. For example, the use of connected devices and cloud technology, despite being commonly used in informal situations, was not found to have had any major impact on informal learning across Europe by the Joint Research Centre (JRC).<sup>v</sup>

The drive to address digital learning is strong in England, with the government's Department of Business, Innovation & Skills responding positively to the recommendations of the Further Education Technology Action Group's (FELTAG)<sup>vi</sup>. Despite this, NIACE's "Implementing FELTAG" webinar polls suggest that there is still some way to go before providers use learning technologies universally, especially in community learning; 37% of practitioners (across FE & Skills) did not think (or did not know) whether their organisation would implement FELTAG recommendations, with a majority suggesting that training staff and influencing management should be a policy priority<sup>vii</sup>.

NIACE is currently undertaking research around England's digital learning landscape, specifically around intergenerational learning and learning for underrepresented groups. The findings are not yet published, but emerging evidence suggests that the issues around technology in informal, community and family learning are around staff development, the cost of resourcing (including devices and staff training) and the lack of connectivity in many community venues. Other issues include the cross-platform and cross-device compatibility and the digital skills of learners. The latter, however, appears to stem not from an inability to use the devices or platforms themselves, but from a lack of capability to optimise the technologies (e.g. information processing skills). This is also noted in the OECD report (OECD, p.96).

NIACE emerging research does, however, include some findings which contrast these findings. For example, a project (unpublished, NIACE, 2015) looking at informal intergenerational learners using "Raspberry Pi" devices to learn coding, suggests that learners can benefit greatly from this as it enhances their employability and all round digital literacy levels. However, in the JRC report, it is noted that programming and robotics are not seen as being important in informal learning. The findings of that project have also showed that the level of engagement with technology varies widely even within the same sector; one project studied was simply using technology in delivery while another was pioneering the use of coding.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs), may solve issues of funding for staff development. While the JRC report notes that MOOCs are more widespread outside Europe (Kampylis & Punie, p.36) it also notes that they are gaining traction in Europe. In the UK the development of FutureLearn by the Open University has provided a clear vehicle for free, open learning. However, most courses remain at an academic level, although there has been some interest in its application to community learning (for example from Peter Shuckie through the Ragged University<sup>viii</sup>) NIACE are about to publish research on Open Educational Resource provision across Europe. This suggests that, while there are many OERs available, they are often intended for a specific audience and that is not unusually one that is compatible for community learning<sup>x</sup>. Simultaneously, the Ufi Trust have funded a blended learning MOOC to develop the capacity and capability of the learning workforce to use learning technologies.

## NIACE's work as UK coordinator

As part of our work as European Co-Ordinator in the 14/15 year, NIACE undertook various activities to assess need and disseminate practice for digital learning across Europe. This work has informed current NIACE projects, including our lead on developing an online dissemination platform for best practice (AE-PRO) and our work around Open Educational Resources (OER-UP) for which we've led on the needs analysis.

NIACE undertook a European wide webinar focussing on technological approaches to English / Language and Numeracy provision across the EU. It was attended by 95 delegates from across the adult learning disciplines. The webinar found that access was perceived as the greatest barrier to progressing technology driven learning (by 64.2% of delegates) with support for staff development (14.2%) being the next largest.

The webinar also explored alternative learning models, both in terms of delivery (e.g. flipped classroom) and in terms of digital tools for delivery (e.g. online quiz software). It found that many tutors delivering basic skills were aware of few or no resources or models, but highly valued the chance for further networking and support.

As a result of this feedback, NIACE delivered a further series of 5 free one hour webinars which were attended by providers and practitioners from the UK and from Europe.

Webinars were open to delegates internationally and featured contributors from across the world. These webinars had an average live attendance of 82 delegates and an additional average of 175 views of the recording. These webinars were attended primarily by digital learning practitioners and found enthusiastic support for the use of learning technologies in community learning, but identified lack of senior management support, tools and resources to drive this agenda.<sup>x</sup>

NIACE further supported these groups with a resource kit for self organised learning groups<sup>xi</sup>. These resources featured many of the tools mentioned in the original and subsequent webinars in a form that could be easily updated. These resources were informed by a further webinar which had 14 attendants from a number of EU countries

## The policy response in England

The two current main drivers for UK government policy in these areas are:

- The UK government response to the FELTAG recommendations
- The House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills report: Make or Break: The UK's Digital Future<sup>xii</sup>

The latter calls for urgent action to improve careers advice and make connections between digital skills providers and employers to "future-proof young people". This report also identifies the importance of higher level digital skills (e.g. coding)

The UK is currently edging towards an uncertain future, however all major political parties in each of the 4 nations support the digital agenda for social inclusion and employment.

## Putting Digital Learning Policy into Practice

NIACE have been working on different approaches to affecting policy in practical situations using different methods:

- NIACE annual digital conference<sup>xiii</sup>
- NIACE webinar series "Implementing FELTAG"<sup>xiv</sup>

NIACE has also, working with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, undertaken research in the following areas:

- The barriers to using technology with specific groups
- Implications for niche groups of an online learning funding rate
- The barriers and advantages of Bring Your Own Device
- The use of technology in family learning
- Learning technology in the secure estate

NIACE work in Europe includes:

- The use of Open Educational Resources (OERs)
- Technology for Self Organised Learning
- Digital skills for niche groups (DLit 2.0) and Digital Age in Northern Ireland

This research is being used to inform NIACE policy and future projects which aim to provide further evidence, resources and guidance for learning providers.

## Questions to the Forum

1. Community learning providers and practitioners are keen to increase their use of learning technologies. However they have identified barriers including those of lack of staff capability, resource and support. What are the views of delegates and how should these issues be addressed?
2. Are forum members aware of any further examples of technology use by Self Organised Learning Groups? What are these and how effective is that use? How would forum members use / adapt the SOL online toolkit?
3. Adult learning providers have a good track record of delivering basic digital skills to marginalised learners, but lack institutional support, resources and connectivity. How could this be addressed to ensure learners progress their skills and what partnerships would help?

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<sup>i</sup> OEDC (2013) *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills* p.90

<sup>ii</sup> Media Literacy: Understanding Digital Capabilities follow-up. BBC September 2013 and March 2014

<sup>iii</sup> *Digital Agenda: ICT for jobs – European Commission*

<sup>iv</sup> [OxIS 2011 Report: Next Generation Users](#)

<sup>v</sup> Kampylis, P & Punie, Y (ed) et al (2014) *Mapping and Analysing Prospective Technologies for Learning*, Joint Research Centre

<sup>vi</sup> FELTAG recommendations <http://feltag.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/FELTAG-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> NIACE (2015) <http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/infographics/feltag3.png>

<sup>viii</sup> Ragged University, <http://www.ragged-online.com/tag/peter-shukie/>

<sup>ix</sup> Lockhart-Smith, A (2015) *OER-Up - National Report on Needs Analysis* NIACE

<sup>x</sup> NIACE Webinar (2015) *Taking FELTAG Forward*

<http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/infographics/feltag3.png>

<sup>xi</sup> NIACE (2014) *Self Organised Learning* <http://www.xtlearn.net/p/sol>

<sup>xii</sup> Select Committee on Digital Skills (2015) *Make or break: The UK's Digital Future* p.44



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xiii NIACE Digital Conference 2014 Storify Archive: <https://storify.com/KevAtNIACE/niacedigi>

xiv NIACE Implementing FELTAG webinars (2014- 2015) <http://www.niace.org.uk/implementing-feltag>