

DISCUSSION PAPER - digital technology & skills & learning

1.0 Foreword

The South West Regional Representative's Group, through its e-Strategy Sub-Group, has progressed a number of initiatives to raise the levels of regional awareness with regard to the role of digital technology in skills & learning. This work has included a regional conference on e-learning, a SLIM Learning Theme, a regional seminar on e-learning, Leadership & Management. The group now wishes to set out a case for a long-term approach by the regional Skills Partnership (SW RSP) to developing better understanding of how digital technology is profoundly affecting skills & learning & how the region might develop strategies to support effective practice in the future. This paper sets out some ideas to start consideration of this.

2.0 The Context

In skills & learning the role of information & communications technology (ICT) is no longer confined to e-learning. In the workplace, effective deployment of ICT increasingly drives the business development agenda & is the means by which continuing professional development, at both formal & informal levels, is managed. Similarly, not only does ICT underpin education providers' management information systems but increasingly it is at the heart of the way in which learners' access information. The last five years has seen the communications element of ICT driving the way in which collaboration is managed both across business & within the skills & learning sector. So, it is accepted that ICT is central to personalised learning & individual progression & key to development & competitiveness in the knowledge economy¹.

2.1 Skills & Learning & Government Policy

Over the past eight years, the Government has provided policies directed at technology & learning. For some time this has been largely concerned with direct central Government action on capital provision, technical infrastructure & staff development. It has been also a process of working through the various education sectors, from schools, HE, FE, & Adult & Community Learning. The position is now that in the medium term all learning providers and employers who offer training to their staff will be operating in an environment that places a premium on the use made of ICT and e-learning to deliver Government strategies, e.g. the skills agenda, targets for improving staying on and attainment rates at post-16, while meeting quality improvement targets. Developments in adult education will be similarly affected by these new initiatives. The context for the work includes;

- ["Realising the potential"](#) – the Foster Report on the role and development of further education colleges;
- ["The Agenda for Change"](#) – the LSC approach to quality improvement;
- ["Harnessing Technology"](#) – the Government E-Learning Strategy with its priorities for the Post-16 sector
- [14-19 White Paper](#) – with a focus on improving staying on rates, improving vocational opportunities from the age of 14 and providing wider opportunities for more able learners
- ["Every Child Matters"](#) – focussed on improvements in children's services
- ["Extended Schools"](#) – encouraging schools to develop partnerships with colleges, local employers and voluntary agencies to meet community needs

Within all of these initiatives there are the shared themes of "personalisation" and "collaboration" between different agencies to deliver Government targets. The source of these themes, within

¹ The main objective that the European Union should become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (European Council, Lisbon, March 2000).

education, is the [DfES "Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners"](#) which sets out the wider agenda for government funded education including the following;

- **Greater personalisation and choice, with the wishes and needs of children's services, parents and learners centre-stage.**
- **Opening up services to new and different providers and ways of delivering services.**
- **Partnerships with parents, employers, volunteers and voluntary organisations to maximise the life chances of children, young people and adults.**

The implications for the region are a refocusing on a key role in meeting the skills needs of the economy and responses to wider initiatives in collaboration with schools and HE partners. The new developments in inspection and quality assurance are supported by changes in teacher training to introduce qualified teacher status for learning and skills (QTLS). ICT and E-Learning are seen in all of the recent government statements as being a critical medium for delivery and institutional development, enabling transfer of learner data, recording learner achievement and supporting staff and institutional development as well as providing the medium for e-government and e-citizenship

In the new inspection cycle more emphasis will be placed on self-assessment by learning providers and on their quality improvement mechanisms. In the near future these elements of policy will be drawn together through the following;

- The launch of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) with its wide remit to improve the quality of provision for learners in the post-16 sector;
- The implementation of the Foster Report with its recommendations for implementation by 2008 and a clearer strategic role for colleges in meeting the skills needs of the economy;
- A White Paper on further education to integrate the work around the initiatives noted above.

Within the broad developments envisaged by government and national bodies is an assumption that ICT and e-Learning will be critical in transforming the learning experiences of adults and in providing the basis for skills training and business development to meet national targets and respond, via regional initiatives, to the process of globalisation.

It is important to note that this approach is also cross-Departmental in Government, emphasising:

- high quality training & support for integrated practice
- key tools for developing leadership & management
- integrated information services for all citizens
- supporting transformation and reform.

So, it is recognised that in both business & individual life, ICT is now woven into the fabric of the environment & includes the way in which we learn informally, develop communications networks, manage information & develop knowledge.

2.2 The Regional Position

Over the past decade, the focus on ICT at regional level has justifiably been a matter of concentrating on technical infrastructure. More recently, the SW FRESA has acknowledged the cross-cutting importance of ICT in learning & skills for regional competitiveness - but has characterised this too narrowly as e-learning or avoided it as being too all-pervasive to tackle directly. Yet increasingly we are aware that empowering business, communities & individual citizens to function effectively in the information society & knowledge economy is far more than simply providing technology & training on



computer applications. Accessibility to technology is an issue of business & enterprises' understanding & adoption of e-business; an issue of learner capacity, not of counting workstations & recognition that developing 'ICT comfort' is not ICT learning; & Internet user skills not being just about technological knowledge, but about developing applied learning theory skills.

As a Regional Skills Partnership, how might the South West Enterprise & Skills Alliance provide any steer, insight, ideas or support for how our region develops the use of digital technology to support the skills & learning agendas it is committed to? For example, as a region, how do we understand the current position & future requirements for:

- Learners, both in the workplace & at home, who are already creating personalised learning environments using digital resources.
- The implications of acknowledging ICT skills as one of the 'skills for life'.
- The extent to which digital technology is reinforcing & reproducing existing inequalities in skills & learning.
- The way in which digital technologies themselves, rather than any policy, can enable business, particularly smaller businesses, to be heard in order to reshape skills & learning provision.
- The role of digital technology in:
 - learners' choices (IAG & career choice & development);
 - skills & knowledge (curriculum);
 - learning environments (pedagogical, institutional, & including collaborative environments);
 - feedback (assessment & recognition).

3.0 Outline Recommendation

To develop a methodology to bring information and intelligence on key aspects of digital technology, the development of the knowledge economy & skills & learning to policy makers and practitioners across the South West to better inform the partners of the South West Enterprise & Skills Alliance concerning:

- The range of pressures & opportunities posed by digital technology in supporting the range of skills & learning agendas;
- The comparative position of the South West region in the context of the other English regions, Europe, & the international scene;
- The implications for the region's strategic management of digital technology developments in the context of Government policies;
- Specific advice regarding programmes & projects to assist the positive development of digital technologies in the region supporting skills & learning & the knowledge economy
- The development of a Learners' Charter for Personalised Learning².

ANNEX 1

² See Annex 1.





The Learner's Charter for a personalised learning environment

As a learner I expect:

Choices

- To be considered as an individual with wide-reaching potential irrespective of age, gender, disability, ethnicity or socio-economic status.
- To take joint responsibility for and be seen as an active agent in determining my own learning priorities.
- To understand and critically engage with the choices open to me in the education process.
- To understand the potential implications of these choices personally, socially and economically.
- To develop the personal and social skills and attributes necessary to make these choices and to engage with the people and resources of the education process.

Skills and knowledge

- To be supported to co-design my own curriculum and learning goals.
- To draw upon and make connections between the expertise and competencies I develop across all areas of my life.
- To develop my expertise and understanding in knowledge domains that are of personal significance to me.
- To be supported to take risks and develop understanding in unfamiliar knowledge domains.
- To have access to learning which will prepare me well as a member of the adult population.

Appropriate learning environments

- To have access to different teaching and learning approaches and resources that meet my needs.
- To have access to people who are able to extend and develop my understanding in my chosen areas.
- To have access to learning environments and resources that enable me to develop my understanding and experience in authentic and appropriate contexts.

Feedback

- To use diverse assessment tools to enable me to reflect upon and develop my own learning at times and in sites appropriate for me and in ways which inform decisions about my future learning.
- To have access to a diverse range of assessment mechanisms and media that are appropriate to the activity I am participating in.
- To achieve recognition for learning irrespective of the context of my learning (in home, in school, in workplace, in community).
- To achieve recognition for learning that enables me to progress within the wider community.
- To participate in assessment activities that provide feedback to the education system and are used to improve the learning environments in which I learn.