



EATT

Equal Access to Technology Training

IRISH LITERATURE REVIEW

Encouraging older people of all abilities into IT training

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Introduction

There is a notable absence of literature on training opportunities in computer skills for older people with vision impairment in Ireland. Therefore, this review will concentrate on policies and initiatives aimed at meeting the IT training needs of older people of all abilities. The section on policy aims to provide an insight into the current thinking at Government level on ways to make IT accessible to older people and people with disabilities. The section on Encouraging older people of all abilities into IT training (including a subsection on older people with disabilities/vision impairment) outlines some of the courses, innovative ideas and strategies adopted in Ireland to facilitate older people into IT training. This also includes ways in which IT can be used as a medium for learning. The literature included in this review has been restricted as much as possible to people within the 35 plus age group. The review will outline Initiatives in Ireland aimed at encouraging people over the age of 35, especially people who are long-term unemployed, back into all types of education and training. These initiatives include the availability of grants, and other financial incentives as well as flexible entry requirements to training courses. Albeit indirectly, such initiatives encourage people with a disability over the age of 35 to undertake IT training courses or take up further education courses, which generally incorporate acquisition of computer literacy skills as part of the curriculum.

Access to IT by older people and people with disabilities

According to a recent survey carried out by the Office of the Director of Telecommunications Regulation (ODTR) (2001), 27% of Irish people currently have Internet access at home. However, the Work Research Centre (2000) found that 64% of Internet users were under the age of 35, which only make up 44% of the adult population.

The number of people on the blind person's register amounts to approximately 7,000 (visual acuity $\leq 6/60$ in the better eye or where a field of vision is limited, the widest diameter of vision subtending an angle of 20 degrees or less). Of this number, 6.5% fall within the 0 - 18 years, 40.7% fall within the 18 to 65 years age group and over half (52.8%) of the vision impaired population in Ireland are over the age of 65 years. Overall, there is a lack of data on the level of usage of computers among the older vision impaired population. Bearing in mind that older people generally have categorised as 'late adopters' of IT, older people with vision impairments will also fall into this category.

There seems to be a digital divide between those who are in education and employment and those who are not. Results of an Information Society Commission (ISC) survey (2000a) show that only 30% of unemployed people are familiar with a personal computer, whereas 87% of students and 64% of the Total workforce are computer literate. The Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996) highlights that

'participation by people with disabilities in education at all levels is significantly below that of the population in general' and the unemployment rate among people with disabilities is approximately 70 per cent. Therefore, people with disabilities outside of educational system and the workforce will have more limited expose to computers.

Information society policy

When Information Society policy was beginning to develop in Ireland, government policy was criticised in the 'Report of the Information Society Steering Committee' for its strong focus on the economy and much less focus on how digital information and services could meet the needs of marginalised groups (NESC, 1999; 101). In response to the ever-expanding role played by IT in Irish Society, in 1997, the Irish Government established an Information Society Commission. Its objectives were to conduct research in order to provide advice and guidance to the Government in adopting policies that will ensure that Ireland develops to its full potential as an Information Society and to promote awareness of the benefits of Information Technology. The Information Society Commission has published a number of reports, which set out a strategic framework for the development of an Information Society in Ireland. Some of these policies attempt to equalize access to technology by all members of society. The ISC recommends a need for investment in lifelong learning, increased provision of IT training for older people and promotion of access to

technology for people with disabilities (See the Third Report of the Information Society Commission, 2000c).

The ISC has also clearly recognised the role of community and voluntary sector in developing Information Society policy and it has created an advisory group, Connected Communities that includes representatives of people with disabilities and older people. The ISC report 'Early and Late Adopters of New Technology' (2000a) recommends that in addition to providing access to a computer and awareness of the practical benefits of computers to the daily lives of late adopters of new technology, it is equally important to provide appropriate support and training in the use of the technology. Although, the ISC does recognise older people as late adopters of IT and highlights the barriers to accessing IT (Information Society Commission, 2000a), none of the ISC reports focuses specifically on the needs of older people with disabilities.

Lifelong learning policy

An Irish Government Green Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education and Science, 1998) recognised that failure to provide access for adults to education and training in Information Technology "...can reinforce exclusion from economic participation and impact directly on competitiveness" (p.23). It acknowledged that while over 25% of all third level places in the OECD go to mature students (aged 26 plus), in Ireland this figure is less than 5%. The Green Paper lists the strategies needed for increased third level mature student

access as the development of outreach strategies, access programmes, counselling and mentoring systems, flexible accreditation and provision in community settings. Albeit indirectly, such initiatives also encourage adults with a disability to undertake IT training courses or take up further education courses which generally encompass computer literacy skills as part of the curriculum.

This Green Paper was followed with an Irish Government White Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education and Science, 2000), which set out the blueprint for the future development and expansion of adult education. It outlines the compelling reasons as to why IT should be integrated into education and training systems for adult learners as: (1) vocational and educational reasons - "Knowledge and familiarity with new technologies will be an important dimension of employability in the Information Society. This is of particular relevance to Ireland in light of the increasing demand for these skills and their importance for the continued growth of the Irish economy" (p.99); (2) Pedagogic reasons - "IT can improve the quality of the educational experience by providing rich, exciting and motivating environments for learning" (p.99); (3) Social benefits - "It is important that all people, regardless of social or economic background, should have equal access to new technologies" (p.100).

Distance learning

In addition, the Government White Paper on Adult Education recognised the rapid growth of the Internet in Ireland. Such growth inevitably means that increasing numbers of adults will seek access to education and training opportunities by using IT as a medium for learning. "Educational institutions in Ireland, while to the forefront in teaching about IT, have been slow in utilising IT in their teaching, particularly in the development of out of classroom teaching. While this has implications for the education sector in the context of global competition, it also reduces the range and choice of possibilities which adult learners in Ireland can avail of in their learning pursuits" (p.99). The White Paper recognised the many advantages of IT as a medium for learning for adults in Ireland. "As an opportunity for adult learners, IT provides a whole new mechanism for overcoming distance; for accessing information from one's home or workplace; for pursuing accredited learning programmes as more and more institutions adapt their programmes for electronic delivery and for interaction with other learners in a virtual classroom environment" (p.99). The Information Society Commission also recognised that new technology can be used as a way of overcoming obstacles such as physical access for people with disabilities enabling a higher degree of equity (Information Society Commission, 2000c; 119).

Although the White Paper acknowledged the benefits of distance learning programmes, it was also concerned with the limitations of IT in educational applications and concedes that it

is better to look at the virtual learning environment as supplementing rather than replacing the actual one. It nonetheless stated that the application of IT in adult education practice is still in its infancy and a vast potential remains to be realised. 'If this potential is to be tapped, and indeed if Ireland as a society is to maintain its position vis-à-vis other countries in the information revolution, it is imperative that the learning blocks in accessing IT are removed' (p.99).

Encouraging older people of all abilities into IT training

In recognition of the growing importance of computer literacy for adults generally, the Irish Government have planned a National Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme as part of its Back to Education Initiative. This will be the first national campaign in IT training for Irish adults. The main elements of this programme will include: a national programme of IT training up to and including NCVA Level 2 standard, technical support for adult education providers to enable them to maintain, upgrade and network their IT facilities, and curriculum support arrangements.

The Information Society Commission has also organised a number of awareness raising activities to target adults that are late adopters of new technology including:

- establishing an Internet Venues Directory showing the nearest point of public Internet access, accessible through a lo-call number;

- an IT road show which comprises of a mobile computer training unit providing basic email and Internet training to groups at local community level;
- awareness evenings, distribution of information packs and attendance at exhibitions other than technology events such as the National Ploughing Championships and a television and radio series to persuade people not ordinarily exposed to technologies of the benefits it can bring.

Access within the community for people aged 55 plus

There have been a number of innovative initiatives in Ireland which specifically aim to encourage access to IT for people aged 55 plus at community level.

- **St. Ann's Senior Cyber Café** is solely for over-55's and is open on a daily basis. This initiative is partly funded by the government. With the support of a tutor, users can surf the Internet or use e-mail. The Café also provides a social function whereby people can arrange to meet over a cup of tea in its 'Friendly Café (Jones, No Date).
- **St. Andrew's Computer Centre** in Dublin also provides a free course on Internet access to older people.
- **The Blackrock Education Centre** set up another initiative which attempted to develop computer skills among older people, however this initiative has been limited in its development due to financial difficulties.

Library access projects

In its report entitled 'IT Access for All' (2000b), the ISC identified a number of potential public sector strategies to encourage access to IT by socially marginalised groups. Amongst its suggestions is that libraries (including mobile libraries) should become key access points to the Internet for the general public and should offer self-learning computer and cyber skills programmes (ISC, 2000b). Under the EU funded Testlab project, in conjunction with the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, six libraries were selected by the Department of the Environment and Local Government to pilot accessible Internet access and library catalogues for people with vision impairment. This project was very successful and it reported that there has been 'significant levels of demand for services of this nature' (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1999; 54). The 'Branching Out' report recommends financial investment by the government for the provision of optical scanners and for the development of accessible facilities in more public libraries.

The ISC also proposes that Government offices should host access points and that new Government offices should be built in such a way that allows twenty-four hour access for citizens to use the Internet. One particularly forward-looking suggestion is that the community and voluntary sector should themselves become Internet access points, which will allow their own community to access the Internet through them. However, the ISC also recognises the barriers encountered by people with

vision impairments when accessing the Internet due to many inaccessible websites (ISC, 2000b; 36). The idea of providing an email address for every single citizen has also been considered in Ireland. Again, the ISC recognised that some 'web-based e-mail services currently available have proved difficult to use ... especially those with visual impairments who need to make use of screen readers' (2000b; 74). The ISC also suggests that school facilities should be open to their communities after hours, at weekends and out of term enabling local people to access their IT facilities.

IT access and training at a local community level

Ennis Information Age Town Project, a competition sponsored by Eircom, a private Internet Service Provider, resulted in 49 towns throughout Ireland developing strategies for improving the use of IT in their own community. Within Ennis, the winning town, personal computers were distributed to 4,500 households resulting in Internet access levels of 80 per cent. Social inclusion was a key goal of the Ennis Information Age Town project. For people with disabilities funding was provided to purchase the appropriate assistive technology. One of the Ennis best practice awards was given to person with vision impairment for innovative use of technology. Senior citizens were offered free computer classes within the local community school. Four of those who passed their European Computer Driving License set up the Sunset Group of Ennis Senior Citizens. With the help of a tutor, the Sunset Group

embarked on designing a monthly online newspaper (<http://sunset.ennis.ie>).

Another initiative which facilitated access and Training in computer skills by the local community is the **Wicklow Information Network**. A network of IT centres were set up throughout Wicklow 'to narrow the IT skills gap experienced by late adopters of technology in rural communities by offering up to date IT training required for participation in today's work place'. All individual needs were catered for, either on a one-to-one basis or in a group situation. Some of the centres have become recognised test centre for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and Microsoft User Office Specialist (MOUS) (Wicklow Information Network, No date).

The **Westmeath Community Development Ltd** project also provided a mobile IT training programme in rural community centres for 10 weeks at a time to provide training opportunities for the local community. A beginner's course was open to all members of the community. Classes were small with a maximum of 10 participants so that individual needs could be catered for. The first programme that ran in Kinnegad Community Centre had 120 participants (ComputerScope, 1998). There is no data on the take up of these courses by older people although it would appear that an attempt was made to cater for all individual needs.

ECDL Ireland

The **European Computer Driving License (ECDL)** was formally launched in 1997 as a means of bench-marking computer literacy for business, education and the voluntary sector. In 1998, ECDL Ireland launched a Test Drive Initiative to coincide with a feature on the ECDL as part of a television series. Viewers were invited to call a free phone number and visit one of 250 participating computer training centres throughout Ireland. During this visit, a hands-on introduction in using a computer was provided. In addition, participants were given a multi-media CD-ROM containing an introductory tutorial to take away. Over 25,000 such discs were distributed as part of the Test Drive. Unfortunately, no data was available on whether people with vision impairment participated in this initiative.

Distance learning

With the development of bodies such as **OSCAIL**, the national distance education centre, there has been an increasing usage of distance and flexible models for educational delivery in Ireland. In particular, the Adult Education Centre in University College Dublin is experimenting successfully with online delivery of courses including courses on computing, using the Internet. **DeLLTTi** (Lifelong Learning Online) at www.ucd.ie/~delltti/intro.htm is a virtual teaching environment. Among other things, students are given the opportunity to participate in class discussions, e-mail their tutors or other class members, self-test, or take part in group work.

The course attempts to reduce a sense of social isolation by students by providing an interactive element to the course.

Encouraging older people with disabilities including those with vision impairment into IT training

While the IT training needs of older people with vision impairment in Ireland have been overlooked until recently, there have been several developments which go some of the way in addressing this void. Since the year 2000, the Irish National Training and Employment Authority, FÁS has had responsibility for labour market training of adults with disabilities. As a consequence, it has had to make its premises and courses accessible to people with disabilities, and trainers and other employees are undergoing disability awareness training. While FÁS do not provide IT training courses specifically designed for adults with disabilities, they offer a range of IT courses (including online IT courses at www.fas-netcollege.com adopting the principle of lifelong learning) which can be adapted to meet individual needs in an integrated setting. Other provisions offered by FÁS promote personal assistance at work, grants for the adaptations to the workplace and subsidies to employers for employment of people with disabilities.

Other initiatives which encourage people aged 30 plus into IT training have targeted long-term unemployed people. Bearing in mind the high level of unemployment among people with disabilities generally, these initiatives will consequently encourage this group to take up mainstream IT courses

(Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, 1996). Fast Track to Information Technology (FIT) was one such initiative, established in 1999 to provide computer training for long-term unemployed people, including people in receipt of a disability payment from the State. The course offered a focused IT training programme in order to prepare participants for return to the workforce. This initiative sought to provide 3,500 people with training and full-time employment in the IT industry in the Dublin area by 2002 (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2000). It was highly successful, with many participants obtaining well-paid employment. Its success was attributed to the high quality of the computer training and its provision of a supportive environment, sensitive to the personal and financial demands placed on its trainees. In addition, FIT was offered from local employment services which are scattered throughout the Dublin area in order to ensure that no participant had to travel very far in search of information and assistance.

The National Training and Development Institute (NTDI) (part of the REHAB group), provides training and development services to people with disabilities in Ireland. Its courses are designed to prepare participants for the workplace and include various IT courses, such as 'Computer Skills for the Visually Impaired' (Level 2) and 'Information Technology by Distance Learning' (Level 2) (National Training and Development Institute, 2000).

In 1996, the National Accreditation Committee (NAC) was set up by the Irish Government to manage the development and

implementation of accreditation for centres providing training to people with disabilities. This Committee provides a means to ensure that training including IT training provided to people with disabilities complies with certain standards.

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) has an NAC approved training centre which provides a rehabilitative course and workskills programme for people with vision impairment between the ages of 16 and 65 years. It aims to facilitate trainees in making a successful transition to independent living and occupational integration. As well as mobility, daily living skills, Braille, literacy and numeracy courses, participants can also sample basic IT and word processing skills. This course has been very successful often leading to further training and employment.

The NCBI also operates a technology service, providing technology equipment and assistive technology as well as a regional service of technical support and assistance in its use to people with vision impairments on a national basis. In 2002, under the CAIT programme, funded by the Department of Public Enterprise, the NCBI has put into place a national infrastructure of trained volunteers who are available to visit the homes of people with vision impairment, providing whatever technical support is needed. NCBI is also recognised as a clearing agent for the Technical Aids Grant, which is funded and operated, by the Department of Health and Children through some of the local area health boards. By means of this grant, assistive devices and software can be provided to people with

vision impairments for their personal use at home. However, some health boards stipulate that recipients of the grant must be under the age of 65 years.

A European funded course 'IT for People with a Visual Impairment' which adopts a lifelong learning approach has also been operating successfully for the past number of years in County Kerry. Tailored to meet the individual needs of the participants, it is designed to provide practical skills in computer literacy leading to further training, education and employment. The successfulness of this course can be attributed to the way in which the training is provided. The course offers the opportunity for social interaction and attempts to provide training in a relaxed environment. The transport arrangements of the participants are considered and course hours are made flexible. One of the course modules focuses on personal development where an initial assessment of the person's needs and expectations from the course are examined. The educational level of the participants' are also assessed in order to ascertain their level of literacy and numeracy. The course caters for all age groups. A life-long learning approach is offered for those over the age of 60 years. The course offers the opportunity to participants to attain NCVA level 1 Certification and European Computer Driving Licence Certification (National Council for the Blind of Ireland, 2001). This initiative is very successful, with a number of graduates obtaining full-time employment.

Colaiste Ide Open Learning Centre

An IT training course was set up for people with vision impairment of all age groups in the Open Learning Centre at Colaiste Ide Senior College in Dublin (Ryan, 1998). The Centre has become a recognised ECDL test centre. The course has proven to be extremely popular (Visually Impaired Computer Society, no date) and has illustrated that community education in an open learning environment is an effective way of offering IT literacy for those outside of the formal education system. In 2001-2002, 7 students participated in the course of which, 4 completed all of the seven ECDL modules successfully. Currently, 9 students are undertaking the course.

Conclusion

There has been a marked absence of analysis on the IT training needs of older people with vision impairment in Ireland. Overall, Government policy on making Information Society accessible to older people in Ireland has been progressive and forward-looking. Some of these policies attempt to equalize access to technology by all members of society and recommend a need for investment in lifelong learning, increased provision of IT training for older people and promotion of access to technology for people with disabilities. However, putting such policies into practice requires financial investment and political commitment. It would seem that the more successful initiatives encouraging older people into IT training are those that are delivered at community level and adopt a holistic approach, tailoring courses to meet the individual needs

of trainees and incorporating personal development skills as well as technical skills.

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