



EATT

Equal Access to Technology Training

UK LITERATURE REVIEW

Encouraging older people of all abilities into IT training

Royal National Institute of the Blind

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This project is part funded by the EU Leonardo Da Vinci programme



Education and Culture

Leonardo da Vinci

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First Edition 2003

Introduction

The EATT project defines older people as aged 35 plus. In the UK, the term "older people" or "older learners" would generally relate to the 55 plus age range. However, every effort will be made to bring the UK review as closely as possible to target age group of the EATT project.

Incidence of vision impairment in the UK

A recent report (National UK Statistics, 2001) reveals that access to the Internet tends to decrease considerably with age with only 11 per cent of the 65 plus age group with access to the Internet in comparison to 69 per cent of 25 to 44 year olds.

In 1997, 193,956 people were registered as blind and 160,197 as partially sighted in the UK. The definition of blindness states that a person should have a visual acuity of $< 3/60$ or visual acuity between $3/60$ and $6/60$ and a considerable contraction of the field of vision or visual acuity $> 6/60$ and the field contraction covering majority of the field. For partially sighted people, visual acuity is between $3/60$ and $6/60$ and a full field of vision, visual acuity between $6/60$ and $6/24$ and a moderate contraction of field of vision or visual acuity is up to $6/18$, or even better, with a gross field defect (RNIB, 2001). Eighty per cent of people with sight problems in the UK are 65 or over.

Information society policy

UK government level policy on making IT accessible to older people is the responsibility of the e-government part of the Cabinet Office. This takes forward the modernising government

agenda. Information about their activity and strategy can be found at www.e-envoy.gov.uk.

Some of the clearest policy statements, backed up with initial research, relevant to the EATT project are made within the policy documents "UK online" (2000) and "UK online strategy" (2001). These documents merely spell out an overall e-policy framework and do not mention specific group such as older people with vision impairments. However, inclusive access issues which relate to older people and people with a disability can be developed through these policies. Community and voluntary organisations have also been to the forefront in influencing inclusive Information society policy at Government level and lobbying for its development and implementation through these policies.

Ensuring that older people are confident in terms of computer literacy falls best within the over-arching theme, "Confident People". One of the Confident People UK government goals is to "embed information and communication technology skills in the education system and throughout lifelong learning". The government recognise that the elderly and disadvantaged have often developed resistance to learning computer literacy skills, sometimes because of unsuccessful attempts to learn in the past, sometimes because of a basic lack of confidence and opportunity. At the same time, research by the Department for Education and Employment or DfEE (2000a) showed that if older people aged 50 plus elderly and disadvantaged people

want to and choose to learn, they are more likely to pursue IT skills acquisition than any other learning activity.

Lifelong learning policy

Recent relevant UK policy should be viewed in light of the European Convention on Human Rights and its incorporation into UK Law in 1998 under the Human Rights Act. This Act prohibits discrimination and requires public bodies to ensure the right to education. Even more recent UK legislation, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act (SENDA) 2001, requires changes to college and university policy and practice. These have clear implications for meeting the needs of students with disabilities, including students with a serious sight loss who require equal access to the curriculum through assistive technology.

The Act states that education providers must not treat learners with a disability "less favourably" for reasons relating to the disability and states that "reasonable adjustments" should be made such as providing learning materials to students with vision impairment in accessible formats (Braille, tape, disk, or large print). Some of the specific adjustments that can be made are summarised in JISC (2001) that include provision such as text enlargement software, large screens and screen-reading software for learners with vision impairment, accessible faculty intranets and institutional web sites.

The UK's higher education sector (degree level education and Higher National Certificate/ Diploma levels) has also been

informed recently by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The QAA published a Code of Practice on Students with Disabilities (1999). The Code sets out 24 precepts or standards which colleges and universities are obliged to meet. Covering teaching and learning, the precepts cover areas such as provision of equipment and assistive technology to learners with a disability. The three QAA Precepts of clear relevance to the EATT project are:

- ensuring students with a disability have access to appropriate computer facilities; that laboratory and other equipment can be used by people with a disability (precept 3);
- provision of IT and personal support for students with a disability (including those not in receipt of disabled students allowance), based on an appropriate assessment of individual need (precepts 6, 18);
- training staff to provide accessible electronic course material and supporting students' use of assistive technology (precepts 15, 17)

Initiatives/ Training Courses/ Services Encouraging Older People of all Abilities/ Disabilities/ Visual Impairment into IT Training

Internet access in the UK

As would be expected, access to the Internet decreases with age in the UK. A very recent report (National UK Statistics,

2001) provides access details but does not employ the aged 35 and over age range cut-off. However, it reveals steadily rising percentages of Internet usage from July 2000 to July 2001 across different age bands. By July 2001:

- 69% of 25 to 44 year olds had accessed the Internet
- 59% of 45 to 54 year olds had accessed the Internet
- 38% of 55 to 64 year olds had accessed the Internet
- 11% of 65 year olds and over had accessed the Internet

More males had accessed it than females, 56% of males compared to 47% of females.

Much of this usage is very regular. That is, 9,400,000 households (38% of all households) could access the Internet from home. This constitutes a radical increase in 4 years. In 1997, only 9% of all households could access it from home. At a more superficial level, but one which is very relevant to this report, 51% of adults had "accessed the Internet at some time according to figures from the July 2001 National Statistics Omnibus Survey". This amounts to 23,000,000 UK adults. Most had accessed the Internet in the month prior to the survey suggesting levels of usage greater than only very occasional usage.

Freedom to Learn

The government working group of professionals and practitioners reported in 2000 after a wide-ranging investigation

of the basic skills needs of adults with learning difficulties and disabilities (DfEE, 2000b). It considered a range of improvements for skills teaching and learning. In its report 'Freedom to Learn: Basic Skills for Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities', the working group specifically recommended that more funding should be made available to improve materials and IT equipment for teaching and learning.

It is worthwhile quoting from the report since the challenges it raises are relevant to the remit of the EATT Project:

Freedom to Learn, Page 6 Clause 12: "If they are to participate in classes, many disabled learners require specialist or individual support. This is frequently unavailable. Some learners require specialist equipment, such as tape recorders, touch screens, Brailers, voice synthesisers, without which they cannot learn at an appropriate level. **Most would benefit from access to information technology where the software is appropriate. Many teachers are unfamiliar with the range of software available.**" (Emphasis added)

Freedom to Learn also considered access to basic skills for blind and partially sighted people (among the range of specific disabilities considered within its remit). It highlights the learning and assistive technology needs of two groups of people with vision impairments who are often neglected: those adults who experience sight loss later in life and those who have additional learning difficulties and/or hearing impairment. Poor access to technology is reported as one of the greatest barriers to

learning because some colleges fail to provide for their needs and because the whole field of community education does not adequately provide assistive technology. It reports "an acute shortage of opportunities to learn tactile methods of reading and writing such as Braille" (DfEE, 2000b; 15). It therefore advocates better availability of assistive technology to "meet individual needs", and more specialist support staff familiar with IT including IT trainers themselves. One of the recommendations specific to vision impaired learners is phrased as follows: "Information technology training for the teachers and technical staff involved in continuing education should include information about, and instruction in the use of, the main types of specialist hardware and software that learners require for access".

UK online computer training

This initiative ran throughout England from May 2000 until July 2001 and offered free, basic IT training to approximately 50,000 people. The aim of the initiative was to begin bridging the digital divide by offering people on state benefits the chance to develop confidence and skills in IT.

The UK government contracted out the training to a variety of training providers such as commercial training companies, voluntary organisations and further education colleges. Innovative delivery methods were employed. Sometimes, training was delivered on-site in colleges but in cases where recipients lived in remote rural locations, some providers delivered IT courses in community settings by means of laptop

computers. Learners could commit themselves at first to a taster IT session to gauge potential suitability of more in-depth IT courses. At the initial stage, they could also receive a basic skills assessment to establish any specific or additional learning needs. All learners were enrolled on courses which could lead to qualifications and awarding body certification but they were not required to achieve a full qualification. Courses included European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and CLAIT.

Three main methods were used to target and encourage potential older learners to participate in this:

- referral to courses by learndirect, the UK-wide training database which can be accessed through a help line
- recommendations made to people by their local job centres
- advertising on billboards, public transport etc

Potential learners considered eligible for this IT training included:

- all those in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance
- all those on sickness and disability benefits
- those in receipt of the UK state pension

However, they all "had to be actively seeking work and have little or no IT experience". Those considered to be in retirement were seen to have a need for IT skills because many were shown to be remaining in a workplace (in paid or unpaid employment) beyond the official retirement age.

This initiative has now been evaluated and it has been shown that many older learners benefited from it. Over 70% of the learners were aged 35 plus while over 10% were classed as retired. An initial evaluation states: "Over 85% of participants rated their training as good or excellent, many later found work using IT, and most reported an increase in confidence, both with IT and in general" (Leatherbarrow, 2001).

The Department for Education and Science (DfES) stated that vision impaired learners were supported through this initiative but precise figures are not available. Some training was delivered in specialist colleges which had assistive technology available. While in other centres, particularly in rural areas, appropriate assistive technology was not already in place. This point emphasises the lack of access to assistive technology within learning centres across the UK. Currently, there is an attempt to rectify this problem through cooperation between the DfES and AbilityNet who seek to adopt pan-disability assistive technology solutions across a much wider range of learning centres than was tackled in the limited timescale of the UK online Computer Training initiative.

Silver Surfers Groups

Throughout the UK, there are now many local communities and college initiatives all designed to introduce older people to computers and the Internet. As well as colleges, training venues can include libraries, community centres and residential homes. An example was featured in the Times Educational Supplement (2001) where Rotherham Council in England had

created an initiative called "MaturITy". This was aimed at older people in residential homes and day care centres, encouraging them to learn IT skills.

Online learning

In the UK, the main entry point to online learning is at learndirect; www.learndirect.co.uk. This is widening access to learning across the 35 plus age range and learning is computer based. However, learning centres are, generally speaking, not accessible to blind and partially sighted people. Currently, the community and voluntary organisation, the Royal National Institute for the Blind, has been attempting to influence inclusive Information Society policy at Government level by lobbying for the development and implementation of accessible distance and open learning environments.

TechDis

The Technology for Disabilities Information Service (TechDis) initiative was formed by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in 2001 and is based in York at the Institute for Learning and Teaching (see Phipps, 2001). It provides an information service to further and higher education. It aims to assist access to teaching, learning and research for learners with a disability and trainers and to promote innovative practice in accessible IT. It works collaboratively with other UK-based services such as the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and is located at <http://www.techdis.ac.uk/>. Information is available on the main types of assistive technology that can be used by vision

impaired learners and illustrates them briefly with case studies from students with a vision impairment (lawrie@techdis.ac.uk). This initiative offers an easily accessible, inexpensive source of information on the Internet and acts as a means of awareness raising for training providers.

NIACE

The National Organisation for Adult Learning (NIACE) is one of the key organisations in the UK which campaigns on and influences public policy in the area of adult learning i.e. it is predominantly concerned with learners aged 35 plus. NIACE has led on a number of initiatives of relevance to EATT (see <http://www.niace.org.uk/>). It tends to provide briefing sheets which relate public policy in practical ways to older learners with disabilities. For example, it recently produced a briefing on the government's "joint investment plans (JIPs)" for older people (NIACE, 2001). Although JIPs relate primarily to health and social services, learning also features strongly. This is because the goal of JIPs is to move older people of working age towards working and out of poverty. At the practical level, NIACE is encouraging colleges and community education services to ensure they are involved in the drawing up of JIPs and in providing lifelong learning opportunities. NIACE has also produced a briefing sheet entitled 'Visually Impaired Older Learners' (NIACE, 2000) which emphasises the point that the needs of older vision impaired learners often go unrecognised. The briefing sheet also contains useful contact details for the main UK organisations that provide support to this group.

HAFAD

Hammersmith and Fulham Action for Disability (HAFAD) in London runs a number of disability led services including computer courses for any person with a disability. Learners range from those with no previous experience to those who are already skilled but wish to enhance their knowledge. A vision impaired users group meets at HAFAD regularly (<http://www.hafad.fsworld.co.uk/>).

RNIB TiLE factsheet training

RNIB's Technology in Learning and Employment (TiLE) centre in England offers a set of factsheets to people with vision impairments on issues to do with using assistive technology (<http://www.rnib.org.uk/technology/factsheets/factsheets.htm>). RNIB's factsheet on training provides a very comprehensive summary of training courses available in the UK and training providers. Sections in the factsheet discuss the following: selecting a trainer, self-training, training establishments which provide a list of trainers and consultants, user groups and technology suppliers who offer training.

Examples of specialist training establishments offering IT courses to people with vision impairments include:

Dorton College of Further Education in Kent, offering advanced access to Microsoft Windows courses with assistive technology, and ECDL through the Internet

RNIB Vocational College in Loughborough, offering a range of short IT courses and longer vocational qualifications both on-

site and by means of outreach support to students at various other regional colleges; specific mention is made to opportunities for older learners

Kingsway College in London, offering a one-year London Open College Network accredited IT course and an evening Internet course, both of which include training in Microsoft Windows 95 using assistive technology.

In recognition of the lack of any formal standard set for the provision of training to people with vision impairment in computer literacy skills using assistive technology, the British Computer Association for the Blind (BCAB) Trainer Certificate Scheme was set up in 2001. This scheme was resourced by the community and voluntary organisation, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). Consultation was made with the suppliers of assistive technology and those who provided training in their use. National standards were set which would measure a trainer's professional competence and arrangements were made with the Institute of IT Training (IITT) to adopt an accessible version of their Training Skills refresher course.

People with vision impairments can now use this standard as an assurance that they will receive value for their money. Both people with vision impairments and product suppliers will be able to source a suitably qualified trainer in their area so that they can avail of local quality training. In addition, the DfEE will be able to ensure that training provided for students or training provided under the Access to Work Scheme, have the BCAB certification. This scheme has been found to be effective and

workable and is recognised and supported by independent bodies and Central Government. The BCAB schemes distinctiveness lies in the very wide range of products in which trainer's competence is assessed and certified.

Conclusion

At the level of policy, the UK is moving ahead at a governmental level in ways which fit with the remit and goals of the EATT project. In some geographical areas within the UK, there are providers, trainers and agencies which do actually provide good one-to-one IT training opportunities for people with vision impairments aged over 35 year. There is a much wider set of providers able to provide training opportunities under a widening participation umbrella for similar groups: older learners generally, people with other disabilities, and so on. However, as is often the case, there is significant evidence of patchiness in provision for people with vision impairments aged over 35 year who specifically want to learn IT skills. There is not a lot of evidence of provision existing outside specialist providers such as RNIB Vocational College and HAFED. Certainly, at the level of UK wide online learning is simply not accessible and remaining so for some time to come. The EATT project is therefore suitably placed to make a substantial contribution, widening access to people aged over 35 year who seek a way back into work through re-skilling and enhanced independence in working with IT.

Finally, the EATT project should also bear in mind that the UK now has a widely accepted assistive technology trainer

certification scheme (BCAB) (West, 2001). This sets a national standard in training skills and in knowledge of IT products. Discussions are currently taking place about the possibility of this scheme being extend to other countries.

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