



A response from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) to the DIUS Informal Adult Learning Consultation

ALT, Registered Charity Number 1063519, is a professional body and scholarly association which seeks to bring together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology, which we define as “the broad range of communication, information and related technologies that can be used to support learning, teaching, and assessment”. We have around 500 individual learning technologists as members and over 200 organisational and sponsoring members. The latter two categories include Becta, DCSF, DIUS, QIA, LSN, CEL, LSC, JISC and HEA most of the UK's universities and a substantial number of FE and related institutions. This response, with the URL http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/DIUS_IAL.pdf was written by Frances Bell, Seb Schmoller, and Shirley Evans. For further information about ALT, go to <http://www.alt.ac.uk/>.

1. Understanding and improving on current provision

a) How can we understand more about the factors that are driving this diversity of activity?

One way is to look at research, particularly qualitative research, that focuses on the lived lives of adults, from young to elderly, rather than confining one's gaze to 'educational research'. There may also be pointers, such as government statistics on media use, that reveal opportunities for adults' informal learning that can be supported within their own context.

Certainly JISC's recent Ipsos MORI study into student expectations of ICT in HE¹ has shed important light on the behaviour of a particular segment of learners. A regularly commissioned – say biennial – “state of informal learning” study would be of value, concentrating on how and what adults are learning informally, and on what scale.

b) What are the conditions that make it easier for learners to learn? How can we support people to be more instrumental in their own learning?

Adults are often more comfortable learning with peers, as is shown, for example, by the success of the TUC's educational activities under the broad banner of unionlearn. Secondly, people learn for a specific purpose, e.g. an adult learner may be motivated to improve his literacy when his child gets to school age and is learning to read; or adults with an interest in genealogy may learn Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) skills in order to populate their family trees and find out more about their ancestors. Adults may then go on to use these literacy and ICT skills for other purposes, including for work. So two keys to supporting people to be more instrumental in their own learning (if this is a desirable policy objective) may be to provide resources for learning (support, materials, ideas) in contexts in which peer-support is likely to be available; and secondly to stimulate the supply of learning resources that match common contexts in which instrumental learning already happens. For example, Web search (a.k.a. “looking something up on the Internet”) is a key method by which a citizen will seek to find information pertaining to an informal learning need. It would be relatively easy to ensure that excellent resources could be found by seeking information pertaining to common contexts. This is not the case at present².

¹ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/studentexpectations.aspx> last accessed 12/5/2008.

² Note, for example, how poorly focused the results are for a well-constructed Web search on the terms <“helping my child” “learning to read” .uk>: <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22helping+my+child%22+%22learning+to+read%22+.uk&btG=Search>, with the most useful result, from a parent's point of view (a free web site maintained by the publishing company Pearson - <http://www.readathome.co.uk>), the 7th link down. Last accessed 12/5/2008.

c) How can we support and develop models of self-organised adult education, learning from (for example) the U3A model?

The short answer to this question is to enable funding and support to flow directly to the self-organising adults or to their organisations, rather than via learning providers. But care is needed: some adults, for example those with disabilities, or those with no tradition of collective action, may not access funding or support, yet have most need to benefit from it.

d) How can we improve the connectivity between different kinds of learning episodes, for example by helping people move from watching a TV programme to using the web, to joining a group and then to pro-actively teaching or sharing information with others?

By encouraging reflexivity in learners, perhaps by creating opportunities for learners to recognise where they are “teaching” or facilitating the learning of others. This could be done by “buddy” schemes, and for a substantial proportion of adults the “social web” may provide a vehicle for developing and supporting informal activity. Furthermore, public service broadcasters like the BBC can play their part by continuing to exploit media convergence, and by using the different channels at their disposal (web, broadcast, podcast, etc. in a coordinated way).

e) How can we further develop the culture of volunteering to support informal adult learning?

An example from the experience of one of the ALT members who contributed to this response, is a virtual community set up in a research project concerned with older participants with Coronary Heart Disease who formed small locally-based virtual communities facilitated by researchers. They have now formed a broader virtual community that they are now sustaining on their own, and whose topics are not restricted to health. For more on this see <http://www.heartsofsalford.net/>³ This group is now working with agencies such as the National Heart Foundation, Salford Primary Care Trust, and Salford City Council, whose Library-based training courses now make reference to the HeartsOfSalford site. Examining the opportunities for supporting informal adult learning within such multi-agency models would seem to be a fruitful line of enquiry.

By ensuring that volunteering, as against paid employment is included as a “relevant/valid outcome” when the efficacy of funding for education and training is being judged.

f) What are the conditions most likely to foster innovative approaches to adult learning?

When a group of informal learners can access relevant resources flexibly and quickly, without having to contend with complex bureaucratic hoops..

When the learning is part of everyday life rather than largely course-based, and when learning is self-directed and facilitated rather than “done unto”.

At the same time it must not be forgotten than many under- or unqualified adults crave (and/or benefit from) securing qualifications through their learning. It would be unfortunate if a drive to boost informal learning led to a loss of opportunities for adults to obtain qualifications.

³ Here is an extract from the home page of the Hearts of Salford web site. “A safe, Informative and relaxed online meeting place for people, and the families of people who are living with heart disease and related health conditions. Welcome! Hearts Of Salford is open to people of all ages. It's a safe relaxed place to come to find up to date information on heart and related health issues. As a member you'll be able to talk to other people with the same problems as yourself, share experiences and learn from each other. Get to know people and make friends, have a laugh.” Website last accessed 12/5/2008.

2. The Government contribution

a) Whether, and if so how, Government support for informal adult learning can be improved?

Currently the pendulum has swung too far towards the provision of qualification-bearing courses for young adults and towards employability at the expense of a broader spectrum of adult learning. The consultation document is to be commended for the importance that it indicated Government places on “structured and unstructured adult learning for enjoyment, personal fulfilment and intellectual, creative and physical stimulation”. To the extent that individual adult learners will be able to access formal learning using a “next generation” Individual Learning Account (ILA), DIUS could usefully examine if groups of learners could access resources and support using some from of Group Learning Account. In relation to this, suitable Internet-based tools would provide a mechanism for groups to form, and one way to develop such a mechanism would be using something along the lines of the MySociety Pledgebank⁴ through which groups of adults get together and commit to social actions of various kinds.

b) Whether you agree that, given the diversity of demand, need and type of provision that is made, it would be inappropriate to aim for a common funding system across Government, or a centralised strategy?

Neither a common funding system nor a centralised strategy seem appropriate, except in so far as a system is needed that provides an entitlement for learning and which enables a group of adult learners to draw upon public resources to get a (legitimate) need met. For obvious reasons a mechanism would be needed to enable priorities to be set, since demand would probably be greater than could reasonably be met. Provided checks are put in place to prevent providers from “doing unto” (see our response under 1f above), then local authorities and colleges are probably the best vehicle for running such a system. Other alternatives include collaborations between charities, libraries and UKOnline Centres⁵.

c) How can we ensure there is proper recognition and understanding of the wide variety of ways in which Government is supporting informal adult learning?

Although a periodically updated overview of the scale and scope of Government support for informal adult learning would be of value, achieving “proper recognition and understanding” is a major challenge that it may simply not be realistic to meet.

d) How can we make better use of Government resources, for example better use of premises?

By building into the remit of those who control publicly funded premises a requirement to maximise their use, and by using the levers for change that already exist (in particular funding and inspection).

e) Are there areas where Government should be actively removing barriers or creating new flexibilities in order to improve the use of resources?

Having access to the Internet (and the information resources and potential for communication that it provides) is becoming part-and-parcel of everyday life in advanced economies like the UK's. Whereas Internet-accessing devices continue to fall rapidly in price, the Government should be doing more to ensure that connectivity is ubiquitously and economically available (for example in rural areas, in accommodation used by older people, or in social housing) rather than patchily so, and for some, under financial terms that they are too poor to meet.

⁴ <http://www.pledgebank.com/> last accessed 12/5/2008.

⁵ Age Concern, for example, works to bring learning to community venues. See <http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcern/it.asp>. Last accessed 12/5/2008.

3. DIUS-funded informal adult education

a) Is the adult education service basically a 1970s model, now overtaken by the developments summarised in Chapter 1? Or is it a successful service that has the potential, with the reforms currently in train, to develop and thrive in the 21st century?

It is somewhere in between. There are enough instances of excellent practice for the “1970s model view” to be too much of a caricature for policies to be based on it. Furthermore, in some parts of the country the “1970s model” had plenty to commend it, with substantial resources devoted to adult learning, a rich spectrum of provision, and many adult lives changed for the better through it.

b) How are Local Authorities now organising their adult education services? What are their visions for the future and what are their experiences of different models of delivery today?

No comment.

c) Have we taken partnership working as far as we can? The scale of the support from other Government departments is important for each partnership to grasp and take advantage of.

No comment.

d) In terms of using the DIUS safeguarded budget, would it be better in future to focus spend on infrastructure and on the organisation of an effective service, rather than through direct subsidies to providers for putting on courses?

Not necessarily. Without direct subsidies to providers of courses, equity issues will arise, because capacity to pay varies very widely between different categories of learner, and geographically, with many of those who most needing to learn being least able to contribute.

e) Do we need the service to become more learner-led? Would a way of doing that be to explore the possible use of real or virtual vouchers, taking advantage of new technologies? These might build on the Skills Accounts mechanism being phased in, starting in 2010.

Notwithstanding the ILA fiasco, a voucher based system has plenty to commend it, certainly to the extent that its potential should actively be explored, and especially in relation to the Group-based scheme suggested above in our response to 2 a).

4. Equality of access

a) How can we do better in ensuring that no one is excluded from the benefits of learning? Or from the same opportunities that others enjoy?

The needs of an aging population, who need skills for living as well as working, and learning for interest and self-fulfilment, should be better catered for. To the extent that the proportion of people with care needs or disabilities rises with age, the demand for expert facilitation of and support for learning is increased, and this must be factored into any planning and funding for learning by older adults.

b) How well do we understand the barriers to learning as they exist at present, and how they affect particular parts of society? To what extent are the barriers financial? What action would address each of the barriers?

The barriers are both financial and social, and some of the social barriers may be almost impossible to penetrate, and this may have to be accepted.

c) What further actions could Government most usefully take to ensure more equal access to informal learning?

It is unfortunate that currently funding for assistive technology is generally only available to students or through the Access to Work scheme. One option to consider would be an "Access to Learning" scheme that supported the provision of assistive technology to learners whether their learning is formal or informal.

d) What further actions could others most usefully take?

No comment.

e) What more can Government do to overcome the 'digital divide' where the people who could most benefit from new ways of participating in adult learning are the least equipped to take advantage of them?

Our response to 2e) is relevant here.

5. Broadcasting and technology

a) What are the barriers to making the most of technology for learners? How can these be overcome?

The PC continues to be a barrier for learners who have not used one. The complexity of setting up and maintaining a PC disbars many users without knowledge and support, whilst easy-to-use devices such as Smart Phones can have much higher connectivity charges and inadequate interfaces for users without 20/20 vision and nimble fingers. The arrival of cheap and relatively unconfigurable devices like the Asus EEE is certainly a helpful development.

We are not convinced that initiatives like the Government's MyGuide will be successful in helping learners overcome the barriers, because the protective "walled garden" of tools and tasks that they provide may not prepare users for "life over the wall".

b) What do we know about the learning opportunities that will become available utilising new technology over the next 10 to 15 years? What is the best way of identifying these opportunities?

It is probably naïve to seek to make specific predictions 10 to 15 years hence. But some points may safely be made:

- device costs will fall steeply;
- providing citizens with connectivity at economical rates will remain a challenge that probably cannot be left wholly to the market;
- the free culture movement (characterised by Wikipedia and by the wide range of Open Educational Resources that are becoming available) will continue to flourish.

c) What opportunities, if any, are there to make learning a more central consideration in the future of broadband and the digital switchover? And in the development of mobile phone applications?

No comment.

d) How can we make greater use of interactive television?

No comment.

e) How can the connectivity between broadcast, physical and virtual resources and informal learning be further enhanced?

There is a disjunct between the information environment available to a formal learner in a University or College, and that available to an informal learner (or, for that matter, to a formal learner with a Local Authority or private training provider), with the former having free access to a much wider range of educational resources on line than the latter. Judicious adjustment to the copyright exceptions currently under consultation in post-Gowers review could make a very big difference here, if research is defined widely enough, and not by academic level, and if private study, as well as research, is covered by the copyright exception⁶.

f) How can we bring new Information and Communications Technology together with more established teaching and learning models so that there are integrated opportunities to learn?

We are not sure if this is the right question with which to conclude the consultation! Determined action to see through the next version of the Harnessing Technology strategy is clearly important. But Government needs to resist the temptation to see learning technology as a panacea, nor to expect quick wins, principally because the kind of integration that is needed involves social and cultural change (which is inherently slow), as well as technical change. In ALT's experience these kinds of changes are best secured by bringing practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers into dialogue, in a structured and sustained way, across the spectrum of educational provision: and it is one of ALT's key aims to contribute to this process.

12/5/2008

⁶ Our response to the copyright exceptions consultation is at http://www.alt.ac.uk/docs/UKIPO_consultation_ALT_final.pdf, and here is an extract that is particularly relevant to technology-supported informal adult learning: "We fully support the Gowers recommendation to allow private copying for research to cover all forms of content, and we believe either the expanded exception should cover private study as well as research or that the definition of the latter should be wide enough to embrace the former. We are concerned for UK IPO to ensure that "research" is defined widely enough and not by "academic level", and we believe that the expanded exception should cover all types of works. We do not believe that there should be a link to a formal course of study or to activity in a research establishment, believing that the extended exception should apply to citizens as a whole. In relation to the latter we note the current DIUS consultation on informal adult learning, and it would fly in the face of current policy thinking if research and private study were defined narrowly by one arm of Government, whilst being widely cast by another." Last accessed 12/5/2008.