

## ICT Skill for Life

The UK government announced in the white paper 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, Realising Our Potential that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) would be included alongside literacy and numeracy as skills for life, that is, skills essential for people to live and work in a modern society. The decision was clearly based on factors such as that 90% of new jobs and 76% of existing ones require some degree of ICT skills, and the significant trend to provide government and other services online. ICT skills and knowledge are increasingly vital to be able to participate in society. Adults without ICT skills, confidence and access to technology are at serious risk of being excluded.

The National Office of Statistics in April 2006 reports that 57% of households in the United Kingdom have Internet access in the home. This has increased dramatically over the last four years and is a considerable success in providing the population with access. However, if we analyse the information, it reveals that access tends to be skewed in favour of more prosperous areas and households (e.g. more access in SE England than Northern Ireland, less access for older people and poorer households).

A large proportion of the adult population do not use ICT. The Central Office for Information (2005) on behalf of the Myguide project undertook an analysis of non-users and a Mori survey in 2004 showed that about a third of the adult population, some 17 million people, did not use the Internet. This included about 3 million people who previously had used the Internet. Those who had never used the Internet tended to be older (over 55 years) with no formal qualifications and unemployed. An analysis of the non-users showed that over half potentially would be willing to learn the skills required if they could afford it, they could see the relevance of learning ICT skills and if the teaching was high quality.

Following the decision to make ICT a new skill for life, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority developed a standard covering entry levels and levels 1 and 2, this was the foundation for developing a national curriculum and a range of entry level qualifications. These have been trailed as part of an initial action research project (2005) and currently within a pathfinder project. The new qualifications are available to any provider to use with their learners.

The ICT Skill for Life standard and curriculum emphasises learning in a purposeful way, to meet the individual needs of learners. This is a significant change to traditional practice which is often centred on learning to use applications or if a purposeful context is provided it tends to be work related. This is of course a stereotype of provision but it is supported by the results of the action research project and more recent research (Luger, 2007). The provision of purposeful learning is clearly critical to the success of motivating non-users but does represent a challenge to teachers to change their approach to teaching ICT.

The relationship between the different skills for life is also important in that ICT has a key role in facilitating the learning of the other subjects. There have been several reports suggesting that ICT can motivate and assist the learning of literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Mellar et al (2007) investigated the effectiveness of ICT-based teaching strategies in literacy and ESOL. The research showed that learners could improve their skills in literacy, ESOL and ICT through an integrated approach.

In parallel with the development of the ICT skill for life is the decision to replace skills for life and key skills with functional skills. These are intended to cover both young people and adults and relate to GCSEs and the new 14 to 19 Diplomas.

There are a number of strands of development relevant to the achievement of a society with the skills, knowledge and confidence of ICT to gain its benefits. At the moment a significant proportion of the adult population is at risk of being excluded by a lack of the relevant skills. We need to implement ICT programme based on purposeful learning, integrate ICT with the other skills for life and consider the future develop of functional skills. These are major challenges.

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