

Meeting User Needs in the Provision of eLearning: The Role of Access, Motivation and Competence

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As one of the key challenges facing European countries at the beginning of the 21st century, the goal of increasing practice and intensity of lifelong learning is high on the political agenda currently. Many experts agree, however, that much still needs to be done before Europe can claim to have established lifelong learning as common practice across all segments of its population. A large number of barriers remain to keep people from engaging in adult education and training, in spite of a level of interest which is often considerable.

In this context, much attention has focused on the ability of ICTs to improve the process of learning and training, by giving easier access to more adequate learning content and more efficient ways to learn “anything, anytime, anywhere”. A recent report by a group of social policy experts enlisted by the European Commission claims that “e-Learning can make a major impact for social inclusion. It provides access to education and training opportunities for all, in particular for those who have access problems for social, economic, geographic or other reasons”¹.

Until now, however, there is very limited knowledge about the conditions under which the positive potential of ICTs for supporting “lifelong learning by all” can be turned into reality. It is certain that factors to be taken into account include not only access to ICTs and eLearning services, but – more importantly – also attitudes towards technology and learning in general, and the endowment with the skills required to use eLearning offers. Aspects of motivation are of key relevance for explaining attitudes towards lifelong learning, as stressed by the OECD: It considers motivation “an essential foundation for learning that continues throughout life. It requires attention to developing the capacity for ‘learning to learn’ through self-paced and self-directed learning”². A lack of motivation for learning often originates from individuals’ experiences with initial education, and more often than

¹ Commission of the European Communities (2001a) ‘e-Inclusion: The Information Society’s Potential for Social Inclusion in Europe [with the support of the High Level Group “Employment and Social Dimension of the Information Society” (ESDIS)]’, Brussels: European Commission.

² OECD (2004) ‘Lifelong Learning’. OECD Policy Brief, OECD Publications, Paris, p. 2.

not affects those who also lack the financial means and the time to participate in traditional training offers.

There is a danger that eLearning will benefit only those segments of the population who are already very likely to practise lifelong learning, while not reaching the rest of the population. This would imply the risk that eLearning will not contribute towards (or even endanger) social inclusion.

The paper tries to shed light on the issues involved by critically reviewing the relationship between lifelong learning and ICTs, and by presenting first results from the EU population survey undertaken early this year as part of eUSER, an EU funded research project looking into user orientation of online public services and how well current supply meets the needs and preferences of the European population.

Through the survey, data from a representative sample of labour market participants has been gathered in 10 EU member states. The survey instrument included an extensive list of variables which together may be able to explain why individuals take up lifelong learning in general, and eLearning in particular. Data has also been collected on user's satisfaction with eLearning courses and their features, and on the extent to which Internet-based learning has removed traditional obstacles to participation in lifelong learning.

The survey results support the view that if eLearning services are to reach wider parts of the population – and thereby provide an effective and efficient alternative to traditional modes of training provision – they need to fully integrate personal interaction with a guide or instructor, and also enable exchanges with other learners. Moreover, supplementing Internet-provided training with traditional classroom-type sessions (“blended eLearning”) – or the other way around – can be an effective way of avoiding the possible negative effects of training “at arm's length”.

In order to obtain deeper insight into the reasons why persons are, or are not, motivated to engage in adult education – and how this relates to attitudes and patterns of usage of ICTs – the adult population is grouped according to two typologies which have been developed and validated using the survey data. This allows us, for example, to distinguish between “adult learners” who are non-Internet users on the one hand, and “non-learners” who are using the Internet, on the other hand. Such a distinction seems necessary because radically different strategies might be needed for making eLearning attractive to each of these groups.

Looking at persons who already make use of Internet-provided training courses, the survey found evidence that eLearning does indeed make a difference for the possibility to engage in learning. A significant share of eLearning users would have been unlikely to participate in adult education if it had not been for the opportunity to do so via the Internet, which means in a way that is adapted to their specific personal preferences concerning time, place, speed and content of the course.

Speaker biographies

KARSTEN GAREIS is project manager at Empirica, Bonn. His main fields of interest are the way Information Society Technologies impact on employment patterns, on the locational behaviour of firms, and on social disparities. Since 1990 when he joined empirica, Karsten has carried out or overseen extensive empirical research focusing on Information Society phenomena such as multi-locational work, eLearning, eBusiness and co-operation using ICT networks. He was responsible for a number of large-scale multi-national surveys in European research projects including ECaTT, SIBIS and BISER. Other recent activities in this field have included the provision of expertise to Eurostat, DG Enterprise's eSkills Forum and CEDEFOP on topics related to eSkills and eLearning. Currently he is responsible for the sub-project on eLearning and lifelong learning which is being carried out in context of the eUSER Special Support Action (an FP6 project). This work includes conceptual research, formulation of appropriate indicators for the eUSER population survey, subsequent analysis of the data and development of policy recommendations.

TOBIAS HÜSING is senior researcher at Empirica, Bonn. His educational background is in economics and sociology. He has worked in quantitative empirical research and has been responsible for survey methodology and statistical analysis in a variety of large-scale, pan-European projects. Among other projects, he has played a part in the European research projects SeniorWatch, BISER, SIBIS, eBusiness W@tch and eUser. He also shouldered responsibility for a project with Eurostat to draw up the methodological report for the 2002 and 2003 European ICT household surveys. His main research interests are the digital divide and societal implications of ICT, as well as methods of empirical ICT research and statistical analysis.

IVICA MILICEVIC is a senior research consultant at the Work Research Centre, Dublin. His work mainly focused on socio-economic aspects of information technology, such as consideration of cross-national differences in dispositions towards new ways of working arising out of usage of ICTs in the workplace. His work included making major contributions to pan-European research projects in the area of IST – Statistical Indicators for Benchmarking Information Society (SIBIS) and Statistical Indicators for Benchmarking the Progress of European Regions in the Emerging Information Society (BISER), ECaTT (Benchmarking Progress on Electronic Commerce and Teleworking Trends), and the ADAPT project (Management in Support of Teleworking), with prominent inputs in the areas of research design, data analysis, and policy analysis. The main focus of his current work is in the areas of eHealth and eInclusion. He is currently involved in thematic studies on promoting access to ICTs as means for advancing social inclusion. In his most recent work he has also evaluated the implementation and progress of the Lisbon Agenda in Ireland.