

Webcast

PS4

Beyond Digital Literacy: Equipped for Work, Equipped for Life

The session heard case studies that had helped socially excluded individuals enhance their quality of life, their employability and the prospects in their business by using life-long learning and ICT. Fast track to IT is a co-operative programme in Ireland to develop a range of learning programmes for people with limited formal education to access new employment. Industrial partners helped to design the curriculum. Mewcat is a very local and very specifically targeted project to develop capabilities for tourism among women on a small and isolated island in Greece. The women, mostly without education, saw themselves (and were seen by their families) as housewives not professionals. Benoit Sillard from the French Ministry of Education described a French initiative to equip a critical mass of students with portal computers for their studies involving wifi hotspots, helpdesks, education assistance and support. Jim Devine showed how work with teenagers in deprived inner-city schools achieved engagement through the creation and sharing of content.

In all these projects, the main barrier was rarely the technology, the infrastructure or even the educational attainment. Finding the motivation seemed to be key because the most important barriers were social and psychological.

Another common theme was that all the solutions relied upon co-operation across a range of different organisations. Public funding often provided the lever, but delivery was secured by people and organisations that were close to the end user, trusted by them and with a deep understanding of their needs.

New approaches to formal education as well as to informal learning were also discussed. The very availability of digital tools and digital content can itself be a trigger. Once people find something they want to communicate they very soon master the technology. “Get away from the driving lessons – find somewhere people want to go and then they’ll learn to drive.”

We also need to recognise the fundamentally different way that we search for and use knowledge. The world is no longer structured into active providers and passive users. Knowledge is now a resource in a world of pluralities that is multi-cultural, multi-modal, multi-media and requires multiple literacies.

Finally, the session looked at the needs of employers in the technology sector. There was a call for more consistency in certification frameworks, not just across Europe but harmonised to the global economy and for greater compatibility with

industry skills programs at country and international levels. Again, multi-stakeholder partnerships are seen as important enablers.

Following is the summary of the session presentations.

Peter Davitt described the project Fast track to IT where most of Ireland's major IT companies co-operated, with government support, to develop a range of learning programmes for people with limited formal education to access new employment. The industrial partners helped to design the curriculum, ensuring access to people who have received training in the skills the companies actually require. It also means that the graduates acquire the skills that are actually in demand in the market. The outcome is a solution that addresses both the needs of social inclusion and the labour market. The programme delivers measurable results: from 5,500 job seekers, 3,300 people are now into work; 715 into further education and training. There are plans to deploy the same approach across Europe.

Yvonne von Beck Katsambi, Director, Mewcat (Milos Educational Women's Collaboration for Activities in Tourism) described a very local and very specifically targeted project to develop capabilities for tourism among women on Milos, a small and isolated island in Greece. The businesses were mainly run by women, mostly without education, who saw themselves (and were seen by their families) as housewives not professionals. There was no broadband on the island and the power supply fails frequently. Training began with spoken language skills, but moved also to the use of email and other business skills such as book-keeping, advertising. Web-based training tools delivered some of the training and also lowered other barriers to participation. For example, a translation tool now enables the women to receive and reply to email enquiries from potential clients. Thus it was not technology, infrastructure or educational attainment that was found to be the main barrier. The most important barriers are social and psychological – as when one of the husbands stayed home on the day the film crew arrived, since his wife felt it was more appropriate to see a man in such a role. Government support provided funding but the major enabler was user-centred, very local, one-on-one support from recognised and trusted hand holders indicating that policy must always chime with user needs.

Benoit Sillard from the French Ministry of Culture described a French initiative to equip a critical mass of students with portable computers for their studies. It involved a wide range of actors from the universities that committed to create the wifi hotspots, helpdesks, education assistance and support, retailers who supplied the hardware bundled with the student targeted learning package, and financial organisations who set up the finance deal to allow students to acquire the full package “for the price of one coffee per day”.

Excellent results were achieved in year 1, and more is expected in year two, when 100% of universities will participate, yielding 5,000 hot spots and 39% of students equipped by the end of 2006. A similar approach is now planned to

secure ambitious penetration of Internet access in the home (two thirds of the population), with a PC packaged with all the software, an IP connection, and three at-home one-to-one training sessions. As with the greek island population, trust and confidence are seen as the major enablers.

After the case studies, **Tapio Varis**, Professor, University of Tampere, Finland spoke about some aspects of education that are fundamentally changed by the new information society. He proposed that entry to working life in the information society requires different skills, even the need to unlearn techniques of the industrial society. To reduce digital literacy exclusively to the skills of using a computer is a crude simplification. We need to recognise the fundamentally different way that we search for and use knowledge. The world is no longer structured into active providers and passive users. Knowledge is now a resource – and we need to define its value in our society. He described a world of pluralities that is multi-cultural, multi-modal, multi-media and requires multiple literacies. He felt that skills are not keeping pace and education in schools is often not answering to these new needs. In the working world, larger corporations are sometimes able to develop training programmes to address these needs, but SMEs need more support, because they have few resources. The bulk of Europe's population work in SMEs and a great deal of learning can be accomplished on the job.

Jim Devine, Director Institute of Art design and Technology, IADT, Ireland welcomed the convergence whereby elearning is coming to be seen as part of the inclusion agenda too. He argued that engagement and participation *influence* and are *influenced by* the motivational and attitudinal disposition of the elusive 'life long learner'. The technology is not an insurmountable barrier. Unlocking the motivation to participate is the key enabler. Once people find something they want to communicate they very soon master the technology. "Get away from the driving lessons – find somewhere people want to go and then they'll learn to drive."

Faced with the difficult challenge of inclusion, the accessibility of digital media can turn the paradigm of motivation on its head: we can achieve engagement through the creation and sharing of content and in this way leverage motivation, raise self-esteem and, almost invisibly, build communities with individual and collective learning and societal goals. Hence, for example, the digital world could address the reluctance of some young people (many quite well educated) to engage in (eg) democracy.

Finally **Antonio Herrera** described two actions that Cisco is involved in, the Eskills and Certification Consortium and the Cisco Networking Academy Program. Although it is recognised that the socio-economic situation of individuals can itself become a barrier, he noted that there is a lack of consistency between education and certification frameworks, and a lack of compatibility with industry skills programs at country and international levels. He

called for multi-stakeholder partnerships between Governments, harmonization of certification and competence frameworks at European level, supported by official recognition of Industry e-Skills education and certification programs. He proposed multi-stakeholder partnerships to overcome the barriers, such as the Skills for Employability Alliance, intended to help thousands of individuals in disadvantaged situations obtain the e-Skills required to enable social inclusion. Pilots are running in Portugal, Belgium, Poland and UK – working with education institutes, offering employment guidance, co-operation with governments and with the European Union to deliver scale.