Meeting the needs of learners

Digital resources and networks offer many new opportunities for learners to engage in learning. However, they also offer new challenges. In recent years it has widely been reported that learners' capacity to use digital technologies for learning is falling behind their social and personal uses of technology, and that they are failing to take advantage of many new learning opportunities that are technically available. This hand-out summarises some of the needs that must be met if learners are to become digitally capable, lifelong learners.

1. Read through the needs that have been identified from general research, decide which of these are relevant to your learners, and add any other needs that you know are being felt by some or all of your learners. Then consider how those needs are currently being met and if a new or different response is needed.

Learners' needs	Response
1.1 What access needs do your learners have ? (For example, we know from research that...) • Many learners do not have access to their own laptop or palmtop device • Many learner-owned devices are old, and unreliable, with out-of date software • Learners rely on access to social networks for their emotional well-being; many also use social networks to support their study • Most learners have access to a mobile phone but not all have advanced features e.g. web • Many learners need assistive technology to have equal access to learning • Learners benefit from access to third-party services to support learning • Learners really value anytime anywhere access to learning materials and information	Your response to learners' access needs: *When are needs identified?* *What help is there?* *How do learners access help?* *Who is responsible?*
1.2 What ICT skills do learners need? What skills do they already have? (For example, we know from research that...) • Learners' ICT skills are generally less advanced than they or their educators think • Even confident learners rarely explore devices and software beyond basic functionality • Learners' information skills are rarely tuned to the demands of academic study • Most learners need help translating skills from social or workplace contexts to study • Some learners have particular challenges in acquiring ICT skills, including ESL learners and older returners • Learners with high levels of ICT expertise need recognition and further progression	Your response to learners' need for ICT skills: *When are needs identified? How are they benchmarked?* *What help is there?* *How do learners access help?* *Who is responsible?*

Learners' needs	Response
1.3 What attitudes and preferences do your learners have around ICT? (For example, we know from research that...) • Characterisation of young people as 'digital natives' hides many contradictions in their experiences, including failure and fear. • Learners' engagement with digital media is rarely critical. Many are consumers, a few are creative producers • Some learners manage multiple online activities with ease; others isolate themselves from digital 'noise' to concentrate on study. • Many learners prefer to engage in some learning activities without digital technology; a few are active 'digital refuseniks' • Learners are poorly motivated by separate provision of ICT/information/learning skills: they need authentic tasks to engage them • Learners really value having access to learning materials in different media, to suit their preferences	Your response to learners' diverse attitudes and preferences: *When do learners express their attitudes and preferences?* *What alternatives are available to them?* *How is the learning experience differentiated?* *Who, apart from learners themselves, is responsible?*
1.4 What practices do you observe your learners engaging in with technologies? What values do they express? (For example, we know from research that...) • Learners may participate in many 'private' social networks without realising that a public digital identity is being created • Learners may be unclear about how to present themselves positively online • Learners have very few models of how to act safely and ethically in virtual spaces • Learners need to engage in digital practices in contexts (e.g. professional) that are meaningful to their long-term learning and life goals • Many learners struggle to critically evaluate information they find online • Active knowledge - e.g. writing wikis, tagging, reviewing, recommending, repurposing, participating in virtual worlds - are minority practices still • Some aspects of learners' everyday practice with technology are at odds academic practice, e.g. around plagiarism, referencing, 'authority'	Your response to learners' diverse practices and values: *When do learners practice their digital capabilities in authentic tasks?* *When do learners practice collaborating digitally on authentic tasks?* *What alternatives and choices are available?* *How do learners express their own identity and values?* *How are professional and academic values made explicit to learners?* *Who, apart from learners themselves, is responsible?*

2. Known pinch points for learners

The following are areas of known difficulty for learners, drawing on literatures of the student experience and of e-learning. It must be emphasised that most of the studies reviewed do not provide evidence about the outcomes of different kinds of provision, but it is worth asking how provision in your context is addressing these known challenges.

- Learners require support in making the **transition to different ICT-based study practices** in HE and FE.

- **Transferring learning and skills** across different contexts e.g. leisure-work-study is challenging for most learners.

- Learners benefit from being able to **use their own technologies** for learning, including software and services: in some institutions this is still problematic

- Support for learners ICT skills needs to focus on the **technologies learners choose** or are constrained to use through their personal circumstances.

- Even with their own technologies, most learners use only basic functionality and are **reluctant to explore** advanced features or personalise technologies to suit their needs.

- Success in 'traditional' modes of learning may (controversially) make some learners more **risk-averse** in using technologies for learning.

- Technologies can be used to begin the period of **induction** well before students actually arrive at college/university, and help to ease social transition. This is also a critical window in which expectations about study practice need to be communicated.

- Learners require support for **online research skills and critical/evaluative approaches to information**; they tend to over-estimate their own capabilities and are naïve about the provenance and purpose of messages in digital media.

- Many learners lack general **research skills**, and find moving to third year and postgraduate study a source of difficulty: 'digital scholarship' should continue to be an element of the curriculum throughout study

- Learners are still strongly led by tutors in using technologies for learning: course practices become personal norms, therefore **tutor skills and confidence** are critical.

- Learners expect technologies in learning to be used **consistently and with a clear rationale** that makes sense to them in terms of their own learning goals.

- Learners may struggle to understand the norms of academic culture, particularly around issues of **plagiarism and originality** in their written work. Institutions should communicate values clearly.

- Students are often dissatisfied with the **feedback and assessment** process, but can respond positively to technology-based solutions. There is still little evidence of feedback being used as a mechanism for learning development i.e. linking performance with the need for particular study skills.

- Young students in particular have often not thought about the implications of **managing public identities online**.

3. Recommendations on provision for learners

The LLiDA study recommended that institutional provision should encompass:

- a generic entitlement to access and skills, articulated in terms of ICT support, benchmark skills, and personal development opportunities
- support for learners' use of personal technologies and social networks to support their studies
- review, feedback and recognition (e.g. through assessment) of learners' practices as they develop
- cross-modular support for developing and showcasing capability, for example using an e-portfolio system

3.1 What needs to be done in your institution to ensure this provision is in place?

The LLiDA study also recommended that this general provision should be augmented by subject-based provision, in which learners experience:

- authentic digital tasks, sharing and re-using digital content, using digital media for academic/professional expression, and self-directed study using preferred tools
- teaching that is informed by the impact of digital technologies on scholarly and professional practice
- clarity about what it means to know, to apply knowledge, to be critical and creative, in different subjects and disciplines, including the impact of digital technologies

The study found indications that support was most effective when it was integrated into curriculum tasks, and when it prompted learners to reflect on and interpret their own approaches to learning and the use of technology. There was evidence that current support for digital literacies – broadly interpreted – is poorly integrated, and that while individual services often do an excellent job there is little coherence in how learners reach the support they need. Feedback, for example, is almost never used as an opportunity to assess need and refer for support.

3.2 What support are curriculum teams being given to ensure that this level of provision is being developed?