Research report:

Executive summary

Barriers to growth in the use of learning technology in the voluntary sector

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1. Introduction

- E-learning is defined as 'the use of electronic technology to support, enhance or deliver learning'

- This project aimed to determine

    o The knowledge and participation of the voluntary sector in e-learning
    o The actual and potential benefits for the voluntary sector in using e-learning
    o Barriers to effective e-learning
    o Strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats to the use of e-learning in and by the voluntary sector
    o A number of recommendations for further action by the voluntary sector and partners.

- The voluntary sector in Wales consists of 30,000 voluntary organisations, with a combined income of £1.022 billion. At least 30,000 people work in the voluntary sector, and the sector benefits from over 1.2 million volunteers.

- Specific challenges for voluntary organisations include funding, recruitment and retention of staff and volunteers and working with other organisations.

- The project involved placing an e-learning champion in each County Voluntary Council, where they conducted action research responding to the project brief and local priorities.

2. Knowledge of and participation in e-learning

The knowledge of and participation in e-learning in the voluntary sector varies across Wales, but overall it can be said:

- Between 50 and 70 percent of organisations are aware of e-learning.

- That the understanding of e-learning is somewhat confused

- Far fewer people have taken part in e-learning than have heard of it, with between 16 and 58 percent of respondents having experienced it in some form.

- Pan-Wales organisations have a higher awareness and participation in e-learning than regional or local organisations.

- The participation in e-learning within pan-Wales organisations varies, with some locations unable to participate.

- Strategic partnerships and delivery partnerships were identified in the project, with some examples of good practice in both.

- Over 500 venues that may be available for e-learning delivered by voluntary organisations, or for voluntary organisations were identified.

- Over 2000 computers and 200 laptops were identified in the project as being available for use by voluntary organisations.

- The distribution of venues and resources identified was not even across Wales.

- 134 venues with disabled access and facilities and a computer were identified. There were fewer venues with special software or adaptations for people with disabilities.

- There is no clear picture regarding the balance of accredited and non-accredited e-learning provision accessible to the voluntary sector.

3. E-learning as a learning tool in the voluntary sector

The following actual or potential benefits of e-learning have been identified for people in the voluntary sector:

- Enable learners to progress at their own pace, to miss out bits they already understand, or repeat bits they don't understand.

- Learners can make mistakes in private, without the shame.

- Enable learners to fit learning into their own schedule, rather than being dominated by providers' timetables or availability.

- Give people a choice of place where they learn.

- People can learn at home, reducing travel time and expense, especially in rural areas.

- Provide learner support, eg training needs analysis, learning styles analysis, job search skills, as part of the learning experience.

- Introduce visual aids into learning, so the learner can see events happening.

- Improve the quality of learning delivery, especially in a classroom environment.

- Offer alternative means of communication, speed of communication, flexibility of communication and sometimes, wider communication.

These benefits are also available to those who receive services from voluntary organisations. The main groups that have been identified as benefiting from e-learning through the voluntary sector are:

- Disaffected young people.

- People with mental health problems.

- Disabled children, young people and adults.

- Older people.

- Community groups in disadvantaged areas.

The champions promoted e-learning throughout the voluntary sector in Wales.

4. Barriers to the effective use of e-learning

Barriers to effective use of e-learning act in three ways: barriers to staff and volunteers, barriers to organisations and barriers to people receiving services.

- Barriers to staff and volunteers include fear of technology, lack of knowledge about the resources available and a perception that e-learning does not involve any social interaction.

- Barriers to organisations include funding for equipment and/or courses, staff time, quality and availability of courses (especially in Welsh) and lack of infrastructure.

- Barriers to engagement of people receiving services include those for staff, with lack of computer skills being highlighted.

In addition, the ability of public sector organisations to work with voluntary organisations emerged as a barrier, particularly in the area of coordination of plans and the lack of impact of the e-learning strategy on the voluntary sector.

Champions addressed some of these problems by advocating on behalf of the voluntary sector with other stakeholders. There were some breakthroughs recorded, particularly with strategic partnerships reviving subgroups and engaging in joint planning.

5. Recommendations

From the SWOT analysis carried out, the following recommendations are put forward. In addition, each champion developed recommendations at a local level.

Recommendations for WCVA

1. Provide an e-learning theme within the work of the sector skills hub to mainstream the development of e-learning provision within the overall development needs to the voluntary sector

2. Seek funding to provide a web-based information gateway to e-learning, based on the ELVS website, for voluntary organisations

3. Provide a database of venues suitable for e-learning

4. Build on the promotional work carried out by the project where possible

5. Seek to agree a national action plan, with voluntary sector partners, to develop e-learning.

6. Work with national level advocacy groups to address the needs of disabled people in accessing e-learning

Recommendations for the local voluntary sector

7. Continue to promote e-learning as part of a portfolio of learner centred provision of informal and formal learning

8. Seek out local delivery partnerships, which provide added value for learners and learning communities.

9. Seek to be involved in local decision making regarding e-learning provision

10. Develop local venues to be accessible and available for e-learning

11. Be involved in the [Communities@one](#) initiative in Communities First areas locally.

Recommendations for ELWa

12. Provide specific funding streams for voluntary organisations to develop sustainable learning activities. Sustained funding needs to be available for there to be any lasting impact.

13. Provide support for voluntary sector learning providers through the JISC regional support centre, to add to the support already available to FE colleges. This should be delivered in an appropriate way by employing people with knowledge and experience of the voluntary sector

14. Address the needs of welsh language e-learners with funding to develop resources

15. Include e-learning in future plans for Learning Community Accounts

16. Fund innovative approaches to engagement using e-learning and support community led content development.

Recommendations for CCETs

17. Strengthen and develop links with voluntary sector partners and communities to provide learning which is learner centred and responsive to identified need

18. Include e-learning in strategic plans which affect community based learning

Recommendations for local providers of e-learning

19. Open dialogue with voluntary sector stakeholders regarding the access of groups to e-learning resources in your organisation

20. Offer joint training to partner organisations

6. Overall Conclusions

The implementation of the Welsh Assembly Government's e-learning strategy has been patchy, with significant progress in a number of areas, but little local impact in the voluntary sector. The e-learning project addressed this with a mixture of research and locally based action which has seen a number of instances of good practice come to light, and has increased the profile of e-learning within the voluntary sector in general.

To move forward, there are four themes that need to be addressed:

- Funding and support provision must be long term, to enable groups to gain in confidence over the next five to ten years. Previous attempts at developing ICT infrastructure have failed because the funding stopped and computers need to be kept up to date to maintain the impact.

- The possibilities of managed learning environments need to be piloted in the voluntary sector, to demonstrate the social engagement that is possible through e-learning. A number of voluntary organisations are developing these and partnerships may be possible with FE colleges. They need to be used in delivery of distance learning and taster courses if people are to be encouraged to get the most from the potential of e-learning.

- The negative impression of e-learning as lonely learning, needing a high degree of motivation and involving no social interaction. This image needs to be changed, or the potential of e-learning will not be realised.

- The realisation that e-learning is best seen as a part of an overall learning strategy, and that support, often personal support to provide the motivation to learn, will always be essential to successful learning for non-traditional learners.