

NIACE Research and Development



Key Findings



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Widening Participation and E-learning – an Action Research Project

Abstract

The Widening Participation and E-Learning (WiPE) Action Research project was conducted between November 2004 – July 2005. It was funded as part of the Learning and Skills Councils' programme to promote e-learning in adult and community learning through the 'Post-16 e-learning programme'. Organisations were invited to submit bids for funding for innovative e-learning Action Research projects in the context of widening participation.

The intended outcomes of this project were to produce new knowledge and practical theories in the effective use of e-learning and ICT, to open up learning in terms of delivery and content to 'hard to reach' learners, and to identify staff development needs in the use of technology to support teaching and learning.

Research methodology:

Twelve successful organisations were selected to conduct Action Research into their own practice of widening participation through e-learning. NIACE supported the participating organisations to conduct Action Research and organised regular project meetings, which focused on the Action Research process. Participants were supported to conduct Action Research by way of reflective practice and systematic data-collection.

Key Findings

The main conclusions of the project are:

❖ Identifying the learners' needs

Identifying the learners' needs might not sound like a revolutionary new concept. However, one quite commonly shared experience of the WiPE projects was the realisation that they thought they knew what the learners needed and wanted. However, systematic reflection and data analysis showed that the real needs and wants of the learners were often different to what they anticipated. Action Research proved a powerful approach to this.

❖ E-learning works

Another common theme was that e-learning offers the potential for providing learner-centred provision. E-learning can offer flexibility and an informal learning environment, which can be non-threatening to learners. The key point about e-learning was how it was used; using e-learning to meet the learners' needs (see theme 1) was the most important rule.

❖ **Staff development**

Most projects found that in order to use e-learning effectively, staff needed to enhance their e-learning skills. The skills required include technical e-learning skills as well as pedagogical skills. Through the Action Research projects, practitioners were able to define the individual development needs.

❖ **Organisational contexts**

Most projects found that in order to effectively reach out to more and different learners they did not only have to analyse their own approaches and attitudes towards their target groups, but also recognised the impact of organisational contexts. In order to improve practice and learning provision, the wider organisation needs to inquire into their practice and approaches.

❖ **Change is possible**

Whilst not all projects immediately attracted hard-to-reach learners, they were able to gain an enhanced insight and understanding of their organisations. Through applying Action Research methodology and through applying the reflective spiral they were able to identify staff development needs, and implications for future provision. Through inquiring into their own practice they were able to identify areas for change and to gain a better understanding of the potential learners' needs and wants.

❖ **Action Research as a tool for professional development**

The majority of participants had never conducted an Action Research project before, and most of them also stated that they would conduct Action Research again if they had the opportunity. They also stated that they found the Action Research as conducted in the WiPE project beneficial for their professional development. This can be supported by the individual Action Research reports that show how professional learning and development has taken place throughout the project.

❖ **The potential of e-learning lies in blended learning**

Most projects showed that e-learning has the potential to be a powerful approach to reach more and different learners. However, most projects showed that the key to success does not lie in e-learning itself but in how it is being used. The majority of projects used e-learning in a blended format, i.e. in a community centre or a classroom type meeting.

Recommendations

- ❖ See above

Output

- ❖ Hesse, C. (2005) *Widening Participation and E-Learning (WiPE) Action Research Project*. Report, NIACE: Leicester.

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Requests for 'Key Findings' in other formats, such as large print, are welcome. We would be pleased to consider your request.

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