Improving adult basic digital skills

Association of Colleges draft response: January 2019

Improving adult basic digital skills - consultation

About this consultation:

The government is asking for views on its plans to improve basic digital skills training for adults by:

- Updating the national standards for the basic digital skills needed for life and work;
- Improving basic digital skills qualifications;
- Introducing a national entitlement to basic digital skills training, mirroring the existing legal entitlements for English and maths.

Respond by 10 January 2019

Association of Colleges

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents nearly 93% of the 266 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Colleges are transformational – they help people make the most of their talents and ambitions and drive social mobility; they help businesses improve productivity and drive economic growth; they are rooted in and committed to their communities and drive social mobility and well-being. They are an essential part of England's education system.

Colleges are at the heart of promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities, providing basic skills education and training to adults who are both in and out of work. Colleges enrol around 1.4 million adults including over 400,000 enrolments at Entry level and level 1.

New national standards for basic digital skills

1. **Do you agree that basic digital skills qualifications should be offered at two skills levels: 'beginner' (entry levels 1-3) and 'essential' (level 1) to comprise the minimum required for work and life?**

Yes. These levels are clear, drawing on the Essential Digital Skills Framework which providers are familiar with and offer a good guide for learner progression, although, in practice, learners will not always be operating at the same level across all the skills categories.

2. **Do you agree with the proposed five skills categories (handling information; creating and editing digital content; communicating; transacting; being safe and responsible online)?**

Yes. The five categories cover the range of basic digital skills, although in practice they will overlap and interact with each other and this should be reflected in programme design and assessment.

3. **Do you agree the draft standards capture the necessary basic digital skills needed to fully participate in:**
   - **life**
   - **to undertake the significant majority of jobs; and**
   - **encourage further study?**

Yes. The draft standards provide a comprehensive description of the essential basic digital skills for participation and inclusion in society. The skill descriptors for evaluating online content appear quite challenging for level 1, eg: in 'buying securely online' (p.17 of the draft standards).

4. **Do you agree that the standards should be reviewed at least every three years?**

Yes. A review of the standards at least every three years is sensible, given the pace of change in digital communications. AoC and member colleges would want to engage with the Digital Skills Partnership in future reviews of the standards and the framework.

Improving the publicly funded basic digital skills offer

5. Do you agree with the three proposed qualification eligibility principles (declared purpose, size and subject sector area classification) If not, please explain why.

Yes. There is a need for flexibility in delivery. Qualifications could be offered as 'standalone' provision, but in many cases they could be usefully embedded in broader adult basic skills programmes which also address literacy and/or numeracy needs. The design of the qualifications should allow for such embedding while also recognising that for many learners, improving general literacy will often be necessary in order to improve their digital literacy.

Introducing a national entitlement to basic digital skills training

6. Do you agree that publicly funded courses should be offered up to and including 'essential' level (level 1) as part of the legal entitlement?

Yes. Any national entitlement needs to be supported by national investment. Additional funding via the Adult Education Budget (AEB) allocation will be needed if we are to prioritise the needs of those 4.3 million adults who have no basic digital skills and to make progress towards the ambition set out in the Digital Strategy for everyone to have the core digital skills they need to fully participate in society. The adult education funding rate has been frozen for 10 years and the budget is under considerable pressure. Introducing a new entitlement without additional resources could jeopardise funding for other essential basic skills provision. In devolved areas, Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority, any new funding for this entitlement should be protected and earmarked.

7. Do you agree that providers should carry out a thorough initial assessment to determine whether an individual should be fully funded to undertake a basic digital skills course?

Yes. Effective initial diagnostic assessment is an important part of establishing learners' prior skill levels, identifying need and targeting resources. Learners without basic digital skills will often also have low levels of literacy and any diagnostics need to address both and identify gaps in prerequisite skills or pre-Entry achievement while avoiding being too onerous. Provision will need to be

flexible enough to respond to learners with 'spiky profiles' ie: operating at different levels across the skills categories.

8. **Do you have any examples of best practice for initial assessments for basic digital skills?**

The JISC Digital Discovery Tool is a good example of an initial assessment which assesses learner confidence and generates a profile of their digital capabilities.

Equality assessment

9. **Do any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionately positive impact on specific learner groups, in particular the 'protected characteristic' groups and people with Special Education Needs?**

Yes. The proposed entitlement could have a positive impact on those learners with special educational needs who are disproportionately excluded by providing access to digital skills and communication technologies which will support their inclusion in society and work. Identifying these learners' needs ca also help them to gain access to assistive technologies.

10. **Do any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionately negative impact on specific learner groups, in particular the 'protected characteristic' groups and people with Special Education Needs?**

Yes. Learners with special education needs, literacy needs or with English as a second or additional language could have difficulties accessing the basic digital skills entitlement without additional support and resources.

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