

THE FUTURE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON LIFELONG LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

UCET Response to Independent Commission of Inquiry Sponsored by NIACE

1. UCET welcomes the opportunity to respond to the invitation to submit evidence to the Commission on lifelong learning and technological change. It is appreciated that the Commission has decided to take “a broad view of what constitutes evidence”. That stance is appropriate, given the complexity of the issues and the diversity of perspectives that may be brought to bear on them. In formulating its evidence UCET has not attempted a systematic analysis of relevant research, although that is a task that the Commission itself might well undertake. For its part, UCET offers a shared perspective on the theme, drawing on the extensive experience of its members in the professional preparation and development of teachers in the many different contexts in which the continuing education of adults takes place.

2. Before addressing the specific implications of technological change for lifelong learning, we assert a principle which is bound to underpin the thinking of the Commission: all forms of education, irrespective of context, presuppose a world of accelerating change. A central task of educators must therefore be to equip those whose development they are concerned to nurture with the knowledge, skills, dispositions and values that will enable them flourish in that changing world. In UCET’s view, all teachers should seek to enable learners to learn how to learn, to be competent problem-solvers, to adopt an open attitude to change, to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, to be resourceful, to be self-reliant while being committed to collaborative effort, to have the capacity for calculated rather than irresponsible risk-taking, to exercise independence of judgement, to be critical without being cynical, and to be persistent even in the face of disappointment and failure. The cultivation of such qualities and attributes ought to permeate the work of every teacher in every setting, giving point and purpose to every engagement with learners. Such an education would itself make a significant contribution to the capacity of learners to meet the demands imposed by technological change.

3. It is widely acknowledged that technological change will have a profound impact on employment. Already, it is clear that the proportion of jobs that are unskilled is diminishing and will continue to diminish; that transfer between jobs and vocations will become more common; and that, to keep pace with changing technology, those in employment will require regular opportunities to revitalise their vocational and professional skills. These developments are already calling for a strengthening of vocational education, for school leavers to be more attuned to the technical and other demands imposed by the working environment, and for all categories of worker to have continuing access to opportunities to update themselves and acquire new skills. As work environments become even more pervasively shaped by technological applications of one kind or another we may confidently expect added pressure on all who contribute to vocational education to intensify their efforts to ensure that all are fully equipped with the skills and understandings that the changing work environment will require.

4. However, technological change, far from being exclusively concerned with the re-shaping of the work environment, will pervade other aspects of life. Advances in medical technology, with other life-style changes, will extend the number of years of retirement; transport technology will dramatically

extend human mobility; the entertainment industry will continue to proliferate opportunities for enriching life or, at worst, for rendering the tedium of existence more tolerable; while communications technology will revolutionise patterns of living by enabling each of us to access any experience or stimulus at the click of a mouse. Indeed, at the individual level, technology will hold the key to the monitoring of personal health and well-being, the management of finances and protection from fraud, the purchasing and preparation of food, household security, engaging with public utilities, banks and the Inland Revenue, and choosing a holiday.

5. When technological change is so pervasive, when in such manifold ways technology becomes such a vital ingredient of personal effectiveness and social competence, it is clearly essential that wherever education is provided learners should acquire the wherewithal to exploit the information and communications technology that is exerting such a transformational impact. Arguably, indeed, ICT competence becomes as fundamental to the educational process as learning to read. Just as some learners are fortunate to come from environments in which learning to read is a skill that is valued and supported, well before they begin formal schooling, so also ICT competence can be differentially supported throughout the community. Fortunately, the culture of childhood and adolescence is one in which competence in handling the gadgetry of modern communications is highly prized, to the extent that some learners can display a degree of competence in their manipulation and exploitation not matched by their teachers. Nevertheless, it must be a fundamental purpose of all educational settings not only to promote learners' capacity to master the techniques of ICT but also how that technology can be used to serve a wide range of human purposes. Those who lack such a capability are seriously disadvantaged and it must remain a priority for the educational community to create settings where that serious disadvantage is made good. In this way, educational settings like schools and colleges, and those that are based in less formal community contexts, are the most telling correctives to the digital divide.

6. However, an education that merely fostered a technical competence in ITC and its various applications would be incomplete. A fully rounded education is one that also enables learners to understand something of the impact of technological change on their lives and the way of life of the community. Many of the great issues of today represent our attempt to control technology and to bend it to meet central human needs: these include climate change and global warming; identification cards and the intrusiveness of the state; DNA and the detection of crime; genetic manipulation in the cause of medical treatment; genetic modification of food; and nuclear power and energy supply. A democratic society presupposes citizens who can engage in the debates occasioned by these and other issues; it is a vital function of the educational service to engage learners in such a way that they can begin to appreciate what makes these issues so controversial and encourages them to move towards a personal stance on them.

7. There is a further danger. ICT technical competence can be so exalted, the computer or the iPod so overemphasised as primary vehicles for learning, that the educational process itself becomes impoverished. So powerful is the new technology as a source of information, entertainment and enrichment that a person could readily make the computer his or her main link with the external world, exploiting the technology to meet the need for information, to view a film, to order food, to settle accounts, to communicate with friends, and to deal with a thousand other matters without actually experiencing any form of engagement with others. A society made up of such solitary addicts would be so atomised that the social fabric would be threatened. At the level of the learner, an over-reliance on the computer would result in an equally impoverished education. It is vital then, as the new technology comes to be exploited with greater enthusiasm, that individual learners have opportunities to engage with others through creative aesthetic experiences, through sport and outdoor activities, through civic participation, through voluntary activity, and through immersion in a way of life that exerts the values of collaboration and shared experience. Indeed, a progressive society would be one in which throughout their lives all would have access to agencies which promote such forms of experience.