

Executive Summary

Getting IT Right – Views on IT Courses in Hull

Issues around IT skills and courses have emerged as an important theme across much of the work carried out by the Learners' Forum project. Our initial report '*Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn*' (Springate, 2002) suggested that residents of Hull understood the increasing importance of IT skills both in work and at home, but also that there were issues with some of the basic IT courses available in the city. These included not having enough tutors in a large class, leaving learners to sit and wait for long periods for a tutor; teaching different courses concurrently in the same room; and having poor quality facilities. This data was drawn together in '*Basic IT Courses in Hull: A Briefing Paper*' (Springate, 2003).

In order to look at these issues in more depth, a questionnaire was designed to investigate basic IT courses in Hull, and see if any of the indications were true. As it was not clear whether some of these issues might prevent people going on an IT course, respondents were sought who had not done an IT course, as well as those who had. Altogether, 239 individuals aged 16 and over filled in a questionnaire, of whom 144 had done an IT course and 95 had not.

The summary draws together the main points from this research into IT courses and forms seven themes. Each theme is of relevance to practitioners and learning providers within the field of IT education. These findings are also compared to previous research about IT courses carried out by Volcom.

The importance of tutors

Previous research by Volcom, '*Basic IT Courses in Hull: A Briefing Paper*' (Springate, 2003), concluded that tutors were a key component of a good learning experience, but that some learners found that tutors didn't have a great knowledge of IT, and this compromised the effectiveness of teaching. This research, '*Getting IT Right*', confirms the importance of tutors and the significance of a good tutor-student relationship. However, it was found that the majority of students were happy with their tutor, including their level of knowledge.

The '*Briefing Paper*' also highlighted the problem of tutors changing midway through a course and the disruption this caused to learners. Whilst in '*Getting IT Right*' the majority of people had the same tutor right the way through their course, this was recognised by a significant minority of people to be an important factor. It allowed a good relationship to develop between student and teacher, resulting in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere where students were happy to ask for help. Some people who did not want to do an IT course said it was because they wanted to learn from people that they already knew. This is perhaps because they feared, unnecessarily, that the

quality of the student-tutor relationship would be poor.

The majority of people were happy with the student to tutor ratio in their class. The *Briefing Paper* had found that there were often too many learners for the tutors to deal with and learners were often left sitting inactive for long periods of time waiting for help. This was found to be true for a significant minority (14%) of respondents in this research who did not get the support they needed from the tutor. However, the ratio of students to tutor was not the only issue as people were able to learn effectively whether their classes had high or low ratios of tutors to students. Those who did not get enough support were not only from classes with high numbers of students to tutors.

This suggests that an interplay of the ratio of students to tutors, course factors (e.g. the mix of abilities in the class) and personal factors (e.g. the confidence of the learner) resulted in whether the level of support each learner needed was given. The *Briefing Paper* highlighted the drawbacks of having mixed abilities and people on different courses in the same class. This perhaps makes a case for pre-course assessment, as the more information tutors have about students, the more they are able to make sure they have everything they need to make the course successful for the students.

Most people were taught either by following instructions from a textbook or handout, or through the tutor demonstrating tasks. Some people were taught by a combination of the two methods. When people were taught by tutor demonstrations the qualities of the tutor were more important as the tutor played a larger part in the respondents learning. When people learnt through textbooks and handouts they liked being able to go at their own pace. Getting the pace of learning right was also a critical factor mentioned in the *Briefing Paper*. Other issues to do with the method of teaching were that people preferred smaller classes and that not receiving enough support from the tutor was a problem.

The critical importance of the tutor is again highlighted in the best and worst aspects of the course listed by respondents. Tutor support was one of the best things about the course, whereas lack of tutor support was one of the worst! Ensuring that students' needs are met in this respect is fundamental to a good experience of any IT course.

About other students

The majority of students thought that it was easier to learn if they got to know the other students on the course and were able to ask them for help. The reasons they gave for this were that it helped create a good atmosphere in the class; students could support one another in their learning; if the tutor was busy other students were able to help; and students could share information and knowledge more effectively.

A minority of people either preferred to work on their own or only wanted to ask the tutor for help if they were stuck. As they were not obliged to accept support from other students this was fine. However, another small minority would have benefited from more support from their fellow students but circumstances or group dynamics did not allow it. This detracted from their experience of learning IT.

In *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn* (Springate, 2002), it was found that some people were motivated to learn by the opportunity to meet other people. This was not found to be a major motivation for doing an IT course, although the social aspect of the course was one of the best things about the course mentioned by respondents; whilst people did not set out to do an IT course in order to make friends, it was a positive side-effect of doing an IT course.

Some people who had not previously done an IT course said that a supportive and friendly environment would encourage them to do an IT course. The other people on a course, along with the tutor, play a major part in providing a supportive environment.

Why people wanted to learn IT skills

People's motivations for doing an IT course in both the *Briefing Paper* and in *Getting IT Right* were broadly similar. To help with a job, or to get a job was one of the main reasons people wanted to learn IT skills. Not surprisingly therefore, people of retirement age were the least likely to find IT skills important. People also thought that it was important to keep up to date with modern technology and that IT skills were skills they ought to have, whether for employment reasons or their own interests.

Whilst people had different degrees of use of IT in their lives, almost everybody agreed about the importance of IT skills, even when they didn't use computers much, or at all, personally. People who had not done a course had similar motivations for wanting to learn IT to those who had done a course, but there were several key issues that had stopped them from taking an IT course: cost, lack of information or not being able to find the right course, not getting round to it, a lack of confidence, or a previous bad experience of learning.

Many of the people who had taken a course had clear outcomes they wanted to achieve from the course either to do with their job, or gaining skills and qualifications. Again, this is in contrast to findings about non-IT courses where learners' outcomes have been more social and learning was seen more as a leisure activity. Nearly all (92%) of respondents achieved the things they wanted to from their course. In addition, one of the best things about the course, in the eyes of respondents, was the fact that new skills and qualifications were gained.

What IT skills people wanted to learn

Two thirds of people who had done a course wanted to learn more technical IT skills such as databases and spreadsheets. Interestingly, despite having done an IT course, one fifth of people still wanted to learn basic IT tasks such as typing a letter or sending an email. The task that most people wanted to learn was creating a website; 59% of people wanted to learn this.

The IT skills of people who had not taken a course were lower than those of people who had done a course, although there were still some highly skilled people who must be learning in other ways. The IT skills that this group of respondents wanted to learn were similar to people who had done a course, although proportionally more people wanted to learn the more basic tasks and fewer people wanted to do the more highly skilled tasks such as databases.

Three quarters of the people who had done a course said that they would either definitely or possibly be doing more learning in the next year; nearly half of these would be doing more learning in IT. The main reasons why people would not be doing any more learning were; not having enough time, not being able to find the right course and personal circumstances, for example one person said they were 'focusing on other aspects of [their] life'.

Just over half of the people who had not done a course said that they would definitely or possibly be doing some learning in the next year. The main reasons they gave for not doing any learning were similar to the above, but included not seeing the need to take part in any learning.

Just over half of respondents who had done an IT course had also previously done an IT course, indicating that people were progressing onto further learning. This also demonstrates that people's experiences of IT courses must be relatively positive; otherwise they would not come back for more!

Some people had said that they did not want to do an IT course, and there were various reasons for this. One reason was that people wanted to learn either on their own or from people that they knew. Some people did not have enough time to do a course; other people thought that they were good enough at IT already. Some people were simply not interested in learning about IT. This group is likely to be hard to convince to do a course. However, other people did not want to do a course because of the perceived cost, because they lacked confidence or because they did not see any benefit in learning IT skills. This group may be easier to persuade to learn IT skills.

Just over half of the people who had not done a course indicated that they could be encouraged to do an IT course if the following issues were addressed; cost, making the course learner-centred, providing good information about courses, holding courses in convenient locations, providing

a supportive learning environment and finally if doing an IT course improved job prospects.

Pre-course assessment

For 10% of people the worst thing about their IT course was the fact it was at the wrong level; either too hard or too easy. In addition 6% said that they didn't achieve what they had wanted from their course because it was not covered by their IT course. 4% did not achieve what they wanted because the course was not long enough and they ran out of time. Pre-course assessments could potentially prevent these issues from arising.

An assessment would provide an opportunity to confirm that a learner is on the right course for their level of ability and also provides an opportunity for a tutor to check what the learner hopes to achieve from the course and whether this is realistic. Tutors can then make the course more centred on the learners' individual needs and ability; this was something that would have encouraged some respondents to do an IT course. Tutors can also ensure that the mix of abilities in a class will allow time to be divided between learners fairly. An assessment was given to 40% of students either before their course began, or at the start of their course.

General views of course

The three main reasons why people chose to do a particular IT course were convenience, utility and value for money. People wanted to learn at a time and place that suited them. They chose a course that covered the things they wanted to learn and offered the qualifications they wanted at a reasonable cost.

The vast majority of respondents were happy with the welcome they received when they started their course. Most were also generally happy with the facilities. Equipment was the only area with which a significant number of people were dissatisfied. A significant minority thought that the equipment used could have been more up to date and well-maintained. However, despite this 61% did not mention anything that could be improved about facilities or equipment. For some people a lack of equipment at home meant that they had no way of practising in between courses and this was a problem.

Finding out

There were two main ways that respondents had found out about their course. The first was through their own networks and word of mouth, for example at work. A large number of people had been dynamic and contacted a centre to see what courses were available, demonstrating a knowledge of where to ring or possibly of having been to the centre before. The majority of people had been able to find out about available courses easily. Those who had found

the process difficult tended to be more isolated, for example retired or looking after the home.

For those who had not previously done an IT course, finding out about IT courses seemed more problematic. Some respondents wanted more information to be available. Additionally, some respondents had not done an IT course because they had been unable to find the right course for their needs. This was also the findings of the *Briefing Paper* where IT courses were felt by some to not be advertised well enough and more guidance was thought necessary to help people choose the right course. Whilst many people have been able to find out about IT courses relatively easily, the information is not reaching all those who are interested in learning about IT.

Overall

The overall impression of IT courses in Hull is a positive one. The majority of respondents were satisfied with the teaching and facilities and were able to achieve what they wanted from the course. However, the experiences of a significant minority show that there are some areas to think about, most notably in the area of tutor support.

The response from those who had not done an IT course demonstrates that there are a group of people who, if the right courses are provided, are more than willing to learn IT skills in this way.