

Lifelong Learning and Technological Change

Evidence for NIACE Commission

A submission to the Commission of Inquiry into the future of lifelong learning, on behalf of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI)

April 2008

This paper aims to provide evidence for the Commission on the following issues:-

- How the NFWI has recently raised awareness of the use of technology by taking its organisational training forward through developing and delivering new training programmes through e-learning for WI members and a new e-learning strategy for the whole organisation.
- The value of funding the infrastructures of voluntary organisations to enable them to develop according to their own needs.
- The enormous contribution of volunteers to make public funding stretch much further.
- The NFWI's experience of implementing technological change throughout the organisation

The NFWI is the largest women's organisation in the country with over 200,000 members in 70 County and Island Federations and 7,000 WIs across England, Wales and the Islands. A very detailed profile of the WI was submitted to the Commission of Inquiry in February 2008 as evidence on the impact of lifelong learning on happiness and well-being. This information has been attached to this document.

Many WI members live in rural areas and are disadvantaged by the lack of educational provision, transport, funding and childcare/care facilities. Most WI members are over 50 and many have not had any formal educational since leaving school and lack confidence.

The increase in the cost of many adult education classes and the reduction of the choice of courses available locally has also excluded many WI members, especially older people and young mothers.

As an educational charity the NFWI is committed to developing and delivering training and learning opportunities for women to enable them to reach their full potential and to play a more active role in public life at local and national level. A large proportion of the training is delivered by volunteers and is very cost effective.

The focus of the educational work of the NFWI is to empower women by enabling them to develop transferable skills that will lead to vocational qualifications, employment and voluntary roles both within and outside the WI.

New approaches to learning using technology

The NFWI Training Committee is responsible for developing and delivering training for WI members. In 2007 the Committee identified a need to improve access to training for WI members who have a role within the organisation by developing a new e-learning strategy.

Funding for this initiative was sought from the then DfES for capacity building as part of a small grant that had historically been awarded to the NFWI for training throughout the organisation. £10,000 was awarded for the financial year 2007/8. This small amount of funding was enormously valuable because it acted as a catalyst to take forward the NFWI's approaches to learning and to change attitudes about the use of technology throughout the WI. There had previously been great resistance in the WI Federations over the use of technology which needed to be addressed in order for the organisation to move into the modern world.

Further funding for £12,000 has recently been awarded for 2008/9 to further develop this successful project.

Summary of e-learning project outcomes to date:

- E-learning equipment was purchased for the NFWI training team to use i.e. laptop computers, wireless mimos, wireless keyboards, projectors, docucams and MP3 players. It is planned to purchase further equipment.
- NFWI trainers were trained to use equipment.
- NFWI trainers developed training workshops to enable them to train WI members in rural areas around the country on "How to run a Campaign." as part of the training in citizenship and leadership skills offered to WI members.
- Training workshops were delivered to prepare women to develop and organise new campaigns at local and national level to improve the quality of life for individuals, families and communities.
- NFWI staff members and trainers have been identified to receive NIACE E-Guide training in the near future.
- Further workshops are being developed and delivered.

- A MOODLE learning platform has been developed and will be launched later in 2008. An initial pilot scheme has been produced to train WI Treasurers to make this training more accessible to women. However, this will be expanded to develop new training packages to meet the training needs of all the NFWI committees. The MOODLE has been funded by the NFWI following the success of the grant funded project.

How the project has taken the WI forward

1. This was a small-scale pilot project, designed to introduce new technology to a wide range of people who had not used it for training purposes before. The trainers who were trained to use it and to develop new ways of delivering learning through IT, acted as ambassadors to promote the uses of technology. This was very successful and as a result the NFWI and WI Federations are now investing in technology and new equipment to improve both the service they offer members and the learning opportunities available through the WI. Trainers and learners reported that their confidence had grown and that new technology had made teaching and learning a more exciting, rewarding and successful experience.
2. Past experience of coping with change within the WI has clearly shown that to manage change successfully it is necessary to start with a small project and to build on the success of the project, taking the organisation forward together with ambassadors to champion the scheme. In the past, large scale funding was awarded to the NFWI for developing learning opportunities throughout the country by the National Lottery Board. However, this funding made great demands on the whole WI organisation and was unsustainable at the end of the three year period of funding. Following this experience, the NFWI has been reluctant to apply for large scale projects before they have been accepted by the whole organisation and which meet the needs of the organisation. It was, therefore decided not to apply for lottery funding to implement e-learning across the whole organisation but to start with a small pilot and build on it over a period of time.
3. The DIUS grant which has funded the e-learning project has been so successful because it has funded the development of the infrastructure of the WI. With the enormous contribution of volunteers this small amount of funding has gone a long way to ensure that older women living in rural areas are better educated in the use of technology to improve their lives and that communication throughout the WI has moved on and now embraces modern technology.

