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INITIATIVES ENCOURAGING E- LEARNING AMONG OLDER EUROPEANS.

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Initiatives Encouraging e-Learning among Older Europeans

by R. Gilligan

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There are a surprising number of initiatives taking place in Europe which encourage older people to use ICT and in this way promote e-learning.

Training is vital for the successful uptake of ICTs and the future of e-learning among older Europeans. At present, general education varies greatly among older people in Europe and illiteracy is still a problem. Many older people in Europe speak very little English, but a lot of content, software and computer terminology is in English. Nevertheless the experience of existing training courses targeted at older people is that language is not a real barrier to learning. The fact that browser software is in English, for example, is not a significant problem if ultimately interesting own-language content is available. In general, older men have a higher level of education, are more interested in ICT and are more likely to use computers at work; therefore older women need to receive special attention.

In order to improve eLearning access for older people in Europe, the following recommendations are suggested:

- There is a need for a greater number of general introductory courses on ICTs targeted at older people. The learning environment and course content and materials should be adapted to meet the needs of older people.
- More research needs to be done regarding how older people best learn about ICTs and this should include the learning environment. The most successful initiatives seem to be those targeted specifically at older people and courses that are tailor made for older people and take their background, learning speed and social context into account seem to be the most effective.
- Public funding needs to be available to subsidise training courses for older people. Consideration needs to be given to the pricing structure of computer training courses for older people to ensure that older people on low incomes can participate in them. Reduced charges based on means testing could be one option.
- Public funding is needed to ensure that teachers of ICTs to older people are adequately trained. Public places which offer access to the Internet must have trained staff. As many older people lack confidence in their ability to learn about ICTs, it is particularly important that trainers understand their learning needs and use appropriate material and methodology. In addition, if public buildings such as libraries are to be used to provide introductory ICT training courses, their staff must be suitably trained.
- There is a need for an inventory of current initiatives on IT training courses for older people in Europe and an analysis of their impact. This inventory should produce best practice guidelines on the structure and financing of initiatives, the content and style of training programmes. Efforts must be made to ensure that knowledge and experience gained are not lost and that activities are not unnecessarily duplicated.

- Volunteers have played a vital role in PC training programmes organised by NGOs in the USA and this is an area that should be further developed in Europe in the future. Although many volunteers are older people themselves, both peer group and intergenerational training have been successful and it is important to encourage volunteers from all age groups.
- The promotion of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) appears to be an excellent incentive to get people of all ages motivated in learning how to use computers. This would also promote PC literacy among older Europeans and build up their confidence in the use of ICTs and promote eLearning for this age group.



Initiatives Encouraging eLearning Among Older Europeans

There are a surprising number of initiatives taking place in Europe which encourage older people to use ICT and in this way promote eLearning. Most of these initiatives have been organised by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-profits and local government agencies. However, to date there has been very little co-ordination or sharing of knowledge between initiatives and little follow-up. Some of the more interesting initiatives currently taking place in Europe are described below:

Senior-Info-Mobil

The [Senior-Info-Mobil](#) was launched in Germany in 1998 by a non-profit organisation (Verein Senioren und Seniorinnen in der Wissensgesellschaft e.V) and is supported by the Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft, Forschung und Technologie (Federal Ministry of Research) and various private companies. This is a mobile internet café and is available on request for demonstration and training purposes throughout Germany.

This initiative is specifically aimed at older adults and the computer equipment has been installed within the so-called Senior-Info-Mobil (a two-level omnibus). In addition, a further computer network is available which can be used inside buildings. Interested communities and ageing organisations can request the equipment together with training staff for a week's stay. Due to weather conditions, it is only possible to run this programme during the summer months and although the organisers say that the initiative has been a success, there is no information available on how many older adults purchased equipment or went online after participating in one of the courses.

University of the Third Age

The University of the Third Age deserves special mention as it encourages learning in later life and offers new services to older adults. For example in Finland, the University of the Third Age, [Ikäihmisten yliopisto](#) or Ikääntyneiden yliopisto, is a

learning co-operative of older people which enables members to share many educational, creative, social and recreational activities. At the moment there are nine universities offering education for seniors in over 30 municipalities. Recently, the University of the Third Age of Helsinki started IKIS Internet, a series of courses on internet services which have proven to be very popular.

LILL network

In Germany the [European network LILL](#) (Learning in later life) is a co-operation of universities, further education institutions, universities of the third age and other institutions from 18 European countries which deal with science-orientated training for older adults. It was initiated by the ZAWiW (Zentrum für Allgemeine Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung/Centre for General Scientific Continuing Education) at Ulm University. It provides an overview of relevant addresses and offers relevant studies from different European countries as well as information on new publications and relevant meetings. A working group called “Seniorinnen/Senioren im Internet” (Seniors in the Internet) has been initiated.

COMMA

In the small town of Batley, Yorkshire, in the UK, a project has been successful in encouraging older adults to produce multimedia content for their website. Specially developed software enables a local group of seniors to scan photos of their local community and archive them with text, sound clips and other material into a local [Community Multimedia Archive \(COMMA\)](#). In this way the knowledge of older people can be transferred to users of the archive (e.g. schools and libraries), which can be reproduced on a CD-Rom. The project has now expanded to the region around Batley and has been implemented in Denmark. At the time of this study, the Netherlands also planned on starting local COMMA projects.

Seniorweb

Seniorweb, a website which targets those aged 50+ in Europe, was launched in 1996 in the [Netherlands](#), in Germany in 1997, and has now spread to [Austria](#) and [Switzerland](#). The main aim of Seniorweb is to encourage older people to use information and communication technology by offering both online and offline services. Its websites in the different countries provide information that is of particular interest to this age group and this includes information on: medicare, investment plans, legal aspects, shopping, travel, timetables for events, TV tips, book reviews etc. It also offers chat groups, e-mail discussion lists, links to other relevant websites and more important information sources. Offline Seniorweb is involved in organizing computer and internet courses for older people. In March 1999, Seniorweb in the Netherlands organized the Internet Fiesta, which saw the launch of two internet cafés in residential homes for seniors in the Netherlands. SeniorWeb in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Austria have worked together to create a website called [EuroSeniorWeb](#). The aim of this website is to bring together different initiatives in Europe and facilitate the exchange of news in this sector.

Rosemarie Gilligan previously worked as a project manager and researcher on the AOP-IS project at the European Institute for the Media, Düsseldorf, Germany. She is at present carrying out her PhD in the Department of Library and Information Studies, UCD and is affiliated to ISSC. Her PhD studies focus on adoption and use of ICTs in Irish rural households. Her research is funded by scholarships from the IRCHSS and RTE.

Rosemarie Gilligan participated in a European study carried out between 1998/99 which explored older people's access to the information society in Europe. This project was co-ordinated jointly by the European Institute for the Media, Düsseldorf, Germany, and the Netherlands Platform for Older People and Europe, Utrecht. The study received the financial support of the European Commission's Information Society Promotion Office (ISPO) and was selected for presentation in the ISPO Showcase 2000. Three project reports were produced which may be downloaded at [Rosemarie Gilligan's webpage](#)

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Here are the links from the article, just in case you need to have them separately:

Senior-Info-Mobil (<http://www.uni-ulm.de/LiLL/senior-info-mobil/flyer-english.htm>)

University of the Third Age, *Ikäihmisten yliopisto*
(<http://www.avoin.helsinki.fi/Opiskelu/ikis/ikis.htm>)

LILL (Learning in later life) (<http://www.uni-ulm.de/LiLL>)

Community Multimedia Archive (COMMA) (<http://www.polkaville.com>)

Seniorweb Netherlands (<http://www.seniorweb.nl>),

Seniorweb Austria (<http://www.seniorweb.at>)

Seniorweb Switzerland (<http://www.seniorweb.ch>)

EuroSeniorWeb (<http://www.seniorweb.nl/eurosw>)

Rosemarie Gilligan's webpage:

<http://www.europemedia.net/editors.asp?EditorID=36>