The potential of ICT to reduce student dropout and disengagement from education

11.1   Recent research on the educational uses of new technology suggests that ICT is not the unproblematic educational miracle that some UK politicians have claimed. However, there is some emerging evidence that ICT can be used to improve educational outcomes, and one question pertinent to this study is the extent to which developments in ICT are being used to reduce student dropout and disengagement from education. The issues involved are wide-ranging, encompassing the issue of the 'digital divide' in the UK and in Norfolk, the efficacy of learning platforms or VLEs, the use of ICT to communicate with parents and carers over attendance, punctuality and progress issues, the use of ICT for educational networking and modes of distance learning, the use of Web 2.0 applications such as podcasts, blogs and wikis to facilitate collaborative working, and the use of ICT to engage pupils in learning and to develop learner autonomy, self-regulation, and social/study/work skills.

11.2   Evidence collected from Connexions' Personal Advisors, teachers working with NEET youngsters and interviews with NEET youngsters themselves suggested that young people who were NEET were significantly less likely to have access to the internet and broadband connection. One member of the Connexions team suggested that as many as 40% of NEET youngsters did not have internet access and there was further evidence to support this view from a small survey of NEET youngsters undertaking a one day a week course to help to develop their work skills and qualifications, where 5 of the 12 students reported that they did not have access to the internet at home or in the hostel. In individual interviews with NEET young people, this was a keenly felt grievance, particularly where internet access was available in the hostel they were living in, but was limited to members of staff. In the case of this Norfolk based course, the tutor had used the course to give them the ability to use the internet to look for educational opportunities and employment possibilities, and to access ALAN Tests and other educational resources, as well as helping them to use ICT to improve and refine their CVs. The tutor regarded the facility for each pupil to access the internet and work on PCs whilst on the course as an important asset, and one which increased students' motivation to attend the course, and their levels of concentration and commitment during the course of the

day. Connexions' Advisors working with traveller pupils felt that this was a particular problem with traveller families, where connectivity was a real logistical problem, apart from issues of hardware provision.

11.3　Interviews with three members of the Norfolk Advisory Service with responsibility for ICT and Inclusion issues revealed that recent initiatives and investments in ICT, targeted particularly at inclusion issues, may well be starting to improve digital access and reduce digital exclusion across the county, as well as helping to reduce pupil disaffection and disengagement from learning. In addition to e-learning projects that were well established, BECTa's Home Access programme and LEA investments in ICT focusing on looked after children had recently provided over 400 computers with full connectivity for cared for young people in the county, together with the development of the Norfolk Virtual School and online tutoring with telephone support to provide extra support for these pupils. In terms of the deployment of these resources, the LEA had taken a broad minded and "liberal" interpretation of the guidelines for the allocation of PCs and broadband access so that machines would not be "taken away" from pupils when they reached the age of 16, and wherever possible, PCs and internet access were provided to pupils at as early an age as possible. It was felt that in terms of the national implementation of BECTa's recent inclusion funding initiative, the county was at the forefront of recent inclusion developments in ICT, although in several of these areas, the initiatives have only recently been implemented and it is therefore difficult to gauge their impact. By September 2010, it is envisaged that the County's External Learning Opportunities Directory will be maintained centrally and will list all Norfolk's external provision. Several LEA respondents envisaged that the development of VLEs by schools and colleges will be more embedded and extended in terms of communication across the system, and with parents and pupils, but in terms of virtual information sharing and communication across the county, there might be some problems arising from the use of different platforms. (West Norfolk schools are not using *Fronter,* a few schools have gone for different platforms, and COWA uses Blackboard).

11.4　Against this, there was more qualified feedback on the impact of *Notschool.* In spite of impressive figures nationally about the numbers of

young people going on to post 16 courses after engaging with *Notschool,* (see www.notschool.net for further details on this), there has not been massive county wide take-up of the programme and the substantial costs involved in "signing up" pupils to the project are felt to be an issue. In terms of the impact of the project on students in West Norfolk, numbers involved are quite small and the project has only "seen through" one cohort of year 11 students. Out of the three YR 11's from last year one progressed on to a Modern Apprenticeship at COWA, another progressed on to NVQ L1 in Hair and Beauty at the college and the last one went to NCH to do an E2E course. Out of eleven YR 11 leavers this June all but one has applied for a college course to date. There have been three successful applicants so far for Hair and Beauty, Uniformed Services and Music, the rest are currently awaiting their interviews.

11.5 UK research on the use of ICT in schools and colleges suggests that although some institutions are making extensive and effective use of ICT to track performance and attendance, help with transition, provide for off site working and engage reluctant or vulnerable learners, the use made of various ICT applications is extremely variable. A recent symposium on the use of ICT in FE institutions (CAL, 2009) reported that only a small minority of institutions used ICT to get learners to solve problems, or to get students to work collaboratively. There were also disparities between institutions in terms of the effective use of learning platforms, and wikis. The development of high quality off-site working tools could be a particularly important issue for schools and colleges with widely dispersed students (see "Remote Control" and "Make the connection via on-screen applications", Education Guardian 10 March 2009 for details of recent innovation and good practice in this area, see also http://history-wiki.wikispaces.com/ for a good example of the potential of wikis for providing opportunities for off-site working). Other areas which might profitably be explored are the ideas and approaches emerging from the Mobile Learning Network (http://www.molenet.org.uk/), exploring the use of mobile phones and MP3 players to promote "mobile learning". Recent BECTa and OECD studies on the use of ICT in education make the point that many educational institutions have been reluctant to explore the possibilities of using technologies which young people routinely use outside school and college for educational purposes.

11.6   Given the proliferation of initiatives in this area, it is difficult for even the most enthusiastic proponents of new technology to keep up with every innovation and initiative. Not all institutions and authorities use the DCSF sponsored s-cool site for managing NEETs and September Guarantees (www.s-cool.com), or BECTa's *Generator* self-assessment tool, not all post-16 institutions have developed the use of blogs and podcasts to the same extent. The move towards all schools and colleges having systems for the development of e-portfolios will add a further agenda to explore (and work on) in the area of ICT. Unsurprisingly, given the breadth of areas for developing the use of ICT to motivate, engage and retain learners, schools have explored different strands of the ICT agenda. One Norfolk school is exploring the development of an alumni site on the lines of *Friends Reunited,* to develop social networking and inclusive post-16 networking, others have consciously tried to develop course websites or e-feedback systems. Not all issues relating to ICT concerned "cutting edge" applications and developments. "How to make PowerPoint less boring?" emerged as an issue which may well be relevant to many schools and colleges. Several students reported that the emergence of PowerPoint as a common mode of session delivery, with some teachers not being particularly skilled in how to make best use of the application, was one of the causes of disengagement from learning. This was not a condemnation of PowerPoint *per se;* students felt that some teachers used PowerPoint more effectively than others.

11.7   This range of approaches raises the question of to what extent there is collaboration across institutions in Norfolk, aimed at sharing ideas and best practice in ICT. The very different ways in which learning platforms are used is one possible area for sharing good practice. There are some VLEs which are extensively used by students, and others which are to a large degree bypassed by the students' own Facebook network. At the most basic, functional level, learning platforms might be used to inform students of when college sessions were cancelled, so as to avoid scenarios where students from outlying areas catch an early bus into the college, only to find that the teaching session has been cancelled and they then have to wait for the evening bus back home (see section 10).

11.8   Given the range of developments and initiatives in ICT, many of which have implications for NEET agendas, the question of how schools and

colleges in West Norfolk and the county as a whole are planning to share information, ideas and good practice effectively in the area of ICT and inclusion seems an important one to consider.

(see also Lightfoot, L. (2010) *Having a more positive input*, Leader (ACSL Journal), January: 24-7).