User-orientation in Online Public Services in eHealth, eLearning and eGovernment

– Results from a Population Survey in 10 EU Member States –

September 2005

This document includes the "summary highlights" from a 300 page eUser Deliverable (D5.1) which presents the first selected outputs from the empirical work of the project, focusing on both the demand and supply side aspects. The different statistics and graphics can be looked at and the whole file downloaded at: www.euser-eu.org.

Direct Links:

http://www.euser-eu.org/SHOWUSERSQL.asp?SQLID=4&show=LIST&MenuID=115

http://www.euser-eu.org/eUSER_PopulationSurveyStatistics.asp?MenuID=73

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Information Society and Media

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Executive Summary

Overview

This document includes the "summary highlights" from a 300 page eUser Deliverable (D5.1) which presents the first selected outputs from the empirical work of the project, focusing on both the demand and supply side aspects.

On the demand side, an initial set of highlight results have been extracted from the representative surveys of almost 10,000 people in the 10 Member States that were included in the survey. These provide new data and contribute to the advancement of the state-of-the-art in the understanding of the relevance of and usage of eHealth, eGovernment and eLearning services amongst citizens in Europe.

On the supply side, two main outputs are provided. One aspect comprises a series of profiles of each of the 25 Member States as regards the extent to which the supply of eHealth, eLearning and eGovernment services addresses the spectrum of user needs. The other supply side aspect comprises a series of case studies of good practice in the development and delivery of online services that address user needs in relevant and effective ways.

Highlights from survey

eHealth

The eHealth part of the survey focused on two main themes – the public's usage of the Internet to find information about health matters of concern to themselves or their families and the extent of usage of the Internet (and phone) for consultation with one's doctor. This is the first in-depth examination of the role that the Internet is playing in the health practices of European citizens and of the user issues that are arising in this context. The results provide an important benchmarking of this field and have relevance both for policy and for practitioners in the health and eHealth domains. Highlights of the eHealth results are presented in Box 1.

eGovernment

The eGovernment part of the survey focused on a number of themes – the public's use of government services, the different channels (or media) employed, the nature of potential future demand for eGovernment, the barriers and experiences in using eGovernment, and the socio-economic attributes of eGovernment users compared with non-users. The results provide important new information on the role that the Internet is now playing in the delivery and take-up of government services by European citizens. Highlights of the eGovernment results are presented in Box 2.

eLearning

The part of the survey which dealt with use of the Internet for lifelong learning and eLearning looks first into the adult population's general interest in organised learning (for work-related as well as for leisure purposes) and associated attitudes and perceived barriers, before analysing the extent to which people use, or would like to use, the Internet for making access to learning easier and the learning process itself more efficient and effective. Barriers related to access, motivation and competence are found to play an important role in explaining uptake of organised learning both in general and mediated through the Internet. Highlights of the eLearning results are presented in Box 3.

Box 1. eHealth Highlights

- In the countries surveyed, 30.6% of the adult population have used the Internet to search for health information (Chart 1); this has risen from just 19.1% in 2002 (Chart 2)
- Amongst those who do not currently use the Internet for this purpose there are substantial levels of interest in the possibility of doing so; more then three-quarters (78.6%) of Internet users are interested and more than half (53.9%) of non Internet users (Chart 7)
- In the countries surveyed, the Internet is already the most important method of looking for health information for 17.2% of the adult population overall, and for 28.2% of people who ever search for health information from any source; in some countries (Denmark, Ireland and the UK) its importance is much higher (Chart 8; Chart 9)
- Most people who use the Internet to get health information have little difficulty in finding what they want, but more than one-in-four (28.9%) have experienced some barriers to usage (Chart 13); the main user problems have been difficulties to find an appropriate site (14.8%) and usability of the site once found (16.3%); language has been a barrier for 7.8% (Chart 14)
- The majority of eHealth users (70.2%) typically rely on standard search engines to find health information, and only 1-in-10 go directly to a known health site; this suggests a lack of availability and / or awareness of suitable eHealth portals (Chart 15)
- eHealth users reported that they attach considerable importance to various quality features of eHealth resources they visit; about one-in-eight eHealth users have come across health-related information or advice that they considered to be wrong (Chart 16)
- One in fourteen (7.3%) of the population in the countries surveyed have used the Internet in preparation for a visit to a doctor (this rises to almost one-in-seven in Denmark, Ireland and the UK); one-in-seven (14.4%) of the population have used the Internet to get more information as a follow-up after a visit to a doctor (this rises to 30.5% in Ireland) (Chart 19)
- Most (92.5%) of those who have used the Internet as a source of health information say that it has made them more informed about health matters; overall, 28% of the population say that they have become more informed about health matters through the Internet (Chart 20)
- Up to one-in-five of users say that the information they have found on the Internet has informed their decision-making about health matters or encouraged them to change health behaviours (Chart 21)
- Telephone-based health information services are also used, but by fewer than one-in-ten (9.1%) of the population in the countries surveyed; telephone-based services are especially important in the UK, being used nearly as much as online services (Chart 23)
- In contrast, telephone consultation with one's doctor is much more common than e-mail consultation; more than one-quarter (28.4%) of the population have had a telephone consultation but only 1.4% have consulted by e-mail (Chart 24)
- The arrival of the Internet as a central feature in the health practices of those who have access to the Internet raises risks of new health divides - at present those gaining the benefits are mainly better educated and generally more advantaged; however, the results of the survey suggest that once people do have access to it, the Internet can become something of an 'equaliser' (Chart 25; Chart 26: Chart 27)

Box 2. eGovernment Highlights

- Face-to-face contact is still the most important channel for contacting government -- 81% of all citizens who contacted government in the last year did so in person, although not necessarily exclusively by this channel. However, in some countries, telephone and post have overtaken face-to-face (for example in the UK with 74% telephone and only 51% face-to-face). (Chart 4)
- In the countries surveyed, about 11% of the adult population have used the Internet to access government services (Chart 24), and of those who have contacted government in the last year, this figure rises to 20% (Chart 4).
- However, potential demand for eGovernment services is about 50% of all government users, and could be higher (Charts 5 and 6).
- Potential demand for eGovernment is mainly for information services, then communication services, and lowest for transaction services. (Chart 6)
- In terms of government services generally, citizens rate their overall satisfaction at about 3.5 out of 5.0 (Chart 3), a figure which is almost identical to that for eGovernment services (Chart 16).
- One quarter of individual eGovernment users have acted as intermediaries for family members or friends, and one quarter have also done so on behalf of their employer. Greater proportions of the total adult population in the older Member States have used eGovernment on behalf of others in this way, but the share of eGovernment users doing so on behalf of others is greater in the New Member States (Charts 7 and 8). Twenty four percent of individual eGov users have received help in using eGov services from a family member or a friend (Chart 9).
- Most barriers which users anticipate they will meet when using eGovernment relate to difficulty in actually starting, with a feeling that face-to-face is better and the fear about data privacy important (Chart 10). However, once citizens have used eGovernment services, the barriers appear less though still important, and relate mainly to the difficulty of feeling left alone with problems or questions (Chart 11).
- When citizens need to identify themselves when using eGovernment services, most use simple well-know methods (such as user ID and password and PIN codes), which are not always suitable for legal or financial transactions. User identification is still a barrier to communication and transaction services, although the evidence also shows that once more sophisticated methods are employed (such as digital signature or smart cards) they are often rated as just as easy to use as the more well-known methods (Chart 22).
- Users of eGovernment services tend to be younger, male and better educated, and have higher socio-economic status and be in employment (Charts 25 to 29).

Box 3. eLearning Highlights

- In the countries surveyed, 12% of the total adult population (excluding students in formal education) have used the Internet in the course of organised learning activities, for example for doing research as part of a course, exchanging messages with co-learners, and downloading dedicated learning content (see 2.3.7)
- The spread of eLearning, narrowly defined as online courses in which a significant part of the learning content is transmitted via the Internet, is still very modest: 2% of total adult population (excluding students in formal education) have had first-hand experience with such a course (see 2.3.8).
- Among formal and full-time students, learning-related use of the Internet has been taken up very broadly already. In the countries surveyed, 76% of students use the Internet in the course of organised learning activities, and on average 8% take an online eLearning course in any year (see 2.3.9).
- A large share of online eLearning courses which are being used by Europeans make use of the full range of learning tools and features enabled by online technology, such as electronic bulletin boards, chat facilities, interactive lectures, and video streams. User orientation in practice seems to benefit from these, as most users appreciate the advantages of eLearning over traditional ways to learn (see 2.3.10 and 2.3.11).
- A majority of eLearning offers also features face-to-face interaction between learners, co-learners and tutors, for example in occasional classroom settings. Nevertheless, users give the lowest ratings for the quality of the eLearning experience when it comes to the possibility for interacting with co-learners (see 2.3.10 and 2.3.11).
- There is evidence that eLearning does indeed extend the reach of training offers. Almost every second person taking an eLearning course states they would not have done training if it had not been available online.
- This characteristic of eLearning courses is likely to make them unalluring to a large share of people who are participating in adult education today, as for many learners the chance to meet other people with similar interests is a major reason for participation (see 2.3.15).
- While users of online eLearning courses tend to be satisfied, the majority of persons who participate in adult education and who also use the Internet cannot imagine taking an eLearning course (see 2.3.19). Main perceived disadvantages of eLearning are lower effectiveness and efficiency of learning when done online, lack of face-to-face contact with teachers/tutors and co-learners, and the expectation that it would be hard to find the necessary motivation for self-learning (see 2.3.22).
- Overall, it appears that learning must be understood as a social process rather than simply as the acquisition of skills. Therefore, most people are likely to assess the suitability of the Internet for supporting learning not only by the extent to which it makes learning more efficient, but also by the extent to which it supports the social processes surrounding the acquisition of skills itself.
- For people who have already considered taking an eLearning course, practical barriers for take-up have been lack of offer by the employer, a perceived lack of interesting or suitable offers on the eLearning market, and doubts whether online learning would actually work out as expected (see 2.3.21).
- While about one in three adults (31%) in the countries surveyed is already participating in adult education and is regularly using the Internet (making them prime candidates for take-up of eLearning), the remaining population is either not/only occasionally using the Internet (13%), or not participating in adult education (19%), or both (38%). A range of factors have to be overcome to make these people exploit the potential of the Internet for lifelong learning (see 2.3.5).
- A major barrier appears to be lack of motivation. Two out of three adults who are not engaged in lifelong learning do not express any interest in participation (see 2.3.4.
- The underlying reasons appear to include learning anxiety (often related to old age or bad experience with learning in previous life), low priority given to learning when compared to other options for spending free time, and doubts whether work-related learning would actually improve employment prospects and the ability to perform well at work (see 2.3.15).
- Assessment of the perceived best ways to learn indicates that a large share of the adult population is likely to need strong guidance and social control if they are expected to engage (more) in lifelong learning. Traditional training courses, based mainly on classroom-style learning, is therefore likely to remain the dominant form of organised learning in the future. New ways to support such learning, for example with the help of innovative online applications, will be of major importance for reaching the objective of lifelong learning becoming common practice in Europe (see 2.3.14).