

Assessing the Benefits of Digital Inclusion for Working Age Poorer People in the UK

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Abstract

Most approaches to understanding and overcoming digital exclusion have three elements in common: motivation, access and skills. Focusing on enhancing citizenship and counteracting social exclusion, early digital inclusion initiatives in the UK recognised that the lack of motivation to be online was a major factor. Since the financial crisis of 2008, there has been a significant shift in the focus of digital inclusion campaigning towards hard material benefits such as: financial benefits; improving the educational attainment of children; enhancing employment prospects of the unemployed; and improving the wage levels. The background information and research used to justify each of these claimed benefits will be examined and the extent to which these benefits are realised by poorer working age people will be questioned.

In the context the UK government's "digital by default" policy, digital exclusion has consequences for citizens' engagement with the state and possible serious consequences for those highly dependent on the state. We therefore argue that academic researchers, practitioners and policy makers need to take seriously a number of urgent actions:

1. Updated and refreshed research on the material benefits of digital engagement for working age poor.
2. Rigorous systematic reviews of the global academic evidence for educational and employment benefits.
3. Rigorous research into the contribution of digital exclusion to broader social exclusion.
4. A review of national and local government approaches to digital inclusion.