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Publication date:
2019

Citation for published version (APA):

Simon, A., & Tyler, A. (2019). *Universal Credit and public libraries in Wales: A scoping study into digital inclusion and digital by default.*

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Universal Credit and public libraries in Wales: A scoping study into digital inclusion and digital by default

Report on initial findings

01/12/2019

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The research was undertaken during a three month period during summer 2019 and combined desk research, a literature review, a survey of library managers in Wales and follow-up sample of in-depth interviews, and some stakeholder interviews. The research was funded by Aberystwyth University and was led by Dr Anoush Simon (Department of Information Studies), with the assistance of Dr Alyson Tyler, an independent researcher.

The objective of the research was to investigate the implications of the digital by default and digital first agendas on public library services in Wales, with a particular focus on Universal Credit (UC). The research sought to understand the introduction of UC in terms of impact on library users and the library service; explore the challenges or barriers individuals may face in accessing government services online; understand how ICT in public libraries helps to overcome these barriers; and understand how cuts to local authority funding impact the scope of support available to socially / digitally excluded individuals. The recent report by the UN's Rapporteur on Poverty highlights the relevance of this topic:

“Universal Credit has built a digital barrier that effectively obstructs many individuals’ access to their entitlements.” (Alston, 2018, p.8)

This initial stage of the project consisted of desk-based research including analysis of relevant reports and online materials, and a survey using closed and opened ended questions about the impact of UC and public libraries, to public library service managers in Wales, with a response rate of 80% (18/22 library services).

UNIVERSAL CREDIT BACKGROUND

When Universal Credit was initially proposed in 2010, there was concern across public library services and third sector organisations such as Citizens Advice and the Bevan Foundation about the implications for people who were digitally excluded, because of the digital requirement of UC. The Welfare Reform Act legislation was passed in 2012 and UC was slowly rolled out in 2013 initially to four areas in north-west England and began in Wales in 2015. For a variety of reasons implementation was not completed by the proposed December 2017, at which point roll-out across the UK was only 11%. Roll-out of UC is not expected to be completed until December 2023, some 10 years after it was started and six years late, leading it to be called “Universal Discredit” by the UN's Rapporteur on poverty. (Alston, 2018, p.4).

As of February 2019 there were 78,837 households in Wales claiming Universal Credit, or 28% of anticipated households. This slow and partial implementation is important because it affects the number of people who might need digital assistance in public libraries in Wales. In addition, it's also important to note that the first and subsequent cohorts of people to claim UC were new claimants and less complex households. They tended to be male, young, with no children, in good health, and often more comfortable with technology. (Lloyds Bank, 2019, p.21). The Consumer Digital Index report by Lloyds Bank found that of their survey respondents who were on UC, 68% were classed as 'digital first' people, 25% as digitally competent, and only 7% as digitally disengaged. People on the six 'legacy' benefits, who are more likely to

be long-term unemployed and with lower levels of digital literacy, have yet to be migrated over to UC (unless there has been a change in circumstances).

UNIVERSAL CREDIT EXPERIENCE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN WALES

Summary findings from the survey of Welsh public library service managers shows:

- a mixed picture of impact from UC with variations between library services;
- implementation of Universal Jobmatch in 2012 had a considerable impact on library staff in Wales;
- less evidence of impact of UC on public library services than anticipated, partly due to the slow roll-out of UC, the demographics of the first cohorts, the increased availability of free wi-fi in public libraries and people accessing the internet with their own devices;
- changes in types of digital training needed by the public;
- on-going need for intense one-to-one digital support for some people.

Universal Jobmatch (implemented in 2012), led to an influx of people who had little/no digital skills, coming into public libraries to use the new website for job searches. They frequently required one-to-one support and training to get online and conduct the job searches. Few library services received any notification or awareness training about the new system. This led to concern that the Universal Credit experience would be similar, and on a much bigger scale. However, because of the very slow and partial roll-out of UC, the rise in the use of personal devices and public wi-fi, there has been less demand on public library staff than initially anticipated.

Unlike with Universal Jobmatch, library staff received generic awareness training on UC, and an introduction to the layout of the website and the claims process, so that they could help with navigation. However, some library services felt they had had very little support from the Jobcentre regarding the new UC system.

COMPUTERS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

All computers are free to use in Welsh public library services. The most recent figures for computer provision in Welsh public libraries are from the published Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) reports for 2017-18. These show significant variation in computer provision and computer usage rates across Wales.

WPLS 2017-18 Annual Reports		Notes
Average number of computers / 10,000 population	9	Range varies from 5 to 14
Average usage rate of public computers	32%	Range varies from 14% to 67% use of the available time

The survey of public library managers in Wales asked whether computer provision had changed since 2013, with 70% of respondents saying that it had changed. Several respondents indicated that they had reduced the number of computers, although three services said they had increased provision. Several services have taken the opportunity to review ICT provision when equipment has been due for renewal, and have often decreased the number of static computers but have increased provision of mobile devices. These can be used for training purposes, flexible outreach events, and for taking to customers for 'at home' services. This reflects changing expectations in technology and frees up space in libraries.

Alongside changes in provision, usage rates have also changed over time as well. According to the 2013-14 WPLS reports, the average Welsh usage rate for the computers was 41%, whereas in 2017-18 this was down to 32%, with three services recording computer usage rates of below 20%. Generalisations about the variations are difficult: for example, of the three services with usage rates below 20%, one has the lowest level of provision/10,000 population, one has an average level of provision, and one has the highest level of provision. It is difficult to generalise on the basis of geography or socio-economic variations as there are contrasting examples of rural and urban authorities and between areas are higher deprivation. Although most services have seen a decrease in usage of static computers (20 out of 22 services), often related to increased use of free library wi-fi and personal devices, some services recorded an increase in use, often linked to local digital initiatives, and/or local socio-economic circumstances.

The trend for a fall in computer usage in Welsh public libraries is not unusual or unique. A survey of Citizens Advice Scotland clients found that the place of accessing computers has changed over recent years: in 2013 45% of those surveyed used the computers in public libraries but this dropped to 15% in 2015 (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2016, p.15). The annual Lorensbergs survey of public library 'netloan' authorities found that only "1 in 5 libraries saw People's Network computer usage increase in 2018. Demand was driven primarily by Universal Credit claimants, followed by Universal Jobmatch users." (Lorensbergs, 2019, p.3).

With Universal Credit applications taking around 1 hour to complete, having a flexible time slot is important and useful. Furthermore, if UC claimants need to spend a specific number of hours online searching for jobs (up to 35 hours a week), having no restrictions in place is beneficial to those in need of longer access. In Wales, most services have bookable time slots for users, and many have no restrictions on the time if no one else is waiting. For some, the maximum length of time slot allowed is 2 hours, which was noted by 11 services. In addition, some services had no restrictions on the amount of usage in a day/week by an individual, whereas some services restrict it to 3 or 4 sessions in one day, or a total number of hours in a day or week.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT IMPACT

Current numbers of people who are on Universal Credit in Wales are very low, and even those authorities with the highest roll-out percentages were still only 30-40% complete during summer 2019. Despite this, some library services have seen a definite impact of Universal Credit. This includes more demands on staff time and basic IT support requests. The quotes from the survey respondents illustrate this:

"The library has become a 'life-line' to many, particularly the people who have fallen through the net. People with no literacy or digital skills have been supported in the library, enabling them to be able to claim benefits and to sustain their UC claim. Many users have told us without the library they would have been sanctioned."

"Very time intensive supporting people as they moved on to the system."

"Increased usage of public PCs, increased attendance of Job Clubs and more Job search related queries."

"Queries have increased again where they were showing a drop, people are now asking staff for more help on ad hoc basis which is a drain on staff resource"

"Some additional customers coming to use our public access computers (anecdotal observation based on number of non-members coming in clutching paperwork and asking for "guest user" sessions)"

"Increased number of people that cannot use a computer and can't wait for a training session on it as need to apply for their benefits now."

"We knew that it was going to be an issue around capacity for us as we had already found this with Universal JobMatch."

However, other respondents noted that they had not seen much impact of UC on the library service. The timing of UC roll-out and the level of affected households locally has influenced the experience of each service.

"The impact of Universal Jobmatch was far more significant. There has been very little increased impact as a result of UC."

"Less impact than expected. Some claimants have come to the library for support to create their accounts but most of this support is delivered at the Jobcentre. They use library facilities to maintain their journals and to look for work online - we cannot quantify this use."

"We have seen limited evidence that the rollout of Universal Credit has had a significant impact on the library service. Staff have not reported significant issues, neither with residents being able to access ICT equipment or requiring support to use the site. There has been no increase in percentage of use of ICT equipment since the introduction of Universal Credit."

"The impact of Universal Jobmatch was far more significant. There has been very little increased impact as a result of UC."

This varied experience across Wales reflects the patchy and partial implementation of Universal Credit, which did not happen as forecast in 2013.

DIGITAL INCLUSION AND DIGITAL LITERACY

"[t]he digital-by-default feature of Universal Credit is highly controversial. ... One wonders why some of the most vulnerable and those with poor digital literacy had to go first in what amounts to a nationwide digital experiment." (Alston, 2018, pp.6-7).

The National Survey for Wales for 2018-19 found that 11% of the Welsh population do not use the internet and are classed as digitally excluded (Welsh Government, 2019, n.p.). This equates to about 300,000 people. This 'all Wales' figure of 11% who are not online masks significant population differences: those who are more likely to be digitally excluded are:

- older (40% of people over 75 years old use the internet, compared with 97% of 16-49 year olds)
- have a disability or long term health condition (74% of people with a disability or long term condition use the internet, compared with 90% of those without)
- less well educated (53% of those with no qualifications use the internet, compared with 95% of those with higher education qualifications) (Welsh Government, NHS Wales and Wales Cooperative Centre, 2019, p.3)

Likewise, in the UK in 2018, 20% of unemployed people were non-internet users, and 34% of low income households (below £10,400) were non-users of the internet (OFCOM, 2018, p.69). Generally, these people are more likely to be Universal Credit claimants.

Some respondents to the Wales survey noted that although numbers have been smaller than anticipated, people who do require assistance with their UC application require a lot of intensive one-to-one support. This may not be possible on an ad hoc basis, especially for small libraries with only few members of staff, or in single-staffed libraries.

"... enquiries from people with poor ICT skills do take a long time. Staff provide basic ICT assistance and will signpost customers onto other organisations if more help is needed."

All Welsh public libraries offer ICT training and support. The survey responses indicate that they all offer a range of informal and formal ICT advice, support and training. The type of digital training tends to fall into two categories: ad hoc informal support and assistance, and formal/bookable training sessions. In general, all front line staff can provide ad hoc support on a number of topics including:

- support to get online
- creating an email account and showing how to use email
- how to use various software e.g. Word, Excel
- how to use social media
- how to use online (library) resources e.g. e-books
- using e-government sites
- CV writing
- printing
- scanning
- uploading and downloading

- transferring photos from phones
- saving files
- tablet use.

One respondent noted that ICT queries make up 75% of all their enquiries (excluding book queries).

For more formal ICT training a qualified librarian, digital volunteer or external partner will often provide advertised drop-in sessions, bookable one-to-one sessions, or formal ICT training courses. Several services noted that a local college provided the more formal training and that Jobcentre Plus run job clubs or 'work and skills sessions' in some libraries to help people with CVs and applying for jobs online, along with other sessions for those claiming Universal Credit.

This research project included a review of all the websites of all 22 Welsh library services. It found that there is potential to make more of the digital skills and training offer provided by libraries. Some library services do not mention that they offer ICT training at all, and in many cases the information was buried and required clicking through several pages to reach it. Some library services were more explicit on their web pages and stated what type of training and support they offered, sometimes giving examples of tasks you might want to do e.g. download photos from a smartphone, and also linked to a calendar with information about forthcoming events. Often the branch-level detail would indicate if ICT support was provided, rather than the information being available generically further up the page hierarchy structure. There are some cases where another department e.g. community/adult learning, provide the more formal ICT training and therefore it is not on the library pages, but a link would still be valuable, as found in a couple of examples.

Of course, there is the argument that someone wanting to improve their digital skills would probably not be navigating the internet in order to find a course, but it could still be beneficial to potential users and external stakeholders to make the digital skills training and support offer more obvious. For services who have noticed a fall in demand, this could be a beneficial way to reach more people.

When asked if there had been any changes to the training provision all respondents replied 'yes'. The changes show a somewhat mixed picture. Some services noted an increase in demand for both ad hoc support and formal training, including support for people coming in with their own devices. One service specifically noted that the changes are linked to an increase in job seekers needing to be online. However, some services noted a fall in take-up of either the ad hoc support, or both the ad hoc and formal training. Several respondents noted that there had been a decline in group taster sessions or generic ICT training, and as a result some have changed to providing more specific tailored ICT training for targeted groups. Overall, the general trend seems to be a decline in interest in generic basic ICT/digital training and courses (informal and formal), but continued interest in more tailored or specific ICT/digital skills training e.g. using specific software for family history.

"A move from general training for everyone to specific training for particular groups."

"The number of 'taster' sessions we provide has declined. This is due to the low numbers of people attending these sessions. As a result we have moved to providing more targeted support, working with pre-existing groups."

Library staff have also seen more queries about people's own devices as they bring them in and ask for help with apps, managing files, printing, uploading pictures, online banking, and using the library's e-download services.

Several services noted that reductions in their budget and/or staffing levels, reduced budgets of external partners, or changes in local priorities, has meant there are fewer formal training sessions, and/or that low participation figures have led to some courses being cancelled:

"...we struggle to get attendees at the programme of activities we run to support people to get online and improve digital literacy. Over the last year we have had to scale back the number of ... sessions we ran ... due to very low engagement levels."

Online ICT training provision was mentioned by only one service in the survey, with reference to the Learn My Way online courses. A review of all 22 library websites found it mentioned by only a couple of services. The Learn My Way software is free online training which has been written and provided by Good Things Foundation and translated into Welsh by the Welsh Government and available since spring 2019. Hopefully more library services will include it on their web pages and other marketing avenues to signpost people to this free training resource.

IMPACT OF OTHER TECHNOLOGIES

Changes in technologies have affected library computer usage and provision. The main factors include:

- investment in ICT infrastructure such as high-speed broadband, free public wi-fi in libraries, 3G and 4G mobile networks, has enabled greater access to the internet from a range of devices;
- rapid uptake of personal mobile devices, particularly the smartphone, has changed the way that many people access the internet, particularly away from home;
- these technological changes may be linked to a small decrease in usage of library PCs in the last five years;
- variations persist across Wales with rural areas often at a disadvantage for mobile phone coverage and high speed broadband.

How people access the internet ceased being a question in the National Survey for Wales after 2015, indicating perhaps that there is less interest in this aspect, particularly as many people are now using mobile devices. However, there are important demographic differences, for example in Wales 88% of 16-24 year olds said they used a mobile/smartphone, compared with only 7% of 75+ year olds, and 22% of 65-74 year olds (Welsh Government, 2019, n.p.). Headline figures can also mask inequalities: lower-income households are less likely to have smartphones, laptops and tablets. (OFCOM, 2018, p.5)

For libraries, the rise of 'bring your own device' (BYOD) has been one likely reason why static computer use has fallen. The fall in usage found in this survey is confirmed by other research, for example the National Survey for Wales found only 6% of respondents use a computer in a library, 57% use 4G, and 37% use free wi-fi hotspots. (Welsh Government, 2019, n.p.)

Using smartphone or mobile tablets to access the internet is not necessarily a problem per se, if the person is comfortable with small screens and a lot more scrolling. Where problems may arise is if the website being viewed is not mobile compatible or if its functionality is impaired. The small screen and touchscreen keyboard may also impede navigation and use of the device. As a consequence, filling in an application form which has multiple pages and boxes, such as the Universal Credit form, may prove difficult. With the UC application taking on average over an hour to complete, this has implications for eyes, wrists, and data costs.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES ONLINE

According to the DWP's own figures, 45% of UC claimants had difficulties with the online application (Department for Work & Pensions, 2016, p.5). This highlights why many UC claimants need additional help with the application process. One respondent in the Wales library survey noted difficulties with the UC website, and the proof of ID process:

“Even people who are familiar with using their phone to go online they find the site difficult to register and the registering for proof of ID was particularly complex and was stopping people from getting their claim processed.”

There are general barriers to being online including low literacy levels, lack of equipment, lack of digital skills and confidence, and accessibility issues. Respondents in the Welsh library survey particularly noted literacy levels as an issue:

“Literacy is a massive issue in the local area with people having very limited ability to read and write, let alone use forms and computers independently.”

“Some people have literacy issues which makes it difficult to access UC online. Others do not have the ICT skills to be able to confidently access the site at first.”

“We have experienced people with no digital skills, very low basic skills, people with mental health problems and disabilities (some people with undiagnosed problems) all being supported in the library, as they have anxiety and fear of going to the job-centre or any other formal service.”

Alongside these issues is the lack of interest or desire to be online, which is a significant proportion of people. For example, the 2019 Consumer Digital Index report by Lloyds Bank found that in Wales 89% of people who are not using the internet state that this is because they have no interest in doing so, the highest rate in the UK (Lloyds Bank, 2019, p.2). The research also found that among those who are over 60 and not online, a staggering 84% said ‘nothing’ could motivate them to get online (Lloyds Bank, 2018, p.2). Research carried out in 2017 by Citizens Advice Scotland found that “less than half of the survey respondents (45%) reported that they would be willing to take up an offer of free training or support, while 25% were ‘not sure’.” (Citizens Advice Scotland, 2018, p.19)

With little interest in either being online or in free online training, libraries and other stakeholders face a challenge in how to reach this cohort. *Needing* to be online to access basic welfare support is not

necessarily a motivational factor if it is seen as an enforced condition, with punishment if it is not done correctly. Research by the Carnegie UK Trust found the best way to get people engaged with being online was to do something of interest first, not something boring and transactional (Carnegie UK Trust, 2014, pp.7-8). Libraries could use this angle to create more ICT training or courses that are based around areas of interest such as family history or sports, rather than on the digital skills themselves.

REDUCTIONS TO LIBRARY SERVICES

The majority of library survey respondents in Wales reported reductions to their services in the last five years, with some reporting decreases in their budget of up to 30% and even 50%, alongside service level restructuring. Changes include:

- budget reductions
- loss of professional staff
- loss of staffing overall
- bookstock budget reduced
- opening hours reduced
- some branches closed and some transferred to community groups.

Many have seen reductions in physical visits, book borrowing and computer usage as a result of these reductions, but some of this has been off-set with increases in attendance at activities and use of e-resources (e-downloads). The last five or more years of public service cuts have squeezed the capacity of public libraries to the point where some branches may be unable to offer a comprehensive range of ad hoc, informal and formal digital support, or to ensure branches remain open at convenient times for the local community, or are suitably staffed and resourced. One survey respondent said:

“The ability of libraries to be the last man standing for many service users is undisputed in our area but the level of investment is so low it creates a real problem for us. The computers are getting older, the facilities are getting older and staff are struggling to keep up with all the demands on their time.”

As UC implementation continues, uncertainty remains around the amount of support required from libraries. In April 2019, Assisted Digital support was switched from local authorities to the Citizens Advice service, with potentially fewer people seeking support from public libraries as a result. However, as one Wales survey respondent noted, as other government services are moved online, public libraries help people with each one:

“There is far more demand for general digital support (informal) than for UC support at the moment. Each time a service (either government or local authority) moves over to a digital access channel, we see a flow of people asking for help. We now for example offer assisted digital services for blue badge applications and soon for concessionary bus pass renewals. Both are government services going all-digital, referring people to the library for help and support to go

online, but making no plans or provision for libraries' capacity to provide this support - just assuming we'll absorb it and provide our usual high level of customer care and support."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

Libraries are trusted spaces where people can go for digital advice and support from trained staff, and for a significant cohort of people they are their only means of accessing digital services or getting help with being online. Austerity has had a negative impact on many public library services in Wales, and in the context of Universal Credit, has led to those services which are in areas of higher levels of multiple deprivation having difficulties in meeting the needs of their customers, as noted by some survey respondents:

"Libraries play an important role in the area of IT / digital support. Our users tell us that the support and assistance from staff is important to them, and that a number of them use libraries as they have no means at home - for whatever reason e.g. no internet, computer, printer, quiet space to work."

"I feel the role of libraries in delivering UC support is not acknowledged at national Government level. Without libraries the whole welfare reform agenda would collapse. For example, our libraries support many people on Saturdays, when there is nowhere else for people to access support. The service is experiencing a large increase of supporting people in times of crisis, most days our libraries are full of job-seekers. The use of computers by children has dropped significantly over the last 6 years."

The future level of impact of UC on public libraries partly depends on the nature of UC implementation and socio-economic factors such as levels of multiple deprivation, literacy levels and base levels of digital literacy. Each library service in Wales serves different communities and their make-up affects the impact of UC, for example, regional differences in unemployment levels.

There are areas where UC has already had a significant impact on the library service, and future research could prioritise these areas to explore the relationship between the public library service, its users and Universal Credit. For example, one library service in an area of high multiple deprivation recorded the second highest computer usage rate in Wales and a steady increase in usage in contrast to the general trend across Wales.

Because of the unknown pace of migration for the remaining households on legacy benefits, it is difficult to predict what the impact might be on public library services in Wales up to 2023. There is time however, to try to reach these people and ensure they have the necessary digital skills and confidence to manage their Universal Credit application. This will be particularly important in areas with the highest level of households on the six legacy benefits.

Public library services could consider expanding the information on their web pages about the digital offer, tailor more ICT training towards areas of personal interest (and promoting the hobby/interest with

the digital skills learnt as secondary), and target their marketing about the ICT support available to key groups who are the most likely to still be digital excluded, whether that's through choice or demographics.

CONCLUSION

The digital by default agenda has highlighted the inequalities that exist in social, cultural, economic and technical contexts. Being online raises barriers of cost, provision, access, skills, confidence and interest and this naturally has an impact on accessing digital public services including the welfare system.

The results of the survey of public library service managers across Wales suggests that the impact of the enforced digital component of Universal Credit has not currently had a major detrimental impact on *most* of the public library services in Wales, perhaps as a result of a combination of factors, including:

- UC did not start in Wales till 2015, with many areas not implementing it till 2016/17
- UC started with new claimants and non-complex households; these people tend to be younger and more comfortable with digital services and devices
- UC roll out was much slower than anticipated and was still only about 30% complete in Wales (summer 2019)
- the roll out of UC coincided with increased take-up of smartphones
- the roll out of UC coincided with near-universal installation of free wi-fi in public libraries in Wales leading to BYOD and less demand on public access computers.

However, with the next phase of UC roll-out comprising the managed migration of people from legacy benefits to Universal Credit, libraries in areas of higher numbers of such households may well see an impact on their services. These library services have already seen the impact from the first cohorts of UC claimants.

It is tempting to see the general trend of falling usage of public library computers and falling demand for some digital training in libraries as evidence that public library computer access is less important than in the past. However, the disparity of ownership of personal mobile devices, variable literacy levels and digital literacy skills indicates that they are likely to become more important, for a significant minority of the population, as the digital divide deepens.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

The researchers would like to thank all the survey respondents and stakeholders who took part in the research.

The researchers also wish to acknowledge the support of the Aberystwyth University Research Fund, which enabled this project to go ahead.

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