

The Use of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) as an IT training package in Irish universities

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This paper explains the structure and outlines the origins of the European Computer Driving Licence. It presents some current figures on participation and completion rates and explains how the ECDL test centre accreditation system works. Brief details of the ECDL courseware packages currently used by Irish universities are given, followed by a short overview of the operation of ECDL in Irish universities.

Introduction

The acronym ECDL stands for European Computer Driving Licence. It is an internationally recognised certificate of competency in computer skills. To gain the European Computer Driving Licence a person must pass seven examinations each of which covers a specific topic.

The modules are based on the Microsoft Office suite and cover the following:

- Basic Concepts of IT
- Using a Computer and Managing Files
- Word Processing
- Spreadsheets
- Databases/ Filing Systems
- Presentation and Drawing
- Information Network Services

A person registering for ECDL is issued with a skills card. This skills card is the record of modules completed. Based on this record the driving licence is issued. The card is valid for three years. Thus people undertaking ECDL can take up to three years to complete the seven modules. The card is transferable. If a participant changes employment they can continue with the programme at another location.

Origins of ECDL

In 1988 the Finnish Computer Society set up a task force to examine computer literacy in Finland. This resulted in the establishment of the Computer Driving Licence (CDL) in Finland in 1994. Following this the Council of European Professional Informatics Societies (CEPIS) established a task force – made up of representatives from computer societies in 10 European countries, and chaired by the Irish Computer Society – to explore the feasibility of adopting the Computer Driving Licence (CDL) as a pan-European qualification. Between 1995 and 1996 ECDL was translated into 10 different languages and piloted in 10 countries. A common syllabus was agreed and in January 1997 the European Computer Driving Licence Foundation (ECDLF) - with its headquarters in Dublin - was established as a not-for-profit company. Members are the national computer societies throughout Europe. ECDL Ireland was launched at Trinity College Dublin in September 1997.

Participation

To date 190,000 people have enrolled for ECDL in the Republic of Ireland. This is approximately 60,000 people per year. The completion rate nationally is 50%; another 20-30% of participants completes 4 of the seven modules. Although ECDL can be completed over 3 years, the vast majority of those that do complete do so within one year. In the United Kingdom – where ECDL started later than in Ireland - there has been a lower take up rate in terms of percentage of population. The completion rate nationally for the United Kingdom is 23%. Numbers enrolling are set to rise significantly with the National Health Service

(NHS) taking on ECDL as a standard and targeting 300,000 of its 1.2 million staff to gain the license. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is also taking on ECDL as a standard qualification. The International Computer Driving License (ICDL) is the same qualification branded internationally. Translated into 22 languages it is now available in 57 countries worldwide. In addition to the standard ECDL package there is now an advanced ECDL with modules for Word and Excel developed to date.

How ECDL operates

The ECDL Foundation sets a standard or benchmark. Each country has a national co-ordinating body. ECDL Ireland accredits ECDL test centres, endorses courseware - the packages for the delivery of ECDL in an organisation, trains testers, carries out regular audits of test centres and issue certificates or licenses. When an organisation applies to become a test centre ECDL Ireland carries out a site audit. To ensure compliance the organisation must have a certain standard of rooms and equipment in which examinations will be carried out. The organisation must also have at least two accredited ECDL testers. These people are nominated by the organisation seeking accreditation and trained by ECDL. There is an annual fee payable to ECDL for test centre status. This is currently €317.43 in Ireland. In addition organisations pay a fee of €95.23 for each tester trained and €31.74 for each skills card issued.

ECDL courseware

As outlined above, ECDL is a standard or a benchmark. To attain this standard most organisations buy ECDL approved courseware from commercial vendors. It is not actually necessary to do this, in that an organisation could, if it wished, develop in-house tutorials in compliance with the syllabus. None of the Irish universities have opted to do this. A variety of approved courseware packages exist, details of which can be found at <http://www.ecdl.ie/courseware.htm>. The three most popular courseware packages in use in Irish university libraries are Electric Paper (www.electricpaper.ie/), NETg (www.netg.co.uk/) and Cheltenham Computer Training (www.ctgglobal.com). The first two packages are interactive and based on the see, hear and do concept. Organisations take out a site licence and the courseware can be networked to the desktop. In the case of Cheltenham Computer training printed tutorial books, exercise sets and Powerpoint slides are provided. This type of courseware is particularly suited to a tutor led environment. Costs of courseware vary significantly. It is worthwhile evaluating courseware in some detail in the context of how the organisation plans to deliver ECDL. If the aim is to provide courseware that will facilitate self-directed independent learning then an interactive package delivered directly to the desktop is possibly the most useful. Courseware is endorsed for a specific version of ECDL. This is particularly relevant if you plan to invest in CD-ROMs - which are available from companies such as Electric Paper - for home study. Version 3 is currently in use, with version 4 due out next year. ECDL Ireland estimate that the version will change every 2 years approximately to keep pace with changes in technology and the needs of employers.

ECDL testing

Initially ECDL testing was carried out manually. A person undertaking an examination had to save their tests results out to disk. An ECDL accredited tester then corrected the results. Recently a number of Irish universities have introduced autotesting. Autotests are purchased at approximately €10 each from a commercial ECDL endorsed vendor. With autotesting a person sitting an examination is given their result on the screen on completion of a 45-minute computer-based examination. Autotesting cuts down considerably on the time spent administering ECDL. It does however add significantly to the direct cost of ECDL. To complete seven modules costs €70 in addition to the cost of €31.74 for the ECDL skills card.

Irish universities

National University of Ireland Maynooth, University College Cork, Trinity College Dublin and Dublin City University are ECDL accredited test centres. The National University of Ireland Galway, University of Limerick, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and University College Dublin have opted not to become accredited test centres. However they all offer or have offered ECDL to staff. At NUI Galway, the Training and Development Unit which is part of Personnel, bought in ECDL training for 250 administrative staff including 14 library staff. This was part of a university wide strategy to significantly upgrade computer skills among administrative staff and was funded centrally. Each week an external training company came on site with a mobile van with 8 PC's which emulated the desktop, to give tutorials. This

took place over a one-year period. In addition 20 Electric Papers CD-ROMs were purchased for home study. 240 of the 250 people who registered completed the course.

University of Limerick Library is also using an external company to provide ECDL training. 10 people have registered to date and 9 have completed. The Library is examining the ECDL qualification, along with the City & Guilds Library Assistant plus a number of years of experience as a way of providing a progression mechanism for Library Attendants to Library Assistant. Currently the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland is involved in a pilot project to offer ECDL to 20 staff including 2 library staff, using the services of an external company. The Library at University College Dublin is also exploring this option.

The 4 other universities – Trinity College Dublin, National University of Ireland Maynooth, University College Cork and Dublin City University are accredited ECDL test centres and offer ECDL to staff and students. Excepting University College Cork, Electric Paper is the courseware package in use. University College Cork uses NETg courseware. Trinity College Dublin back up their desktop delivery of Electric Paper courseware with tutorials based on the Cheltenham courseware. The emphasis is on self-directed learning, except in the case of University College Cork, where three learning options are offered – classroom tutorials, online training using NETg courseware delivered to the desktop and self-paced home study. The third option has proved the most popular to date. The completion rate in the Irish universities that are ECDL accredited test centres is around 40-50%.

Conclusion

There has been a significant uptake in ECDL as an IT training package in Irish universities. As yet it is too early to assess the impact this investment has had on IT skills within the library environment. Factors such as the relevance of the seven modules, the cost of delivery - both in terms of monetary costs and time - and the gains to staff in terms of their career development need to be examined in more detail. New packages such as Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS) need to be compared with ECDL and there is a need for libraries to clearly define their IT training needs. Undoubtedly ECDL has much to offer as an IT training package, whether it provides the desired skills set for library staff needs to be explored further.