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# ENTELIS+ Policy Recommendations

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## **I. Introduction to ENTELIS+ Project**

ENTELIS+ is a project aiming to reducing the digital divide through collaboration in the development of strategies and policies for digital skills development among persons with disabilities. ENTELIS+ is coordinated by the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) and implemented by a consortium of 10 experienced European partners with complementary skills and knowledges working together.

ENTELIS+ brings together service providers from Italy, Austria, Ireland and Greece; universities from Austria and Cyprus; a leading expert organisation on accessibility and three European networks representing service providers for persons with disabilities; assistive technologies experts and regional authorities.

The target group of ENTELIS+ is defined as: educational institutions, public service and policy makers, service providers for people with disabilities, disabled people's organisations and organisations representing older adults.

The objectives of the project include:

- To raise awareness about the importance of accessibility as an enabler for inclusive learning and teaching.
- To facilitate the implementation of good practices on the inclusion of learners with disabilities, thus stimulating an inclusive education.
- To develop specific digital skills for people at risk of digital exclusion, empowering them and contributing to minimise the digital divide, making them active participants in the digital age.
- To build the capacity of all key actors involved in the design and implementation of facilitating frameworks (public authorities and service providers).

Bearing this last objective in mind, ENTELIS+ promotes this policy paper aiming at formulating workable strategies for promoting the reduction of the digital divide through the development of digital skills. It is based on the expertise and knowhow of the ENTELIS+ project that we provide the following recommendations to policy-makers, with the view of developing the digital skills of persons with disabilities and reducing the digital gap.

## **II. Digital gap in Europe**

The digital gap is a broadly understood concept. However, its details and effects are often overlooked or underreported. In the present day and age, in which Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is at the core of most economic, societal, and everyday processes, it becomes especially important to tackle the negative outputs of the digital gap in the lives of those affected by it<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The digital divide is a worldwide issue, about 70% of the global population (source: Digital Divide Council). According to World Stats of 2020, in Europe the 87% of its population had Internet access, compared to 39% of Africans. Anyway, the divide persists the level of Internet access. In this regard, several types of digital gap are identified: access divide (possibilities that people have to access this resource), use divide (lack of digital skills, which impedes the handling of technology) and quality of use gap.

The rapid rate of innovation on these new ways of communication has as consequence that a sector of society will be left behind in the adoption of new technologies<sup>2</sup>.

A digital gap occurs when structural factors create barriers leading to unequal opportunities. It is important to analyse its causes and to see what can be done to bridge the gap and reach full digital inclusion. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the way in which technologies are present in and impact our daily lives.

ICTs can provide real opportunities to persons with disabilities and older adults if combined with assistive technologies. With adequate support and training, many more persons with disabilities and older persons could benefit from such technologies to remain independent and socially connected, while, at the same time, maintaining a good quality of life in their homes and communities.

Nevertheless, there is a divide between those who are able to use these technologies and those who are unable to do so. This divide is known as the “digital gap”. The gap may originate from several factors, such as personal circumstances, social, economic, educational or cultural circumstances. Impairments may play a significant role in increasing the digital gap, if they are not attenuated by accessibility policies and technologies. Despite advances in the latter theme, most technologies are still relatively unprepared to respond to the needs of people with disabilities and older adults.

In the particular case of the older adults, such a gap is often related to their incipient digital skills<sup>3</sup> and different, non-technologically-based concepts of social life. While in the long term there is a trend towards an increase in the number of digitally apt elderly people, in the short term such a deficit in digital skills tends to play an increased role in the digital gap faced by them<sup>4</sup>.

Taking into consideration the importance of technology nowadays, digital exclusion has wide-ranging effects in the economic, social and cultural integration of people with disabilities in wider society. Bridging the digital gap is essential to ensuring that all people can lead a full life and access the labour market, thus providing wider societal benefits and economic growth at local and national level. The main reason to push towards digital integration, however, is the fact that it can help persons with disabilities enjoy equal rights to others.

As such, bridging the digital gap and using ICT to enable persons with disabilities is at the very forefront of discussions around the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). The UN CRPD defines disability as the result of the interaction between personal factors an individual may have – for instance, an impairment – with attitudinal and environmental barriers; for example a workplace not being accessible. In this case, it is the fact that the workplace is not accessible which hinders a persons right to access work; not the person’s individual situation.

Bridging the digital divide can mean – in principle – that persons with disabilities can use ICT and other digital tools to create more inclusive environments; thus facilitating their inclusion. That is the real importance of bridging the digital divide.

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<sup>2</sup> Several analysis indicates that disabled people in the EU have around 60% lower chance of having Internet access at home than non-disabled people.

<sup>3</sup> 20 % of people aged 75 years and older use the internet at least occasionally, in comparison with 98 % of 16-29-year-olds (source: Fundamental Rights Agency, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> According AGE Platform Europe, only 33% of the total population -8% of persons between 65 and 74- have more than basic digital skills.

## Different approaches to bridging the digital gap

There are however different approaches to tackling the digital gap; most of which are covered in the following points.

### Education

One of the origins of the digital gap is the school environment. Education is a key tool for individuals to develop their skills and capabilities from a young age: social, emotional, learning etc. This is also the case for when it comes to digital education. Historically, people with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream education. For many years, education of children with disabilities was associated with the provision of special education in segregated educational settings<sup>5</sup>. Special education represented the view that any 'problems' and 'deficits' were located within the child and thus these problems had to be remedied in order for the child to fit the 'norm', a view also associated with the charity model, that perceives disabled people as dependent and passive individuals in need of charity rather than rights. However, from the 1990s, such a view was increasingly challenged and contested, with the UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994, which advocated that mainstream schools should be restructured at all levels in order to accommodate the needs of all children on equal terms, being of paramount importance.

This is also in line with Article 24 of the UN CRPD. The unequal access to mainstream education environments means that many persons with disabilities are unable to -or have unequal- access the type of digital education that the mainstream population receives; thus increasing the risk of their digital exclusion and consequently their societal exclusion.

### Employment

According to European Commission, a strong digital economy powered by Europeans with digital skills is vital for jobs and European competitiveness. Over 70% of businesses have said that the lack of staff with adequate digital skills is an obstacle to investment.

Access to employment for persons with disabilities is still a challenge. For them, it is often harder to get properly trained and employed. According to an ANED analysis of Eurostat data referring to 2017, only 50.6 % of persons with disabilities are employed, compared to 74.8 % of persons without disabilities. The unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in the EU, aged 20- 64, is 17.1 % compared to 10.2 % of persons without disabilities, and the EU activity rate of persons with disabilities is only 61.0 % compared to 82.3 % of non-disabled people. Furthermore, a recent report on Employment from the Council further highlights that people with disabilities tend to leave employment early and are particularly affected by poverty and social exclusion<sup>6</sup>.

Negative effects of the economic crisis in Europe are felt in the social, employment and education sector, taking a particular toll on the most vulnerable groups in the labour market, including people with disabilities. It is therefore necessary to assess which models of employment for persons with disabilities are leading to the highest social, financial and personal outcomes. Moreover, there is a correlation between unemployment and poverty. As statistics from ANED show, national unemployment rates have an immediate effect on the unemployment rate of people with disabilities.

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<sup>5</sup> Atkinson, D., Jackson, M. and Walmsley, J. (1997) *Forgotten Lives: Exploring the History of Learning Disability*. Kidderminster: BILD.

<sup>6</sup> Council conclusions on the 2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy and the Joint Employment Report (2020).



Therefore, if the unemployment rate increases significantly, the risk of poverty for people with disabilities is considerably higher.

### **ENTELIS+ policy recommendations**

It is clear that the digital divide has a serious effect on the inclusion of persons with disabilities and ensuring that they have equal access to their rights.

The digital divide must be addressed from different approaches if we are looking to ensure the equal inclusion of all people in the digital world. Achieving this goal requires a response from local and authorities (as well as at national level, depending on the attribution of powers on Education, Employment, Social Affairs...), as they are a key element in providing support and promoting this type of initiative, which needs significant political support.

There are three main areas which require the involvement of local authorities:

- Firstly, to promote “universal design” for the production of products so that they are accessible, understood and used to the greatest possible extent of people;
- Secondly, the promotion of inclusive education in place of special education by raising awareness of the need to adapt schools to the needs of all people; This includes digital skills education.
- Thirdly, to raise awareness of the importance of improving the employability of persons with disabilities through the use of technology.

Having assessed the technical and political feasibility, implementation, costs, time and effectiveness of each option, ENTELIS+ recommends a combination of two solutions: increasing the take-up of universal design in the development or provision of products or services, and the implementation of awareness-raising and awareness programmes regarding inclusive education.

Regarding universal design, the ENTELIS+ partnership recommends local authorities to develop a subsidy system to facilitate the take up of universal design by companies and others. It may also include specific references to universal design within public procurement processes. Its high political and technical viability (usually there is an agreement to carry it out), its low cost in time (it implies only an amendment to the Ordinance) and in resources (not a cost but an increase in collection) facilitate its implementation. Likewise, its evaluation is also simple due to the facility of collecting this type of data from the City Council (or equivalent body) itself and the usefulness of the proposed indicators, which allow the measure of, for example, the percentage of companies engaged in the production of technological material that take into account in their policies universal design in comparison to the previous year.

Regarding the second recommendation, the idea is to encourage social awareness by informing and training teachers and school administrators about the need to develop inclusive digital education methods. The methods include training activities in schools and institutes aimed at teachers, orientation programmes and encouraging people with disabilities to develop on equal terms without having to be set aside. A digital information platform about this approach and advertisements aimed at the population in order to raise awareness of this educational alternative could be implemented too. The main objective of this proposal is the achievement of a consensus among the actors involved, from local government to educational organizations, aimed at promoting knowledge about a new and

more inclusive teaching methodology regarding digital education. It also highlights its low economic cost and the ease of obtaining the necessary resources.