ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION PROVISION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING
KEY POLICY MESSAGES

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the conclusions and recommendations of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) Accessible Information Provision for Lifelong Learning (i-access) project and highlight how these recommendations can support the implementation of existing European Union and international policy priorities.

The increase in signatories to the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* 2006 (UNCRPD) has intensified debates on critical issues relating to equal access to information for all – especially in the field of education.

All organisations involved in the provision of information relevant for learning have a duty to make this information accessible to everyone.

Accessible Information Provision for Lifelong Learning – Trends at European and International level

Effective participation in lifelong learning requires the ability to access relevant information for and about education. The barriers presented by inaccessible information potentially impact on more then one billion people with disabilities worldwide – that equals 15% of the population (WHO, 2011).

The freedom and ability to access and share information is a basic human right, which was affirmed by the UN General Assembly as early as 1948 in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1948). Building on this right, accessibility is also an underlying premise throughout the UNCPRD of 2006, which outlines the obligation of State Parties to 'provide accessible information to persons with disabilities' (Art. 3 and 4) and calls for 'the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems' (Art. 9). This clearly implies that accessible information is vital for education and learning.

On the basis of both the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Declaration of Principles (2003) and the Tunis Commitment (2005) it was agreed that the Information Society could be supported best: 'when ICT-related efforts and programmes are fully integrated in national and regional development strategies'. (p. 6).

In general it can be argued that access to ICT and information should be considered as a right and an entitlement for people with disabilities that extends far beyond considering accessible web design (as described in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (W3C, 2008). Access to ICT and information is considered to be a vehicle in the move towards the goals of a knowledge society (Council Conclusions, 2009, p. 2) and growing economy (Council Conclusions, 2010, p. 6) as well as to social inclusion (European Commission, 2007, p. 10 and Council Conclusions, May 2010, p. 3). This results in a call for accessible ICT and information for all, as well as enhanced ICT skills for people with disabilities to enable them to contribute an open, green and competitive knowledge society (Council Conclusions Dec. 2009, p. 3).

The European Council of Ministers' Conclusions on an Accessible Information Society (2009) requests

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all stakeholders to 'Improve the accessibility and usability of ICT-supported education material and methods, thus ameliorating the learning chances of persons less familiar with ICT as well as persons with disabilities' (p. 5). In the area of procurement both the General Standardisation Mandate (2005) and the European Disability Act (scheduled for 2012) support the production and procurement of accessible products (p. 3).

Countries who have signed and ratified the UNCRPD commit themselves to supporting the provisions set out in the Convention within their national legislation, and indeed the UNCRPD acts as legal basis for, and is referenced in, many legal frameworks produced both at European and national levels.

The Agency Accessible Information Provision for Lifelong Learning (i-access) Project[1]

The i-access project was implemented from 2011 to 2012 with support from European Community Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) funding.

21 Agency member countries were involved in the i-access project[2] with contributions from over 70 participants. These professionals included policy makers, journalists, researchers, ICT experts and service providers as well as representatives of international and European organisations.

The results of all i-access project activities show that, in reality, there is no lack of policy regarding accessible information and that the UNCRPD is an increasing influence on both European and national policies dealing with accessibility issues. ICT solutions are also available to support such policy on International, European and national levels. However, the findings of the i-access survey and conference, indicate that, despite this, the main barriers to implementing existing policy centre upon:

- The need for cross-sectoral policies based upon a universal design and all-inclusive principles that have clear and unequivocal directives relating to accessible information provision;

- Policy implementation strategies based upon multi-stakeholder involvement and geared towards capacity building in organisations in terms of investments, education of professionals and continuous organisational self-review;

- Evaluation and monitoring of compliance to policy that ensures that the rights of people with disabilities and/or special educational needs to accessible information are met.

The guiding principles and subsequent recommendations developed in this project present strategies and approaches to address these policy issues.

Project Findings and Recommendations

Recommendations focus upon what needs to be included within a written policy in order to direct accessible information provision in organisations;
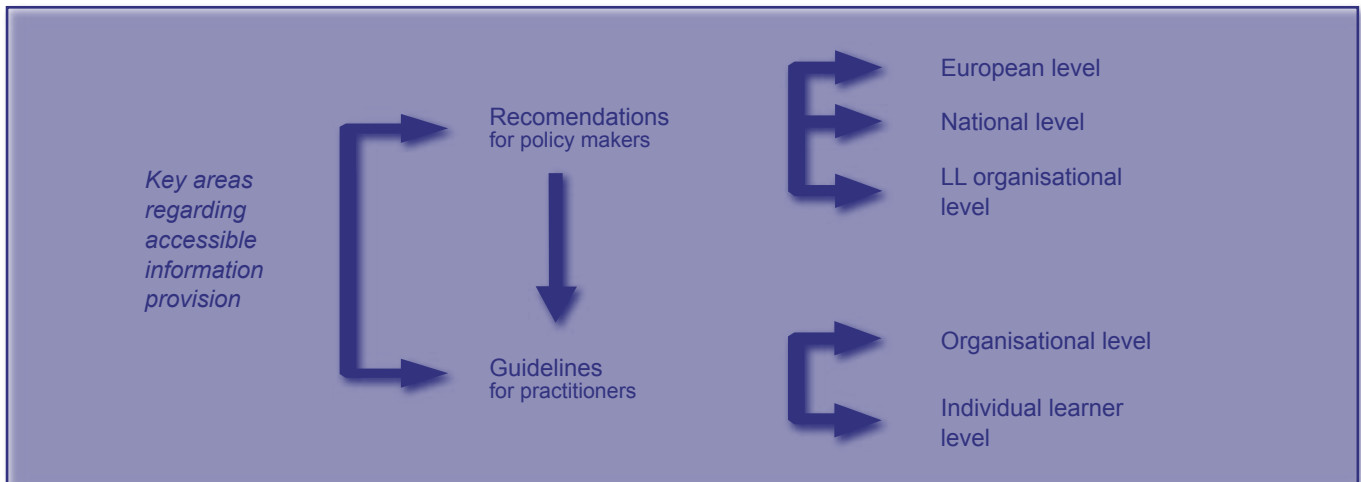
Guidelines focus upon how the policy can be implemented in a practical way at the organisational, as well as individual learner level.

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[1] More information is available from: http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/i-acces

[2] Belgium (both the Flemish and French speaking communities), Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom (both England and Scotland).

One main outcome of the i-access project was to differentiate between recommendations and guidelines within the project, as presented in the figure below.

Distinction between recommendations and guidelines linked to target groups

There are four general principles that both policy makers and practitioners consider vital for policies on accessible information provision.

Rights Principle: Access to information is a fundamental right - it empowers learners and facilitates their participation in society.

Structural Principle: It is vital that any policy or recommendation does not regard technology as an end in itself.

All-Inclusive Principle: Accessible information provision needs to be considered in its widest interpretation to include people with all forms of disabilities and/or special educational needs.

Synergy Principle: Accessibility benefits users with disabilities and/or special educational needs and may often benefit all users.

The seven project recommendations are targeted at policy makers for lifelong learning as well as policy makers for ICT, working at the European, national or lifelong learning organisational levels.

Raising awareness about accessible information for lifelong learning as a rights issue. Policy makers, organisations and professionals in lifelong learning, ICT specialists, people with disabilities and/or special educational needs and their families and support networks should be made aware of learners' rights to accessible information provision.

A multi-stakeholder approach based upon co-operation and information exchange should be taken. Highly specific policies focused upon single interest group issues alone cannot achieve the provision of accessible information for lifelong learning.

Issues around accessible information provision should be covered in the education of all professionals involved in lifelong learning. ICT can contribute to effective access to learning opportunities only if all professionals in lifelong learning are educated in the use of ICT as a tool to enable equal opportunities in education.

Issues around accessible information provision should be covered in the education of ICT and media professionals. By educating media and ICT specialists on the impact of disabilities and/or special educational needs on people using ICT, it is possible to develop more accessible technology from design to production.

Accessibility should be a guiding principle for procurement of all goods and services. Goods or services should not be purchased from organisations that do not fully take account of accessibility issues.

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> ***Research should be promoted in order to develop an evidence base for future policy design, implementation and evaluation.*** Long-term research efforts in this area should inform policy-making, monitoring and evaluation but - more importantly - should aim to identify areas for future development and work.

> ***Compliance to policy should be systematically monitored.*** Monitoring of compliance can only be encouraged at present, but should be extended. In the long term monitoring of compliance with accessibility policy should be mandatory at the National level.

Both the guiding principles and recommendations can be considered as a core framework to be developed and localised based on different country and regional contexts.

Areas for Further Policy Development

Many policies exist which are relevant for accessible information provision for lifelong learning, but further action is needed to translate policy into practice and raise awareness of the importance of this issue.

The current speed of technological development provides a great opportunity if consideration is given to inclusive design. At the same time, there is a danger of leaving learners with special needs or disabilities behind and increasing the digital divide if the technology developed to carry and present information is not accessible.

A general recognition and acceptance of the need to provide accessible information for learning is growing across and beyond Europe. However, policy is often fragmented across sectors and the practical implementation of existing policy needs to be supported by practical guidelines on how organisations can provide accessible information.

Concluding Comments

The ability of all learners to access information which is relevant for their learning on an equal basis throughout their learning careers is a fundamental key to building an inclusive society. Learners with special needs and disabilities are at a double disadvantage if confronted with information that is not accessible to them.

The need to provide accessible information is generally accepted – once organisations are made aware of the difficulties that learners face with inaccessible material. The challenge remains to raise awareness in all organisations dealing with the provision of information relevant for learning and supply guidance for the implementation and sharing of good practice.

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