Digital Inclusion: Evidence Digests *No 3*

Evidence Digests present information on Digital Inclusion trends and outcomes in an easily digestible form. They act as a guide to conversations between those delivering Digital Inclusion projects and those who wish to learn from them where both can share in an understanding of what the evidence tells us, why and how it should be measured. In this issue, we introduce the digests and what they aim to do

The Unemployed

Context

Against the backdrop of the ongoing technological and digital transformation/revolution, digital skills have not only become critical but also ubiquitous in all aspects of personal and professional life. Indeed. such skills together with easy, affordable and secure access to ICTs underpinned by fast, reliable and high-quality connectivity and broadband coverage are seen as fundamental in supporting the twin green and digital transitions of the EU. For example, 90% of jobs today already require some level of digital literacy/skills, with some requiring very high levels of professional ICT skills.[2]

Yet a large number of European citizens still lack basic digital skills deemed essential for fully participating in today's digital society and economy and thriving both personally and professionally: in 2019, 42% of the EU's population lacked basic digital skills.[3] This masks significant digital skills deficits that vary widely between Member States and regions within them as well as different segments of the EU's population, with the most socially disadvantaged groups being much more likely to lack both sufficient digital competences and access to ICTs and associated reliable connectivity and (fast) broadband. For example, digital skills gap is particularly pronounced among EU's unemployed population with obvious adverse implications about their employability and job prospects in today's increasingly digitalised economy.

Defining Digital Inclusion

According to the European Commission, Digital Inclusion is defined as:

'ways to ensure that everybody can contribute to and benefit from the digital economy and society'. [1]

The European Commission, and most EU Member States, typically shape their Digital Inclusion policy in terms of three key intervention areas:

- Connectivity: access to the internet through broadband, wi-fi and mobile.
- Usage capability: the acquisition of digital competences so people can use digital devices efficiently and effectively.
- Quality of use: the design of services so they meet all user needs, including the needs of people who are vulnerable.

[1] Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions A Digital Single Market Strategy for Europe. COM/2015/0192 final

[2] European Commission, (2020). *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 - Resetting education and training for the digital age*, COM(2020) 624 final, Brussels, 30.9.2020, https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/deap-communication-sept2020_en.pdf

[3] European Commission, (2020). *Digital Economy and Society Index Report 2020 - Human Capital – Digital Inclusion and Skills*, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/human-capital

COVID impact

Significantly, the Covid-19 pandemic and the much wider reliance and use of ICTs (e.g. during lockdowns for personal and professional purposes such as remote working) has increased digital inequality, not least by exacerbating the digital skills gap that already existed.[4] Indeed, the European Commission in its recently launched European Skills Agenda, emphasises that, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, new inequalities are emerging as many European citizens do not have the required level of digital skills.[5]

Recognising the importance of digital literacy for getting on in life and work, there is a strong policy focus on equipping people, including vulnerable and socially excluded groups, with the necessary digital skills (at all levels) and allow them to, inter alia, make the most of the internet and digital technologies. For instance, both the EU and its Member States have embarked on major upskilling/ reskilling initiatives aimed at providing the unemployed with the required digital skills to either (re) enter and progress in the labour market and/or use these as the basis for further upskilling and specialisation in the digitally-intensive occupations and/or sectors.

Good practices for the unemployed

An example of such digital upskilling initiatives is the large-scale Portugal INCoDe.2030 programme, launched in 2017.[6] This national programme aims at addressing the significant and growing digital skills deficit among different segments of the Portuguese population, including the unemployed. Likewise, Finland's The Digital Age Skills programme (Digiaikakauden Taidot) is a national initiative also aimed at enhancing the digital skills of the unemployed and other vulnerable groups.

Apart from major digital upskilling initiatives such as those described above, there is also a plethora of smaller scale projects – funded by EU, national/regional and/or sectoral funds – that are also targeted at the long-term unemployed. For example, EU funding such as Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund (ESF), have for long supported the development of digital skills among vulnerable groups. In addition, quite a few programmes and projects focus on specific sub-groups among the unemployed population, most notably women, young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs), older jobseekers, migrants/refugees and the long-term unemployed.

For example, as regards the latter, since 1999, Ireland's Fast Track for - Information Technology programme for long-term unemployed (FIT) has been providing quality ICT-related training to long-term unemployed and those at risk of long-term unemployment. There has also been a concerted effort to bridge the digital gender divide both at EU and national/regional levels. For example, since 1988, the ESF-supported Interface3 in Belgium has been targeting unemployed women from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to enhance their employability in the ICT sector or in professions requiring digital skills through ICT training.[7]

Unemployed young people, especially those not in employment, education or training (NEET) has been another key target group for policies aimed at fostering digital inclusion through, inter alia, equipping them with digital skills that are essential for living, working and fully participating in today's

[4] European Commission, (2020c). *European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience*, COM(2020) 274 final, Brussels, 1.7.2020, https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2020/EN/COM-2020-274-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF

[5] European Commission, (2020c). *Op.Cit.*

[6] https://nit.ie/

[7] https://www.interface3.be/en/interface3

society and economy. Although across the EU younger cohorts are much more digitally/media literate than older age groups, even today more than one in five young people aged 16-29 lacks basic digital skills.[8] As a result, it is not surprising that a large number of large, medium and small-scale programmes and projects are also aimed at equipping young people, including NEETs, with digital skills at all levels – basic, intermediate and advanced. For example, the Crescere in Digitale (CiD) project – as part of the international Grow with Google programme – has been targeted at NEETs aged 15-29 registered with Italy's Youth Guarantee (Garanzia Giovani) Programme.

Another key target group has been older job seekers who often lack even basic digital skills to fully engage with the digital world: at present, only 35% of those aged 55-74 and 30% of the retired and the inactive across the EU possess basic digital skills, despite these being essential for full participation in today's society and economy.[9] A number of EU and national/regional programmes/projects are, therefore, seeking to enhance the digital skills of older job seekers (and workers), in an effort to plug the digital skills gap of older cohorts and increase their employment chances. For example, the two-year Erasmus+ Media Literacy 45+ project has explicitly targeted low-skilled /low-qualified unemployed adults 45+.

Finally, in response to the recent increased migration flows, a growing number of programmes/projects seek to address the digital (and labour market) exclusion of (unemployed) migrants and/or refugees through digital upskilling. Apart from focusing on enhancing their social and labour market integration, many of these programmes also to plug the significant ICT-related skills shortages resulting from the fact that demand is rapidly outpacing supply – the EU already has around 1,000,000 vacancies for digital technology experts.[10,11] For example, Germany's ReDI School of Digital Integration, provides its (migrant and refugee) students with free quality education through IT, programming and coding courses and helps them develop a wide range of digital skills in order to enhance their employment chances in the tight German digital labour market. Likewise, the French pilot project Refugeeks[12] is also aimed at vulnerable refugees who wish to enter the labour market and have experienced social exclusion.

[8] European Commission, (2020b). *Op.Cit*
[9] European Commission, (2020). *Digital Economy and Society Index Report 2020 - Human Capital – Digital Inclusion and Skills*, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/human-capital
[10] European Commission, (2020d). *A new Industrial Strategy for a globally competitive, green and digital Europe*, COM(2020) 102 final, Brussels, , 10.3.2020, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0102&from=EN
[11] Verdi, G., (2020). *Digital Skills and Refugees: Towards a European Approach*, European Student Think Tank, June, http://www.esthinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Digital-Skills-and-Refugees-Towards-a-European-Approach.pdf
[12] https://simplon.co/refugeeks-fr