

Research project: DigIn – Digitalisation and inclusive education: Leaving no one behind in the digital era

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Abstract

Even before the pandemic, education systems were not ready for digital education (OECD, 2018). However, the forced closures experienced worldwide by schools during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted various critical issues related to distance learning and, specifically, to its accessibility for all students. While many schools have risen to the challenge and developed effective forms of digital instruction, others have fallen behind, leaving some learners without access to quality education. Studies have pointed out that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the exclusion of students with disabilities from education, showing that they are least likely to benefit from distance learning (UN, 2020; Bellacicco & Ianes, 2020). For these learners the online transition has indeed constituted a substantial obstacle to learning and participation in class activities (OECD, 2020; UN, 2020) – also because of the sometimes limited digital competences of teachers who, during that time, had to adapt to new modalities of delivery of teaching for which they have not been trained.

The DigIn project was born in this context and is aimed at strengthening teachers' profiles and professionalising them in the field of digital and inclusive education. Its main purpose is indeed to create inclusive settings that enhance, through the use of digital technologies, the learning and the participation of students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Two are the primary lines of action adopted by the project to ensure all students access and effective participation in digital

education: (1) verifying that the educational technologies employed in teaching and learning are accessible and usable by all learners; (2) helping teachers to implement such technologies in their teaching practices in an inclusive way.

To achieve this, the intended outputs of the project are:

- The creation of an online training aimed at developing teachers' digital competences and their ability to support students with disabilities/SLD in an inclusive environment (MOOC of 5 modules), which will be implemented in schools starting in September/October 2022 in each of the partner countries. Moreover, once the project is over, the training will be offered as an online resource for all interested pre-service and in-service teachers.
- A process of self-assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in the use of digital technologies from an inclusive perspective – carried out by schools in each partner country (SELFIE study), both before and after participating in the online training described above.
- The design of new teaching techniques and materials for the inclusion of all learners in digital instruction (Best-Practice-Examples Toolkit).
- The development of guidance tools for teachers with respect to the accessibility/usability of existing digital resources for teaching and learning and the design of inclusive settings in line with the principles and strategies of the Universal Design for Learning approach (Tool-Check and Innovation-Check instrument).

The results of the current project constitute a fundamental starting point in terms of reinforcing inclusive education, through the use of digital technologies, with a view to meet not only the specific needs of learners with disabilities and SLD, but also to respond to the vast heterogeneity present in the classroom. Now more than ever is indeed fundamental to enhance inclusive digital education, also in light of the increasing degree of digitalisation of our reality. Moreover, this would allow the creation of a repository of good practices which could also be applied to specific circumstances like, for example, in the case of students who, due to chronic diseases, cannot attend school for long periods (the so-called homebound students).