Enabling Access to Education & Employment - Digital strategies for sustainable community building Seminar

At the recent seminar “Enabling Access to Education & Employment - Digital strategies for sustainable community building Seminar” showcased DigiPlace4all, an online peer support community for people with disabilities developing digital skills for accessing education and employment, developed by the DICE (Digital Inclusion Champions in Europe) project in Ireland, Belgium, Poland and Bulgaria. Additionally, the seminar also demonstrated how EU funding can help NGOs collaborate within Ireland and across Europe on dynamic initiatives like this.

John Dolan has Chief Executive of the Disability Federation of Ireland presented a thought provocation speech that was well received by the audience “Enabling Access to Education and Employment – Digital strategies for sustainable community building”. The speech can be read here

Enabling Access to Education and Employment – Digital strategies for sustainable community building

Introduction

Technology has come to define the society in which we live. It has moved into every aspect of social, political, economic and cultural life and at this stage, in essence, dictates how fast the world turns. Technology can be considered as a source of social support with life enhancing opportunities for society at large. It is advancing rapidly and, as with the rest of society, its impact on people with disabilities has been considerable. For most people technology can make life easier by expanding life choices and opportunities. For people with disabilities, however, technology can change the most ordinary of daily activities from the impossible to the possible. This emancipatory possibility means it is a very exciting time indeed.

How peer support and online community initiatives like DigiPlace4all can serve the national agenda to improve transition opportunities to education and work for people with disabilities

The social exclusion of people with disabilities involves a complex set of processes that encompasses the lack of or denial of resources, relationships, rights, and opportunities in all areas of life, which negatively impacts on the individual concerned.

The place of people with a disability in Ireland – Their place in public policy is to be cared for and maintained, rather than enabled. While the rest of the population get educated, get a job, and are on their way, only falling back on the system and its supports if they need to. The
condescension towards people with disabilities results in them being entirely dependent on a system that leaves them poor and helpless. The roots of this social apartheid can be traced back to the legacy of Ireland’s carceral State, where we locked up more of our population as “mentally ill” than Stalin’s Soviet dictatorship.

The statistics on people with a disability in the areas of education and employment read like a misery index: People with disabilities are much less likely to complete third and even second-level education. In fact, among people with disabilities, almost half have not progressed beyond primary education. While about one third of people with disabilities have been found to leave education before they intended because of their disability.

The facts are just as stark in the area of employment. People with disabilities are much more likely to be unemployed, while the participation rate of working-age people with a disability in the labour force is less than half of that of general population. Even at the height of the boom when long-term unemployment was at an all-time low, the percentage of people with disabilities in employment was also less than half that than for those without a disability.

Furthermore, mainstream activation and employment measures such as JobBridge, Momentum, Gateway, and Community Employment for those on the Live Register exclude people on Disability Allowance. To Ireland’s shame, we are the only country to systematically exclude young disabled people from the Youth Guarantee.

It is pertinent to mention here the striking fact that over one third of people with disabilities, and almost two thirds of younger people would like to work if the circumstances were right.

These new technologies offer an opportunity to decolonise our imaginations and see the promise in empowering people with disabilities to take control of their own lives. Initiatives such as this can exploit the individual’s capabilities to their fullest to overcome the fragmented and unequal distribution of people with disabilities in education and employment. It represents a flexible and comprehensive approach to the daily experiences of people with disabilities as it can be adaptable to each individual’s need at a particular time in their life. Different people can work on it in different places, at different speeds, with relative autonomy from each other. It is instrumental to an inclusive society as it goes towards ensuring equal opportunities by changing the environment from a disabling one to an enabling one.

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1 Just 19% of people with disabilities have completed third-level education, compared to 38% of the general population. In 2010, 50% of people with a disability had less than full second-level education, compared with 22% without a disability. Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey, ESRI July 2015.


3 Ibid.

4 The unemployment rate amongst disabled people was 30.8 per cent, compared with 19 per cent for the overall population. http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011profile8/Profile_8_Full_document.pdf p. 15

5 29% compared to 60% for general population. ESRI 2015 Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland


7 Younger people in the 18-34 age groups, ibid.
With a myriad of networked people, exploited and disenfranchised by the current system but with the whole of human intelligence available to them, change is possible. We are truly on the cusp of something extraordinary: educated and connected human beings who are not reliant on hierarchical structures and who cannot be silenced, segregated, or dispersed.

More specifically, user-centred and user-generated content and approach could help with and overcome transitional issues in the areas of education and employment by creating dynamic communities of peer support relationships within and across stakeholder groups. This would enable community members to develop and maintain support relationships, sharing experiences, knowledge and skills. There is the opportunity to build the digital literacy skills needed to transition from VET centre training to mainstream education and employment. Regarding education, there is also the possibility of alternative online courses provided by universities which could be cheaper and more accessible.

In the area of employment, many people with episodic conditions may have intermittent availability for work. Greater flexibility is needed in order to support people to remain economically and socially active. While over 40% of people have had to leave work because of their disability,\(^8\) demonstrating the very real way in which disability is itself socially constructed, both due to the lack of accessible work environments, transport infrastructure, and the absence of appropriate supports. Notably, this breaches Article 27 (Work and employment) and article 9 (Accessibility) of the UNCRPD.

To conclude this section the innovative technology discussed here today may offer the opportunity to turn around the poor employment statistics, and the poorer educational outcomes that are cruel and unjust reality for people with a disability.

**How peer support communities can complement support by trained staff**

Revolution of service provision - These type of support communities are major avenues for transferring knowledge and cutting through the professionalism of service provision as people with disabilities can garner advice from their peers rather than genuflect at the altar of state-sanctioned “experts”. Indeed it is the people with a lived experience of disability who are the real experts. Crucially, this focuses on the person’s strengths rather than trying to alleviate their weakness in order for them to become supplicants to the system as it is currently organised.

On a more practical level, people with disabilities often need personal assistants and accessible physical environments to engage with activation schemes which would be much easier to handle online. For instance, the majority of Intreo offices, which provide a single point of contact for all employment and income supports, are not accessible to people on disability and illness payments. Personal Assistant Services are not automatically available to those who need them, while capacity amongst staff to interact with disabled people (including working with people with mental health issues) is a recurring problem due to a lack of appropriate training.

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\(^8\) ESRI 2015 Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland
How organisations within the disability sector need to cooperate and share responsibilities in creating and using initiatives like this

DFI believes that there is considerable scope for better coordination of organisations and individuals in this area. Issues that need to be examined, for example, are ways of creating more effective and streamlined access to Assistive Technology for individuals.

DFI’s goals include developing a sustainable network of individuals and organisations that collaborate and focus on the development of strategies and policies for AT services for people with a disability. To achieve this we are creating another online Community of Practice for individuals and organisations who which to play a key role in moving this agenda forward. It aims to support further development and take up of AT in organisations that complements developments such as Digiplace4All and ensures that Digiplace4All is known throughout the sector and take up is high. It is a cross sectoral collaboration bringing together expertise from within the sector. It is also important to inform policy makers of how AT can be improved and extended. My colleague Pierce Richardson (here today) is happy to talk to any of you on this.

The role of public policy support and funding

Do we see this as a more accessible way for people with disabilities to feed into the labour market as it is currently formulated only to be exploited in different ways or is it perhaps an alternative? The shoots of something less alienating and instead promising human liberation and flourishing, achieved through building inclusive alternatives within the current system.

There are a number of concerns that must be addressed in order to achieve this. Firstly, those who can’t afford internet access risk becoming poorer and ever more marginalised as life, more and more, shifts online. Secondly, we must address questions of dominance, power, and control. Who controls the power of networked communities and online knowledge and directs technological change to ensure it benefits all in society? These initiatives must be decentralised, users must have much greater and more meaningful control over data flow in order to prevent the typical monopolisation and protection of data, the capturing and commercialisation of this free social data by corporate interests. The state must be a bulwark against this. (UNCRPD articles below).

Conclusion

DFI believes that assistive technology could be given more attention and importance in policy affecting people with disabilities and older people, as well as in policy on wider issues facing the health and social care system. These assistive solutions (AS) need to be specifically identified as an important dimension in all relevant policies and programmes in order to truly empower people with disabilities to live the life of their choice.

I want to end by thanking Mark and his colleagues and commending Esther Murphy and the Digiplace4All team and champions for leading the way towards this new horizon of possibilities.