

e-Inclusion in the Information Society

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Some relevant definition

Before addressing the issue of **e-inclusion or digital inclusion**, it is important to go back to some general definitions of **social inclusion** (and social exclusion, being the reverse side of the medal).

There is a considerable body of research to demonstrate that **social exclusion** *is complex and multi-dimensional* (Bradshaw et al, 2004). The key inter-relating factors include low income; labour market exclusion (linked to ill-health, low educational attainment and lack of skills); access to education and learning opportunities; housing status; degree of social capital and neighbourhood status, linked to the reinforcement of ‘cycles of poverty’. These factors tend to commonly occur across many western societies. In turn, standard measurements of exclusion and poverty suggest that the ‘poverty gap’ is increasing rather than diminishing. However, although this pattern holds for a number of other countries within the EU and elsewhere, there is some evidence to suggest that some societies are less ‘exclusion prone’ than others (Justino and Litchfield, 2003).

One area that has been relatively neglected in research, and which could contribute to explaining this differentiation – and indeed to explaining why social exclusion remains so intransigent – centres on cognitive, cultural and discursive processes that shape how poverty and exclusion are socially constructed and how they relate to identity and ‘learning’. From its early years, social science has explored linkages between social cohesion and social pathologies, tracing interactivities between social disintegration, crime, poverty, deviance and ‘anomie’ (Durkheim, 1951; Merton, 1968; Giddens, 1991).

A recurrent theme in this strand of social science is that cultures, communities and groups that develop strong and adaptive mechanisms to promote cohesion and solidarity are somehow more resistant to the forces of social dislocation and social exclusion, and hence more resilient in the face of social and economic pathologies. It is suggested that sustained and repetitive exposure to social and economic ills – as a result for example of poverty-induced ailments, “generated by despairing circumstances, insurmountable tasks, or lack of social support” (Elstad, 1998; Krieger, 2004; Kawachi and Berkman et al, 2000) – itself undermines social cohesion, saps the collective spirit and therefore ultimately increases the vulnerability of those exposed to social and economic pathologies.”.

Thus some studies argue that environments characterised by highly developed levels of ‘social capital’ and ‘social cohesion’ can improve population health by influencing norms and strengthening the bonds of “civil society” (Kawachi and Berkman, 2000; Wilkinson, 1996; Lynch et al, 2000; Kunitz, 2001).

This perspective partly reflects the long-established concept that social exclusion *stems from the combination of multiple factors of deprivation* (Townsend, 1993; Bradshaw et al., 2003; Perry, 2004), pertaining to dimensions such as: economic distress, deficient schooling, inadequate housing, unemployment, etc., as explained in the following Section.

Social Exclusion/Social Inclusion

Social exclusion is subject to many and different attempts at definition. Many definitions focus on the “classification” of target groups excluded or at risk of exclusion made on the bases of factors of disadvantage that can, for example, be economical, physical, geographical, or linked to gender, age, etc.

While the concept of poverty refers to lack of resources, especially lack of income, the concept of social exclusion seems to point to the multidimensional nature of the process of exclusion, which amplifies its effects on individuals, groups within region or urban areas, or in society as a whole.

Seen in the wider sense, *the concept of social exclusion is related to the relative position that an individual or a group has in the whole context of the society*. Exclusion may be due to being part of an ethnic or religious minority, or to being resident in a geographically disadvantaged area etc. In any case, there is surely a link between poverty and social exclusion but poverty is not the only factor of social exclusion.

This conceptual difference is particularly evident in EU political documents and programmes. A key distinction between poverty and social exclusion lies in their single and multiple dimensions. Multidimensional social exclusion is the outcome of more complex processes than the mere poverty.

Exclusion can perhaps be understood more clearly from the point of view of a social structure where the following sub-systems are present:

- politics (democratic distribution system),
- economic system (labour market and instruments of economic integration),
- social system (welfare state supporting services and social integration),
- community and family systems.

Considering social exclusion as a dynamic concept, in which different importantvarious factors contribute to deprivation, it becomes relevant to take into account a range of “indices of deprivation” (DETR, 2000), as follows:

- Employment Deprivation
- Income Deprivation
- Health Deprivation and Disability
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation
- Housing Deprivation
- Geographical Access to Services
- Exposure to Crime
- Physical Environment

Social exclusion goes beyond issues of unemployment and access to the labour market. It is evidenced by several types of deprivation and barriers, which alone or together prevent the full participation in areas such

as education, health, environment, housing, culture, access to rights or family support, as well as training and job opportunities.

Discrimination and xenophobia can exacerbate social exclusion, in particular for immigrants. Social exclusion also raises particular questions in relation to social protection policies – most notably the safety net schemes and their related measures. It calls for attention to education, and training policies, taking in particular account of the view that life long learning is vital if people are to be empowered to act as full members of the knowledge and information society.

Access to public and private services and the quality of these services, including care services, are also major issues. Combatting school failure, ensuring access to the technology of the Information Society, and developing the skills and competence needed to take advantage of it, are also essential to ensure that the information age does not actually create new divisions in society, but rather promotes inclusion and cohesion (European Commission, 2000b).

Such an approach to social inclusion implies the creation of synergetic relationships and collaborations between different actors in local government and services, public administration and social networks so as to adopt a “system approach”.

Following this approach, social inclusion can be characterised by means of some institutional definitions. According to the definition of the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (2002)¹:

“Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure that everyone, regardless of their experiences and circumstances, can achieve their potential in life. To achieve inclusion, income and employment are necessary but not sufficient. An inclusive society is also characterised by a striving for reduced inequality, a balance between individuals’ rights and duties and increased social cohesion.”

Another definition developed by the European Working Group on Empowering the Excluded (1999) explains social inclusion as follows:

“The development of capacity and opportunity to play a full role, not only in economic terms, but also in social, psychological and political terms.”

¹ The *Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion* is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working with the British Government, the voluntary sector, business and trade unions. More information at: <http://www.cesi.org.uk/>.

The digital divide in the Information Society

Various features of the Information Society entail new access and exclusion issues. There has always been a gap between those people and communities who can make effective use of information and communications technology (ICT) and those who cannot. Now, more than ever, unequal adoption of and access opportunities to ICT exclude many from benefiting from the advantages related to the introduction of technologies in many fields of social life.

The term **digital divide** refers to the gap between those who can effectively use new ICT tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot. Whilst a consensus does not exist on the extent of the divide (and whether the divide is growing or narrowing), researchers are nearly unanimous in acknowledging that some sort of divide exists at this point in time².

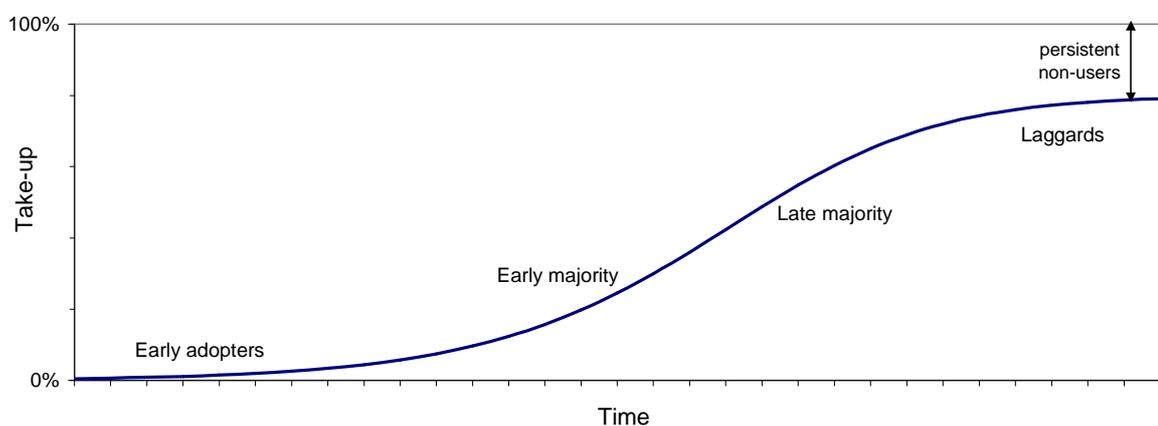
In fact *there is not just one digital divide but multiple divides which relate to a variety of factors* such as: gender; age; ‘ethnic clustering’; uncertainty of living/financial conditions; work insecurity, and social insecurity.

In the light of this, social exclusion principles and policies need to be rethought to take into account the fact that the digital divide is basically about social access to digital technologies. This goes beyond the idea of “access to the technical kit” and considers the social relations around the uses of ICT and the socio-technical aspects of the emergent Information Society. Instead it is about lifestyle choice; identity creation; changes in social structure and relationships; the emergence of new working methods; changes in the economies of education and training; the creation of new communities of learners/citizens according to a societal learning paradigm.

I. A theoretical approach to understand e-inclusion policies

The stage of development of e-inclusion policies can be investigated and understood using Molnar’s analytical model (Molnar, 2003), based on the concept that the **diffusion of innovation** typically follows an **S-curve of adoption**:

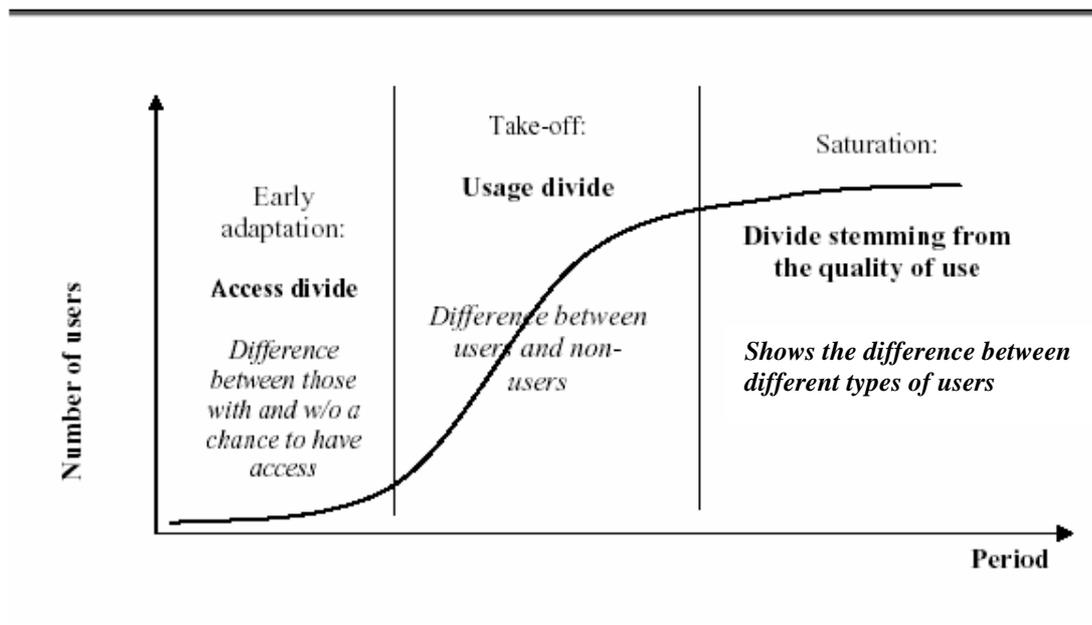
1. Figure: Diffusion of innovations



² Definition taken from the web site of the Digital Divide Network, accessible at the following URL: <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org>.

Molnar applies and adapts this conceptualisation to the specific phenomenon of ICT adoption and diffusion, also considering a range of social, cultural and economic factors – for example income – that influence the model:

2. Figure: Diffusion model of innovation regarding using of ICT means



Source: Molnar, 2003

„In the take-off phase, a minority of some early adopters take up the new technology. Growth in user figures is rather low due to high prices, insecurity about functionality and standards and poor diffusion of knowledge about the innovation. Once prices fall and these insecurities vanish, take-up begins to gain velocity and the large majority of early users and late users become involved. Once a saturation level is approaching, only the smaller group of late adopters or laggards is still left uninvolved and growth rates decline again.” (Empirica, 2006: 13-14)

Such a theoretical model assumes that ICT diffusion patterns are shaped by a combination of three variables: the degree of penetration of the technological innovation(s); the rate of growth, and the actual properties of the technologies themselves. The interaction of these three variables leads to three **types of ‘diffusion state’**:

- **Saturation** - where penetration is practically complete and growth is stagnant
- **Plateau** – where penetration is very high but not complete and growth is low or oscillating
- **Dynamic** – where penetration is lower but increasing and growth is very high

Molnar suggests that in the case of old technologies, the stage of saturation is observable. This means that growth is at a standstill, while for example plateau cases like cable television and video cassette recorders (VCR), a low or oscillating growth rate can be perceived presently. It would be logical to assume that ICTs will reflect this dynamic pattern. More importantly, the model suggests that the differential operation of these diffusion and adoption factors, in terms of the take up and adoption of ICT technologies, will shape the process, and the features of different types of ‘digital divide’.

Furthermore, the model suggests that three broad types of ‘digital divide’ can be identified (Molnar, 2003), each associated with these different diffusion phases:

1. Table: Main types of digital divide

| Adaptation stage | Type | The digital divide Term | Description |
|-------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Early adaptation | Access divide | Early digital divide | Describes the difference between those with and without access |
| Take-off | Usage divide | Primary digital divide | Describes the difference between users and non-users |
| Saturation | Divide stemming from the quality of use | Secondary digital divide | Describes the difference between users and users |

Source: Molnar, 2003

The three facets of digital divide are defined as:

- *Access divide*, or “*early digital divide*”: it considers the gap between those with and those without access.
- *Usage divide* or “*primary digital divide*”: it concentrates on those who have access but are non-users.
- *‘Quality of use’ divide* or “*secondary digital divide*”: it focuses on differentials in participation rates of those people who have access and are users.

2. E-inclusion and the European Union

E-inclusion has become a ‘must’ in the policy initiatives and actions carried out at macro level by EU Member States, and at meso and micro level by all social actors (collective and individual, public and private). E-inclusion is the information society dimension of the ”Social Inclusion Process“ which the EU Member States launched at the European Council in Nice (European Commission, 2000b) in their strategy to fight exclusion.

The eEurope Advisory Group has defined e-inclusion as follows (Kaplan, 2005):

e-Inclusion refers to the effective participation of individuals and communities in all dimensions of the knowledge-based society and economy through their access to ICT. (...) Further, e-Inclusion refers to the degree to which ICTs contribute to equalising and promoting participation in society at all levels. (...) The digital divide measures the gap between those who are empowered to substantially participate in an information and knowledge-based society, and those who are not.

Furthermore it stresses that *the scope of e-inclusion analysis must consider both individuals and communities*. Also e-Inclusion shall not be reduced to e-Adoption, which would only look at levels of ICT at large and miss the social impact of relative differences in ICT use between various socio-economic groups and individuals.

As the Information Society advances, it becomes ever more important to ensure that disadvantaged people are not left behind. Data collected in the framework of a Europe-wide research initiative (Gallie and Paugam, 2002) also show that huge gaps in ICT access and literacy persist, and that digital exclusion is more and more felt as a real barrier for people’s lives. The emerging risks of the digital divide underline the urgency of preventative actions for specific target groups mobilising both public and private actors.

In this respect, the definition of the so-called ‘Lisbon goals’ (March 2000), focusing on economic competitiveness; social justice; an inclusive society) and the elaboration of the related policies have set the pace for the balanced and sustainable development of e-inclusion actions.

The following table summarises the policy development process at EU level:

2. Table: Policy development process at EU level

| Policy | Policy function | Vision of EU policy | e-inclusion focus |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| eEurope 2002, eEurope 2005, i2010 | „Access” | Providing access and ensuring availability of broadband access and information infrastructure through which e-Inclusion within Information Society is possible | Inclusion as a matter of preventing exclusion as well as an opportunity to use Internet resources. |
| eEurope 2002, eEurope 2005, i2010 | „Accessibility” | Ensuring socio-technical accessibility for highly segmented target groups with different means | Inclusion as overcoming of functional or social challenges of particular ‘target groups’. |
| (eEurope 2002), eEurope 2005, i2010 | „Development of services” | Ensuring accessibility and development of e-services in several sectors | Inclusion as overcoming of functional or social challenges of particular ‘target groups’ |
| eEurope 2005, i2010 | „Building capacities for individuals” | Providing population or segments with adequate skills to utilize ICT-based services through ‘surviving’ or ‘participating’ in Information Society is possible. | Inclusion as a matter of having basic skills |
| i2010 | „Human and Social Capital” | Supports different types of peer-networks as well as bottom-up approaches and learning environments for human and social capital promotion | Inclusion as contextual setting socio-cultural issues and their balance |
| i2010 | „Citizen Participation” | Creating interesting content and enabling citizens to participate in every issues they are interested in | Inclusion as a matter of motivation and active empowerment |

Source: European Commission, 2007

Furthermore, the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion (NAPs/inclusion) were updated and presented by all Member States in July 2003 in response to the common objectives to fight poverty and social exclusion, revised in December 2002.

Each Member State presented in the NAP its priorities and efforts for the following two years (mid-2003 – mid-2005), focusing on a set of priority areas identified through a concerted policy process. Eight core challenges stand out from the NAPs/inclusion (2001):

1. developing an inclusive labour market and promoting employment as a right and opportunity for all;
2. guaranteeing an adequate income and resources to live in human dignity;
3. tackling educational disadvantage (preventing young people from dropping out of school, developing and extending lifelong learning so that there are customised education and training opportunities accessible to vulnerable groups, enhancing access to basic skills provision or tackling illiteracy);
4. preserving family solidarity and protecting the rights of children;
5. ensuring good accommodation for all;
6. guaranteeing equal access to quality services (health, transport, social care, etc.);

7. improving the delivery of social services and overcoming the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of policy making and delivery;
8. regenerating areas of multiple deprivation.

In 2001 when the European Council of Nice endorsed the proposal of a strengthened coordination process based on common objectives, National Action Plans and commonly agreed indicators, the fight against social exclusion ceased to be an exclusively national concern.

3. E-inclusion as an empowering factor for European citizens³

E-inclusion is considered as a key factor for Europe's future for a number of reasons. In economic terms, the EU's competitiveness will be affected by factors like the market penetration of ICTs; the development of a comprehensive e-skills base to enable European industry to evolve, and the creation of new markets for e-services. In turn, social cohesion and a dynamic, multi-cultural and inclusive society will be supported by active citizenship and a strong participation culture. The policy initiatives designed to promote active citizenship and participation – based on e-government and e-democracy – assume a high level of ICT use by citizens.

However, statistics and qualitative studies also show that e-inclusion is a problem for a significant number of European citizens. For instance, the 2005 Community Survey on ICT usage shows that more than one third of European citizens do not have access to a computer and 37% between the ages of 16 to 74 have no computer skills whatsoever. Access and ability vary from country to country, with highest levels of e-inclusion in Northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia, and lowest levels in southern Europe and new member states. E-inclusion also varies according to variables like age and gender, and there are particular groups in society who are vulnerable to e-exclusion. This is reflected in the targeting strategies adopted by e-inclusion policies and actions which focus particularly on young people; older people; women; people with disabilities.

Research suggests that actively promoting e-inclusion policies, initiatives and practices could have positive impacts at different levels. For *individuals*, lack of e-skills and low digital literacy can affect life chances including educational and employment opportunities. Since an estimated 60% of existing and 90% of new jobs require ICT skills (Department for Education and Skills, 2002), people who are ICT-literate in principle stand a better chance in the job market. In turn, job vacancies are increasingly advertised on the Internet. E-inclusion initiatives based on exploiting these trends, such as the Employment Café⁴, are working to promote the development of e-skills.

At the *community* level, e-inclusion policy and initiatives aim to impact in these key areas: making government services more effective; reducing isolation and social alienation; promoting community harmony and reducing tensions. A number of government services – for example driving test bookings - are now enabled on-line, although the level of service varies significantly between different EU member states. Attention is now being paid to ways in which integrated e-inclusion services, bridging a range of different government agencies, can promote better quality of life for communities. Similarly, there is some evidence that the availability of on-line infrastructure, coupled with investment in supporting the development of the e-skills necessary to use it, encourages greater participation in local democracy.

E-inclusion policies also affect *business and industry*. It is argued that the complex nature of the challenge to enable a digital EU can only be addressed through partnerships between government, industry and the third

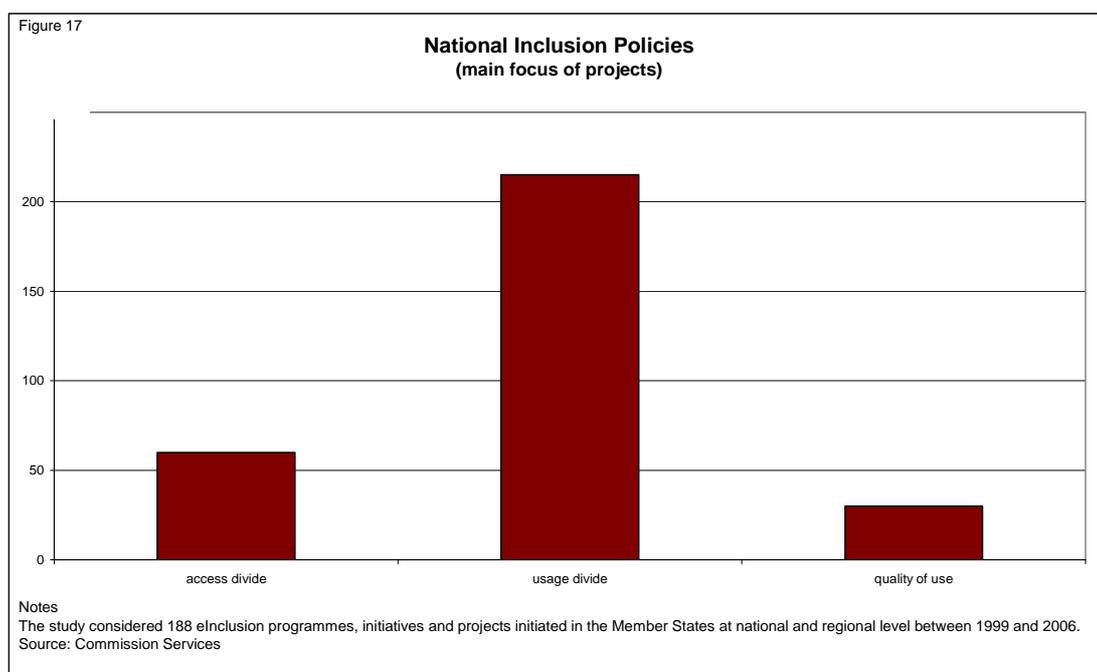
³ This section is based on the study: Status of e-inclusion, measurement, analysis and approaches for improvement. European Commission, 2007.

⁴ <http://www.employment-cafe.co.uk/home/index.asp>

sector. An interesting feature of recent trends has been the increasing importance of corporate social responsibility in shaping industry's involvement in e-inclusion.

E-inclusion policies in the European Union

The model developed by Molnar finds interesting applications in reality. Considering the policies for e-inclusion that EU Member States have been developing in the past few years (European Commission, 2007), it emerges that EU countries are placing emphasis mainly on fighting the usage divide.



Source: European Commission, 2007: 34

However, the review also showed that activities addressing the access divide are still very much a feature in national policies though their relative importance differs greatly between countries. In general, the more sophisticated a national ICT infrastructure and the greater the ‘hardware saturation’, the more likely a country is to tailor access activities to exclusion factors and to explore the viability of extending new technological modes of access.

Based on the study carried out by Empirica (2006), it can be affirmed that:

“By signing the Riga Ministerial Declaration in June 2006, 34 European countries now have expressed their dedication to carry on furthering an inclusive and unrestrictive Information Society which in conclusion abets social and economic inclusion.”

With its statements, the Ministerial Riga Declaration provides a mixture of “policy objectives” and “policy targets”. In sum, it sets out the following specific targets:

1. to halve the gap in internet usage by 2010 for groups at risk, such as older people, people with disabilities, and unemployed persons,
2. to increase broadband coverage (i.e. the availability of broadband infrastructure) in Europe to at least 90% of the EU population by 2010,
3. to ensure that all public websites are accessible by 2010,

4. by 2008, to put in place actions in the field of digital literacy and skills so as halve gaps for groups at risk of exclusion by 2010,
5. by 2007, make recommendations on accessibility standards and common approaches, which could become mandatory in public procurement by 2010, and
6. assess the necessity for legislative measures in the field of e-Accessibility, and take account of accessibility requirements in the review of the electronic communications regulatory framework beginning in June 2006.” (Empirica, 2006: 17-18)

The European Union has committed itself to the configuration of a receptive information society and has assigned those tasks as well which are necessary to achieve these goals – now it is the member states’ term to realize this policy.

Summary

To date theory, research, policy and practice in education, and in social inclusion, have tended to follow ‘parallel lines’. Whilst it has long been recognised that education (or the lack of it) is inextricably linked to the causes and effects of social exclusion, *little systematic work has been done to develop a ‘joined up’ approach to learning and inclusion, and to integrate these domains with other related policy agendas such as citizenship, identity and immigration and community regeneration*. This is particularly relevant in relation to the adoption and application of new technologies in education – particularly aimed at disadvantaged groups – since there is increasing evidence that new technologies may be working to increase rather than reduce inequalities, and promote rather than eradicate the so-called ‘digital divide’.

Against this background, a fundamental task to be taken on and brought forward is to explore how far and in what respects social exclusion reflects a form of ‘inheritance’ - one that is mediated through and exacerbated by a particular dominant learning paradigm. This exploration is to be considered within the context of another hypothesis – that education is currently in a state of crisis and that the current ‘state of the art’ in education theory, policy and practice can do little to promote social inclusion and cohesion unless it begins to understand, develop and apply learning paradigms that are based not on ‘human capital’ principles but on models around ‘societal learning’.

Another set of issues revolves around the penetration of new technologies into most forms of social relations and social discourses – and more importantly the role of new technologies in shaping new forms of social relations. These issues and the dynamics that underpin them are rapidly evolving and are highly contested. To polarise and (over)simplify the debates, one perspective maintains that the process of globalisation is creating societies in which people’s level of access to information and knowledge is becoming a key factor in determining their access to economic, social and political power. Those without access to ‘official’ knowledge and information are increasingly excluded from significant participation in society. Since the excluded are less likely to be able to access new technologies, then it is highly likely that they will represent the majority of the emerging ‘digital underclass’.

The counter-position to this perspective is that *new technologies represent a huge opportunity to address social exclusion* through for example providing access for the excluded and ‘hard to reach’ to training and skills development opportunities. Perhaps more significantly, there is an argument that new technologies provide opportunities for the development of multiple identities, and the constant re-definition and re-invention of ‘self’ (Giddens, 1991; 1994; 2000). This has important implications for developing new ways of addressing persistent and inter-generational exclusion, since it implies that people can escape ‘poverty inheritance’ with the help of new technologies.

Revision questions

1. How can the relationship between social inclusion and e-inclusion be defined?
2. What does the term “factors of multiple deprivation” mean?
3. How can “the digital divide” be defined?
4. What does “early digital divide” refer to?
5. What does “primary digital divide” refer to?
6. What does “secondary digital divide” refer to?
7. What is the European Union strategy to fight the digital divide and promote e-inclusion?

Key terms

Deprivation: Literally meaning ‘poverty’, the term is particularly powerful when used in the expression ‘multiple factors of deprivation’. This implies that poverty / deprivation is caused by the combination of elements such as: economic distress, deficient schooling, inadequate housing, unemployment.

Diffusion of innovation: This term refers to the process characterising the spreading, adoption and consolidation of innovative tools and artefacts. In Molnar’s theoretical model, diffusion patterns are shaped by a combination of three variables: the degree of penetration of technological innovation; the rate of growth, and the actual properties of the technologies themselves. The interaction of these three variables leads to three types of ‘diffusion state’: saturation; plateau; dynamic. (See “types of diffusion states”).

Digital divide: In general terms, it refers to the gap between those with access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and those without. Initially the term was used to indicate those who had access to hardware (i.e. a Personal Computer) in comparison with those who had not. As technologies evolved and their use also changed qualitatively, the divide has been seen as separating users from non-users, and latterly, distinguishing different types of users. It is clear that there is not just one digital divide but multiple divides which relate to a variety of factors, such as: gender; age; ‘ethnic clustering’; uncertainty of living/financial conditions; work insecurity, and social insecurity.

E-inclusion or **digital inclusion:** refers to the conception that all citizens should have access to ICTs and should be able to make effective use of them.

S-curve of adoption: Refers to the diffusion pattern characterising the introduction of a new technology; it shows a slow start, then a steep rise, and then a slow progress again. It implies that the adoption of a new technology goes from the bottom of the curve, where there is a long period of research and attempts to address the market, and then it suddenly takes off when the market is ready and willing to adopt it.

Social exclusion: This term refers to the condition of individuals who are not active members of the society they live in. It is assumed that this social phenomenon is caused by a number of inter-related factors including low income; labour market exclusion (linked to ill-health, low educational attainment and lack of skills); access to education and learning opportunities; housing status; degree of social capital and neighbourhood status, linked to the reinforcement of ‘cycles of poverty’. These factors tend to occur commonly across many western societies.

Social inclusion: denotes the opposite situation to ‘social exclusion’. In other words, it implies that individuals or groups are active within the society they live in, with the potential to access available educational, professional, economic and/or political opportunities.

Types of diffusion states: In Molnar’s theoretical model, *saturation* refers to the situation where penetration is practically complete and growth is stagnant; *plateau* refers to the situation where penetration is very high but not complete and growth is low or oscillating; *dynamic* refers to the situation where penetration is lower but increasing and growth is very high.

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