

FINISHED FILE
EU Procurement for Inclusive Education
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>> YULIE SARVIRO: James, we have the participants joining so you might want to wait one moment.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Welcome, everyone. We will get started now. I am James Thurston, Vice President for the Global Initiative for inclusive ICTs. I'm standing in my home office, sort of a blurred background with some artwork on the wall. I'm wearing a blue shirt. This is a discussion really on Procurement for More Inclusive Education. I am happy we are here today with this group of people. I think you're going to enjoy hearing from them.

I should mention that this discussion today is part of the Zero Project Conference.

>> Recording in progress.

>> JAMES THURSTON: We are a partner channel for that conference so we are happy to be working with them to bring this issue and these leaders and experts to you. And it's also, this session today, is part of an ongoing collaboration between my organization, G3ict, and the European Disability Forum and Microsoft. And we have been over several months looking at the linkages between inclusion of people with disabilities there in Europe and the digital transformation of site and how we can be using procurement in the purchasing of technology and deploying and using of technology to promote greater inclusion of persons with disabilities and not create barriers.

Today we are going to focus specifically on how we do that in education.

With that, I'd like to ask each of my partner organizations to say a few words. Catherine, would you like to go?

>> CATHERINE NAUGHTON: Thank you so much, James. And hello, everybody my name is Catherine Naughton and I'm speaking to you here from my room in Brussels. And the director of the European Disability Forum, we are an umbrella organization at the European level promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. We are really excited to be part of this event today. The right to access inclusive education is fundamental for all children, and it is especially children with disabilities are one of those groups of children who are often excluded from education throughout their whole lives. Additionally, public procurement is extremely important to us. It's the way the government purchases all of its products and services and inclusive public procurement is fundamental across all sectors and especially Education. So we are happy to partner with you on this event today.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much. Catherine. And Esa, partner from Microsoft.

>> ESA KAUNISTOLA: Thank you, James. Esa Kaunistola from Microsoft. I'm sitting in my study in Helsinki. And I would like to thank very much G3ict and EDF for organizing such a timely and important event to ensure accessibility and public procurement. Microsoft's partnership with these two organizations is very long lasting and it's been very successful over the years. And it's wonderful that you always ready to organize discussions like today's.

It is probably now rather than never been more important to explore how the private sector can play a role in driving and forwarding a more inclusive and accessible future.

Today we will discuss how to improve the digital transformation of education in Europe and how to support the digital transformation for learners with disability and to ensure conclusion and accessibility in classrooms. Which are all very important topics.

The mission of Microsoft is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more, extends beyond our products and services to the approach to inclusion in everything we do, including ensuring that all learners can participate in and benefit from the transformation of education. Thank you very much. I'm looking forward to the discussion.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Esa, and Catherine. It has been both an honor and really quite productive to be partner with you on this set of issues around procurement and digital -- inclusive digital transformation of society.

Before we get started with our speakers and you discuss sanities, I would like to ask my colleague at G3ict Yulia to step us through a few practices to make sure the event is as comfortable and productive for you as possible.

>> Thank you, James. My name is Yulia Sarviro. I am senior project manager at G3ict team. I am a white woman with short blond hair, and I wear the violet dress today.

This meeting is recorded and it will be made available to the public after the session. We have closed captions available in English. You can see them on the live transcript button at your menu, or please check the chat for the link to the captions being broadcasted in the browser.

You can also there at the browser, reach out to all the translated captions in French, German and Spanish. There is also international sign language interpretation available, and you can pin the interpreters, their videos, by right clicking on it.

We ask the panelists to keep the microphones muted unless you are speaking. And to the participants, we would like to ask you to use the Q&A section if you would like to ask a question to one of the panelists. And, of course, please feel free to use the chat if there are any technical issues. The G3ict team is here to help you to resolve those.

And of course we are going to have the Q&A session towards the end of this event today. And if there are still any questions left or any comments you would like to share with G3ict, EDF, Microsoft, please send them to info@smartcities4all.org. Thank you.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Yulia. We have divided this discussion up into two sections. The first will focus on what do we mean by the digital transformation of education. How do inclusion and accessibility relate to inclusion in the classroom and the use of technology in the classroom.

We have got three speakers. Each with, I think, an interesting perspective on this topic and lots of experience. And we will start with Janet Looney, who will be presenting some of the research that she has helped to lead. And Janet, I have to say every time I dig into this relatively recently released research that your organization has partnered on, I find more nuanced information that is really incredibly powerful and valuable. So, please do, with all of our speakers, maybe a brief introduction and then please jump right in.

>> JANET LOONEY: Thanks a lot. That's a very nice introduction to the presentation. So, my name is Janet Looney. I am a white female in a burgundy jacket and white blouse today. And I am sitting in my home office in Paris. I am Director of the European Institute of Education and Social Policy. We work on international education policy from a lifelong learning perspective and we are also the editors of the European Journal of Education.

So, this particular study -- let me see. I'm going to share my screen. You should have the slide show version now. This study was conducted with our partners at FRS and lead researchers were Maria Melstveit and Laurie Day, who couldn't be here today. So I am carrying the flag for our collective work.

This is a study on digital inclusion, funded by the European Commission and it was carried out between September 2020 and September 2021. The back drop for this study was growing in and demand for evidence on the role of digital tools within education and in the context of rapid technological change. A high policy interest and increasing policy interest in digital education with the launch of the digital education action plan and the digital education hub which were planned before COVID and are now even more prominent.

So, I will also mention the fact that this was carried out during COVID as it was having its first and full impact on education systems really helped to bring the equity and inclusion dimension into focus.

The study objectives, the main objective of the study was to establish actual and potential role of digital technologies, in other words, what's currently happening and what should be happening. The methods used for this study included and to meet the objectives outlined here included an extensive literature review. And I will mention that our view of inclusion was very broad, very inclusive. So it was learners with disabilities and access needs. Migrant learners and so on. And we also included a mapping of the policy and implementation which was conducted by country-level experts with a good view of what's happening at the ground level. We identified case studies of good practices so we could delve into what is working and conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders so we could get current insights and refine those for our final policy recommendations.

The scope of the study included primary and secondary education and VET education and also had some attention to early childhood education and care.

With a focus on inclusion, we were most concerned with populations of learners with additional needs. We were concerned with equity both in terms of access to digital tools and platforms, but also quality with attention to high quality outcomes for all. And that encompassed well-being, effective teaching and learning practices to support all learners and overall learning environments.

An important sub theme was the importance of agency as, sort of, the oil in the machine. By that a, we mean digital tools mediated by the stakeholders at all levels within the system. And I think what's important to emphasize here because there's sometimes a misconception that classrooms are mediated

by technology and it's really the other way around. The technologies are mediated by the people who are using them.

So, the study outputs include a final compendium with case studies. And a final report and executive summary with the conclusions, findings and recommendations. I will put a link to these products in the chat when I am done with this presentation. I will note that the compendium has not been published but should be on the site soon. This is a commissioned site so they will post it as soon as all the necessary steps have been taken. This really is hot off the press. It gives you an idea.

Now, to get into some of the details, in terms of access, of course, our information and access is the results of our mapping of the EU27 member states and it provided data pre-pandemic. As you will see here, it was a mixed picture. We found quite stark national and regional differences in the ability -- availability of digital tools in the integration of digital pedagogies within classrooms. Tech is generally, although not exclusively more embedded at the secondary stage. It is less used at the primary level and there's quite a bit of variation at early childhood education and care levels.

And here there's some controversy on whether young children should be using tech tools, although there are some good results which we can talk about later.

The country mapping also revealed a complex patchwork of policy initiatives that have driven access and availability for teaching and learning. They reflect different owners at a policy level, education, regional and economic development strategies and so on. It's really quite different across the member states.

Also, we find that historically the development of measures for learners experiencing disadvantage are often driven by Special Projects and EU funds so they are not -- you know, they are targeted EU funds for special projects. Scalability can be an issue.

And the inclusion projects and digital education are not always in sync. They may be not necessarily tech oriented or vice versa so that partnership is not always there.

So, as I mentioned, we started this study in September 2020. So, it really was in the early days of -- well, the first few months of COVID. But I also want to emphasize that it is not just a COVID study. We were able to capture emerging challenges and successes following the first wave of the pandemic in how ministries, schools, parents and carers and learners were responding to the measures in place. And importantly how they all stood up to the stress test of the

schools emergency remote learning stage and the rapid shift to distance learning.

The Delphi consultation, so when we were able to speak with a wide range of stakeholders in a couple of different rounds, that took place in May and June 2021 and followed the country mapping exercise. And that provided an opportunity to test some of the emerging finding with a wider grip of stakeholders across Europe and it was a fast-moving picture. What we found and this is really in tune with what I have seen in various studies, is that the disruption really compounded inequalities with the poorest outcomes of the emergency school -- emergency remote learning, the poorest outcomes reading for low socioeconomic groups, linguistic minorities and special Education learners and their families.

However, there were a few silver linings in the crisis that challenged the status quo and this is why it's called disruption. It was a fresh (?) policy and legislation regulating the use of digital technology within education. So it pushed digitalization up the agenda and the massification of digital education programmes. It also incited some cross central partnerships and investments in infrastructure. It prompted targeted action on inclusion with a large number of member states initiating or scaling up measures for learners with additional needs. And it created conditions for greater school and municipal autonomy, as they were really there problem solving in the instant. This was a precedent set during the crisis.

And new professional networks and collaboration platforms were formed. We were able -- all these different actions demonstrated the sustainable use of digital tools and practices that were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and often beforehand. But then put to the test.

As one of the examples of the case studies that we included, school in a suitcase. This was, of course, was started before the pandemic. But it played a valuable role. So the school in a suitcase in Romania was developed for role schools where there are specific barriers related to the lack of access to appropriate ICTs, low opportunities for teachers to develop their digital competences, and a lack of availability of high-quality digital learning resources. With Vodafone, the Romania foundation and the world vision Romania foundation, they brought together the free hardware and software in a suitcase, training for teachers to use the resources and a dedicated platform. It was rolled out across 11 municipalities with more than 5,000 digital lessons added and a large majority of students were supported in schools and they were able to access learning easily during the 2020 lockdowns.

So, it was a case where you can see that the earlier efforts and investments really paid out in this disruptive emergency situation and created a real resilience in the system.

Let me move on to quality after access. So, really to understand what happens in classrooms and when and why different types of technology integrated and so on was an important focus of the study, a really key issue is it's not what tech you have. If it's the latest and the fanciest and so on. But it's really how you use it. We found that the knowledge base on what works and for whom is really patchy. And we don't have enough evidence on the efficacy of specific educational tools or methods, but we do have an emerging evidence base.

Part. Reason for this state of affairs is that new tech is emerging very rapidly. But there's also a lack of controlled studies. There's need for more monitoring and evaluation of how tech is being used and how it's better defining learning and well-being outcomes. I will also mention that because education is contingent, it's also used in different situations and it's not always easy to translate the findings of one controlled study into another situation.

Action research, however, can give insights on how to implement tech into classrooms. And also really importantly includes contextualized insights of teachers because that is often missing from research studies.

Just to unpack the evidence a little bit more on what works for whom. What we found was that mobile and micro learning gamification, so on, more practical and visual approaches can be really motivating for certain learners who struggle with traditional pedagogies or not engaged with the classroom format of being lectured at with classic textbooks. The interaction is a positive. Developmental and attention disorders. There's also some evidence that artificial intelligence and -- can be useful for diagnostic assessments and detecting a specific learner's difficulties. Here I am going to insert a little bit of a editorial in that artificial intelligence is new and changing all the time and that it should always be used with teacher judgment in mind, that we can't off load our teaching needs and diagnosis to machines. But we can use them to augment what's happening and also catch learners who might fall through the cracks, especially in larger school systems.

And then finally, virtual learning environments are very important and they can create a different kind of learning experience than in the classroom with a lecturer. They are more interactive. They can lead to more rapid feedback, which is supporting formative assessment and the ability to adjust lessons in time so students don't fall behind. It can support collaborative platforms so that students are working together

more and interacting. And building stronger relationships. And also on web 2.0 platforms, engaging in creative products and using multimedia. And that also fosters a pure learning culture so it's not all about getting information from the teacher, but learners also interacting and having their own agency supported.

Another example here that we found in our research on good practice case studies was telepresence robots for learners with long-term illnesses. And I think this exists in more places than Denmark but this is the one we identified there. And this case study example a robot was placed in the classroom as an Avatar for studies who couldn't attend the classroom. There's a two WAI audio and a one-way camera and the learner was able to see the classmates. Unlike distance learning where everyone is on the screen, here you have the robot and it can move through the class and interact with students and have different viewpoints.

Some of the evaluations found that the students were interacting with the avatar, you know, and even stroking its cheek and playing with it at recess time, and really interacting. And, of course, this also happened because they had a previous relationship. But there were some really meaningful social interactions, which is an extremely important goal, for learning continuity and social emotional well-being.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Excuse me, Janet. We probably need to wrap up this part of the segment in just a few minutes, if you could -- sorry to interrupt because this is incredibly rich information.

>> JANET LOONEY: Yeah, I only have two more slides, actually. So I think we should be right on time.

Okay. So, digital learning environments create opportunities and risks in unexpected ways. We found some groups that are traditionally at risk of underachievement and exclusion can fair considerably better with their digital skills and this includes low socioeconomic status learners, migrant learners and other groups where the risk of marginalization is high.

Other groups have more risks, and those include individuals with cognitive disabilities who are victims of online bullying, impulsivity and other problems of navigating online. And finally, we found that there are some ongoing barriers in terms of gender and so on. Those need to be addressed in order to reduce disparities.

And finally, key reflections. So, this is, of course, a policy document. And we had some reflections related to policy. Factors that were critical to the success of digital inclusion in member states and mobilizing and maintaining access to digital included clear system leadership with broad

arrangements, structural, information and pedagogical measures and a long-term budgets and plans. Smart use of data and feedback to iterate change, so a formative evaluation approach. And pedagogical activation. The most important aspect is these are used and useful for teachers and they are not just technologies that are brought into school and never used.

So, in inclusion, just to say it's not just what tech you've got, but what you do with it that counts. And that is everything. So, I will post the link to the study and, of course, I will stick around for questions later in the afternoon. Thanks.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Janet. As I said, this research is incredibly rich. Please do check out the links that Janet will post and continue to ask questions in the Q&A section.

And Janet, I really appreciate how the pandemic wasn't the focus of the study. But you used it as an opportunity to identify unique observations and I also really like how you looked at technology broadly from mainstream technologies to more leading edge technologies and data as well. Every time I go back to the research, I find some new learnings that are really informative for me in my work.

>> JANET LOONEY: Well. Thank you. And thanks for the opportunity to share.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Absolutely.

With that, I'd like to ask Humberto to introduce himself and give us his remarks.

>> HUMBERTO INSOLERA: Great. Good afternoon. And I am pleased to be here. And we are talking about education. Inclusive education for learners with disabilities is a crucial issue. The quality of education we offer young people will very likely determine their path in life. And the opportunities they have as they grow older. It's also understandably quite a sensitive issue. It's because education is something very personal and the best approach depends on each individual.

We saw education is not equal. I would like to remark some issues about education. Education is -- there is no one-size-fits-all solution to offer inclusive education. And we do not have the same financial aid in everywhere for the inclusive education. We also know that person with disabilities from very early years in different settings at home or at school. We need to have the research about projects for inclusive education. We need to advocate for more funding for inclusive education projects. These funds need to focus on their necessities of every person in every country and every settings.

Sometimes people didn't know about how to approach the very necessities of people. And it's not only about the funding, but

about the barriers of political issues, the public policies for people with disabilities.

We as the European Disability Forum want to strengthen the necessity for educational inclusion, inclusive inclusion for families, children and the persons with disabilities in every setting for an open education settings. And the quality of education is very important.

I would like to headline the importance of equity education for every person, and to have the same curriculum as their peers. The importance of being included in mainstream education settings is the feeling of being fully part of the community. And visible to those around rather than being hiding away. Even a child with a learning disability, for example, does not have the same curriculum as their peers in the same school, the fact attending the same educational school can be hugely symbolic. Unless from a young age, I respect among all young people in the community for the diversity of society and embrace everybody's differences.

You know, they are embracing their education, but they have all the people with disabilities, we do have a lot of barriers. They do not have sign language interpreters. They do not have captioning in everything. And we are working for advocating to have this reasonable adjustments.

As the UNCRPD say about inclusion education the Article 24 of the convention of rights of persons with disabilities, aligns the general principles of what inclusive education and why it's necessary. It states it sets out that state participants should recognize the rights of persons with disabilities, of education an inclusive education system at all levels in lifelong learning. It means that it is responsible for monitoring on the rights of persons with disabilities.

There's necessary to recognize the difference for different learners at school and different times of the lifetime of education. For no discrimination. The second, it's to have the learners at the same level with their peers, their families, to respect their very own contexts. The theory is to have reasonable accommodations, to not discriminate the people for not to have reasonable accommodations. To respect their own contexts, to give them reasonable accommodation based on their own necessities.

We need to have the support plans and support policies for every person, for every learner, individual needs from every person and their families, teaching their teachers at schools on how to improve their educations.

This reasonable accommodation of educational setting should never be decided by a medical diagnosis of a child. But,

instead, must be decided by looking at the barriers of education that a particular child faces.

The general supporting educational plan should be designed for each learner with their disability with the full involvement of their family and their teachers. What we will like to see the EU do to help support inclusive education? This is a tricky question as education is famously one of the areas of policy where the member states and even the regions within each country retain full competence.

However, there's still a lot of the European Union can do. One of the main tools that the EU has up its sleeve is the distribution of the EU funds, particularly the European social fund, plus we would like to see this money invested through the member states to train teachers and classroom assistants in involving learners with disabilities in mainstream settings. We will also like money to go towards hiring more classroom assistants to offer personalized support to learners with disabilities in the classroom. One issue also goes forward the provision of necessary assistive technology such as the screen readers or Braille browser to enable learners with disabilities to study autonomously as well as for providing more sign language interpreters in the school to allow deaf or hard-of-hearing children to learn and communicate in their first language.

Last but not least, finally, the EU is looking increasingly at the digital education particularly through this European pillar of social rights of action plan. We would like to all work on digital education and e-learning to prioritize setting standards for accessibility to reduce the ongoing risk of learners with disabilities having their education disrupted or held due to accessibility issues.

We also like to see the member states of the COVID-19 resilience. Thank you very much.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Fantastic. Thank you so much, Humberto. And thank you for really sharing with us the EDF perspective, both on where we are today when it comes to inclusion in classrooms in Europe, but also the path forward and where you need to be headed. We appreciate that.

And please for Humberto or the other speakers, put questions in the Q&A section. Next up is Ivana. Would you like to introduce yourself?

>> IVANA JURAGA: Hello, everyone. My name is Ivana Juraga, and I am a policy officer at the European Commission in the digital education department. So, I think my presentation will follow quite nicely from Humberto's. I will just share my screen.

I hope you can see my presentation well now. So, it's my pleasure to be here with you today. And I will focus briefly on some of the strategy making that we have at the European Commission about -- around digital education and how it connects to inclusive education as well.

So, just as a way of introduction, we know that during the COVID pandemic there was a large-scale shift to distance and online learning across the world. We had 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries out of school. And this transition has been far from simple. So, we all had to switch to using distance learning practically overnight. And this revealed many opportunities. It promoted digital education around the world the way it had never been seen before. But it also brought significant challenges, especially in terms of equity and quality, as has already been mentioned.

To assess how this experience went, the European Commission ran an open public consultation in the summer of 2020 and it was really very successful with more than 2700 contributions from around Europe. And the majority of those being from individuals. So, from teachers and teaching staff, parents and learners themselves.

What we learned from this consultation is that there were significant challenges, especially when it comes to learners with disabilities or special needs. As not all tools and content were accessible, and learners faced particular challenges on accessing technology and assistive technology as well, and having technical support provided to students with disabilities, as well as struggling with the teacher competence on disability and accessibility matters.

As a result of this public consultation and in order to push forward the digital education in Europe, the Commission and the EU as a whole adopted a digital education action plan called "Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Age." The focus of this action plan are two strategic priorities. So, it has two main focuses. One of which, the first one being fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem. Here we talk about setting up the conditions that education and training institutions need in order to provide digital education. So, things like proper technological equipment, connectivity in schools, but also training of teachers and teaching staff and having institutional strategies for digitalization of the pedagogical process.

The second strategic priority is enhancing the digital skills and competences of the population as a whole. So, not only those who are in formal education at the moment, but also adult populations, people who are already in employment but need to enhance their digital skills and so on.

The key characteristics of this action plan is that it promotes deeper cooperation across borders, sectors and cultures. It is set specifically for the period from 2021 to 2027, in order to be in line with the EU programming and funding cycle. And it takes, like I said already, a lifelong learning approach so it covers not only formal, but also nonformal and informal education. And the idea is to support it through cooperation, good practice exchanges, as well as collecting evidence, peer learning and research.

Now, when it comes to learners with disabilities, this is an important target group that we cannot ignore, because at the moment we know there are around 87 million persons with some form of disability living in the EU. This includes the entire population. Because, importantly, everyone in the population is potentially a learner, regardless of what age they are. So, we are not talking only about children in formal education.

And we know that learners with disabilities face considerable barriers in access to education. When we talk about early school leaving or attaining a tertiary degree, finishing higher education, their rates are significantly behind the rates of people without disabilities. And this is, obviously, something that we want to work on in the future.

Inclusion is really at the core of the digital education action plan, both when it comes to socioeconomic inequalities and when it comes to learners with special needs. Because the guiding idea behind the digital education action plan is not to increase the digital divide, but, rather, to reduce it and to use digital technologies in the potential they have to make education more accessible and more equitable, rather than the other way around.

So, I have a slide here which shows all the different actions which are included in the action plan. I don't want to terrify you with this slide. I just wanted to give a short overview. One thing I would like to mention is a few actions that directly have an impact on inclusion and accessibility. One of these actions, for example, is the council recommendation on online and distance learning, which was adopted last year, which aims to portray a vision for primary and secondary education, to increase the inclusiveness and the flexibility of school education through the use of digital technologies.

We also have actions which encourage member states to make the most of the available EU funding with regard to both internet access, but also the purchase of digital equipment and e-learning applications and platforms, and in particular for students from disadvantaged groups and students and educators with disabilities. This is the kind of funding that Humberto was mentioning in his talk as well.

We also have recently launched an action that I would just like to spend another moment on, and this is the structured dialogue on digital education and skills. This is a new action that we started towards the end of last year with the objective of supporting the EU member states in the digital transformation of their education and training systems in an integrated, coherent and more ambitious approach.

The way we are doing this is by engaging in a dialogue which brings together different sectors of governments. So, not only the education ministries, but also talking to ministries responsible for the digital transition, ministries responsible for financing, for infrastructure, for employment and social policies and so on. And at the same time, bringing to the table the business sector, the social partners and the civil society.

This is a process that we will be engaging in over the next 12 months, until the end of 2022. And we will have two important outcomes of this process. Proposals for two council recommendations at EU level, one of which will be on the enabling factors for digital education. What we call enabling factors are, basically, building blocks that each education and training system needs to have in order to be able to provide high-quality and inclusive education and training to their learners, and among these enabling factors, one of the crucial ones is also access to assistive technology for students who need it, and also making technology used in the classrooms accessible to all learners.

So, this is something that we will be working on over the next 12 months and we hope to have good results by the end of the year. So, with that, thank you very much. Our contact details are here on the last slide. And I believe the presentations will be shared. If you have any questions, I will be around until the end of this seminar. Thank you.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Ivana, and, yes, we will be making all the materials available through G3ict and our partners. Ivana, thank you for sharing those insights from the consultation, but also speaking a bit to the new opportunity to weigh in on these issues of inclusion and digital transformation of classrooms through the upcoming dialogue, which is great -- a great opportunity.

We have heard a little bit from the first three speakers about the digital transformation of schools, the impact on learners with disabilities, and the opportunities for learners with disabilities. Next we really want to make that linkage to procurement and how schools, education ministries are enormous consumers of technology. They have a lot to say about the kind of technology that they want to buy and deploy in classrooms across Europe and really around the world as well.

So, first up speaking to these issues of procurement and promoting greater inclusion and accessibility in classrooms will be Inma. Would you like to introduce yourself?

>> INMACULADA PLACENCIA-PORRERO: Yes, hello. Good afternoon to everybody. My name is Inma Placencia. I also work in the European Commission in the (?) department. My (?) is responsible for the implementation of the UN convention and the rights of persons with disabilities, the new disability strategy 2021, 2030, and accessibility legislation and that is where I am going to -- what I am going to be talking to you about today, to compliment the representation that my colleague did on what we are doing on digital education. So, focusing on accessibility and procurement.

Let me start by saying that we have legislation in Europe that requires basically buying accessible. So when public authorities buy educational material, books, technological solutions, computers, electronic systems for teaching, as long as those fall under the European legislation, they will have to be bought, they will have to be required to be accessible by the public authorities. So, this is a very important issue we are covering or considering these technologies used by public authorities.

In addition, let me say recently approved in 2019 legislation called the European Accessibility Act, contains additional obligations that would be really very relevant, are very relevant for the educational system, the digital -- under digital education settings to be accessible. The European Accessibility Act requires that economic operators, manufacturers, service providers, plays in the markets accessible technologies from 2025.

Many of these accessible technologies is used in education, both in classrooms, but also in remote education. I think that should the Act would have been already applicable, the experience for learners with disabilities during this pandemic would have been really very different. Because we are talking about having tools like computers and telephones. We are talking about having electronic communications, technology that supports or gives access to individual media services. We are talking about electronic books that would have to be accessible.

The application date of this legislation is 2025. So, we are still in the preparatory phase in which we are doing two basic steps. First, we are working with the member states so that they translate, basically, or as we say they transpose the -- this European legislation international laws. And that process ends in June this year. Then national laws would have to be adopted.

Then we have a period under 2025 in which our main work is going to be to support the implementation of the directive by the economic operators but also public authorities and governments. There is where we are doing a number of things. First, the development, we are calling for the development of European harmonized standards. These would be standards that would support and federally regulate, more in technical terms, the accessibility requirements that are in the legislation, in the European Accessibility Act. We have in that legislation one annex that contains a set of accessibility requirements, and the standards will full elaborate so that it is easier to know how to implement those requirements in practice.

In addition, and this is the second point, how we are supporting implementation. We are launching a resource center for accessibility. That resource center is announced in the disability strategy 2021, 2030. And the aim is really to support implementation of accessibility to bring coherence across the EU, to enhance competence and to facilitate the process of making accessibility. We are working on its preparation and I hope that by the end of this year, we will have more information.

So, how this links with the procurement legislation that I started with, saying that the obligation exists to be accessible and the European Accessibility Act contains provisions that indicate that in the context of procurement, the accessibility requirements for the products and services in its scope and please remember that it was, you know, goods like computers, telephones, and services like electronic books, for example, they -- the accessibility Act puts concrete functional accessibility requirements. In other words, it makes it renders operational the general accessibility obligation that is in the public procurement directives.

To support the application or the knowledge about how to buy accessible, among other elements, I would like to refer you to a guide that we have published last year. The guide is called "Buying Social" and it contains a whole section on buying accessible and with links to and references to the European standards.

To finish, let me also say that we have carried out, we have led, carried out a study on how disability inclusiveness and accessibility has been taken on board or is being taken on board on plans for the digital transformation. My colleague mentioned this digital transformation plans in the area of education. But this goes beyond that. We day to day with the recovery plans, with the recovery funds. There is a lot of investments going on, investing in digital transformation.

Well, the conclusions of these or the findings of these study is that very, very, very few digital plans across all member states consider disability inclusiveness or even accessibility of that technology that is going to be deployed.

Similarly, and this is, I would say, also of concern, is that accessibility strategies -- sorry, disability strategies, disability plans few also of them have elaborated sections on digital accessibility or digital inclusion in relation to persons with disabilities.

So, to close, just to say that, okay, mixed feelings. I think we are investing a lot on improving accessibility or improving accessibility with a great potential for digital education and to have digital tools that are accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities. But the reality is that we are still far away from having reached a true inclusive digital environment for the education of persons -- providing access to education for persons with disabilities. Thank you for your attention.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Inma, thank you so much for those remarks and for laying out the policy framework that really, I think, supports improving accessibility and inclusion in all sectors but certainly in education there in Europe. And I know you know that at G3ict, our nonprofit points to many of these policies and standards in our work around the world as excellent practices to model. And I like that you, sort of, asked the question of, if the European Accessibility Act were fully in place today and implemented, how would education look differently today and be more inclusive, which I think is an interesting and important question. Thank you.

Next up is Susanna. Susanna, would you like to introduce yourself?

>> SUSANNA LAURIN: Yes. So, hello, everyone. And thank you, James. My name is Susanna Laurin. I am the chief research and innovation officer at a consultancy company called Funka, I am the representative to the EU for G3ict and IAAP and I am also currently the chair of the joint working group working with the standards that Inma was talking about that supports the directives on accessibility in European Union.

James asked me to be efficient so that we can save a little time. So I will try to be short. I have been asked to talk about good practices, challenges and opportunities for improvement when it comes to procurement of accessibility. And I think we all agree that procurement is, kind of, one of the keys or maybe the key to better inclusion. But still, it's not really used as much as it should or could. And we have just recently finalized a couple of research projects or a series of research projects in the educational area in Scandinavia and

it's really clear that procurement is not used the way it could have been done. And I think it has even more focus now with the pandemic and everything that really digitalization in the education system is not really working for everyone.

So, I really think that the EU is the driver here with the directives and the standards. And the Procurement Directive may not made big change but still we saw in our numbers already when the Procurement Directive came out that ICT companies on the supply side started to feel that there was a little bit more focus on these things. And with the Web Accessibility Directive, things are changing really. And, of course, with the European Accessibility Act, I agree with Inma, a lot more will happen. Things are going in the right direction.

But as far as I can see from our research, the two main challenges in general is, I mean, apart from people not being aware of the topic at all, is that the procurers are not accessibility experts. And sometimes community tries to treat them as such. And I think that is not going to work. And the other big challenge I see is sometimes in procurement the aspect of quality is not considered enough. So, when it comes to procurers not being accessibility experts that's, kind of -- they are specialists in procurement and that is a specialty in itself. They need to be able to procure everything or anything so we can't expect them to be experts in our topic even if that is close at heart.

So, there is a need for awareness, of course, and tools and support and I will get back to the tools and support. But I think one interesting finding that we have found is really that there's a need of collaboration. There is, kind of, an organizational issue here. So, in many cases there are accessibility knowledgeable people in the organization. But the people responsible for accessibility and the people responsible for procurement, they don't really speak to each other or not in a good way at least.

And sometimes we even see that the communication or IT people who know about accessibility, they seem a little bit scared, maybe, for the procurement department or the legal people.

So, I think if organizations would better use the competence and experience that they already have in the organization, I mean, the people who, kind of, get their hands dirty and are close to the action, that would really be a good practice to do. And we see that when that happens, it really helps the organization to become more accessible at the general level. And this is not only for the education system but in all procurement, of course.

I want to come to the quality aspect. We see some organizations using the same, kind of, simple procurement templates and models for procurement when they procure educational systems or material as they do when they buy paper for the copy machine or something like that and really then price will be the only award criteria or at least the decisive factor and that won't work and this happens, of course, because of lack of awareness because I do think the procurers, even the ones who do know about the topic and care about it, they are led in the wrong direction by the technical specifications. Some people claim that accessibility is a yes/no, black or white question, and, kind of, a setup where you can tick the box, you can say, yes, we are accessible and then that's it. Because the supplier will always claim to be compliant with any technical standard.

As all we know, that accessibility is really about humans and the context, the situation, the devices and many other aspects are just as important to take into account as the technical standard. So, how is the learning material going to be used? Is it part of a learning management system or is it a standalone or part of another system? Is it used on desktop or mobile? Can the interface can be configured to meet my needs or can I use my own assistive technology with it, et cetera, et cetera. It is a little bit more complicated than just ticking a box.

So, if we move on to the best practices, I think that the best practices that we have found is really when accessibility becomes the new normal, if you like. So, when accessibility is treated as part of the daily routine. When I prepare a meeting, I create the agenda. I make sure that there's coffee. And I call the captionist and the sign language interpreter so that way I know my meeting will run smoothly. Something like that. Easy checklists that makes it part of what you always do. When accessibility becomes that mainstreamed, then it starts working for real.

And this is true for public sector bodies but also for large organizations that, kind of, put this into their processes and it does work. So, when they procure or buy things, they need to put in -- I mean, they have a set of general requirements, like the supplier needs to deliver on time. They shouldn't use child labor or they should be environmentally friendly or keep budget or whatever. Some standard things. And if you put accessibility in there at the same level as all of these other things, then things start happening.

And really the organizations that succeed most in accessibility procurement, they don't stop there. They also include the same things in the contract so that the supplier is

not being paid in full if the accessibility requirements are not met. And that means that they also need to control what is delivered to them.

So, I believe that there needs to be a policy decision at the management level and a practical, kind of, hands-on way of working with accessibility. Nice words will not do the trick and one single committed professional is not enough either. So, you need to have, kind of, everyone on board to succeed with this. But specifically make sure that there's collaboration between procurers and the subject matter experts.

So, a little bit about the opportunities and some useful tools. I wanted to be a little bit future leaning, so in the U.S., but probably most of you know there's something called the VPAT, the Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates. They have been around for a while. A lot of debate, pros and cons about that. But it is right now being refined and defined, I think, in a very interesting initiative called the open ACR, so open Accessibility Conformance Reports. Funded by the GSA, the General Services Administration, which is the federal agency for procurement and ICT services and administration for other agencies at the federal level in the U.S.

So, this is a way to try to make the new generation of VPATs more useful, and I personally think that this could be really, really useful for the EU and myself and many others have tried to push for this and so far we have had very little interest. But I still hope that someone will look into this, because I really think it could be a good opportunity for EU.

What we already have here is the EN301549 and other European standards and I want to promote the EN standard and I am biased here. It's not only mine but many other also see the EN standard as our baby. But I do think that the annex B of this standard, I know, it's long, it's complex, it's difficult. Technical standards are hard. But the annex B is really a useful tool. And it is used a lot by procurers, all around the world. Not only in Europe.

And it can support procurers both when choosing the right requirements used in procurement and also for selecting the best solution for the supplier. Actually, annex B could be useful for developers and designers as well but we have much less data on that so I can't tell you if that is happening or not.

Another useful tool that helps both buyers and sellers is professional certification. And I am not talking about certifying a product, but, certifying the staff at the supplier site because when you procure something that doesn't exist yet as a website or an app, then you are not really looking for a product. You are looking for a partner. And then you need to know that this partner has the competence that you need.

And the international association of accessibility profession, which is the, kind of, the parts of G3ict, we are providing professional certification that is used both in recruitment and procurement. We see an increasing number of member states using it, not yet as a mandatory requirement but as an award criteria. I hope the Commission will push for certification, either IAAP certification or something else. But there is a need for procurers to be able to distinguish people who claim to know accessibility and those who actually do know the topic.

Just to summarize this, cooperation is important, see accessibility as quality aspect of every activity you do, and make sure that when you procure, have clear requirements, look for proof for competence, and control that your delivery is accessible when you get it. Thank you.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Susanna, thank you very much. And I know and maybe a lot of our guests here and participants know that you have been incredibly active in Europe but also worldwide on both policy and standards and I think it's important that you make that linkage between, sort of, high-level policy and standards to actual implementation and best practices, good practices, tools and resources. And we, actually, at G3ict have an entire web portal on procurement and accessibility and inclusion and maybe Yulia or Bella can post that into the chat as well and you can find some of those tools and resources there.

Next up is Caroline Wright. Caroline, would you like to introduce yourself?

>> CAROLINE WRIGHT: Lovely. Thank you very much, James. I am just going to share my screen. So, hopefully, hopefully you should be able to see that now. Is that okay? Lovely.

I will kick off. I know we are a little bit tight for time. So, let me go to the start. I am Caroline Wright. I'm Director General of the British Educational Suppliers Association. We work with the British, the United Kingdom education suppliers, everything from companies that make textbooks to ed tech to educational furniture, and in particular the members I'm going to talk about today, the companies that specialize in special education needs products, we work with them to raise awareness of their products and services and also to help them drive up the quality and standards of what they offer, which in turn we hope drives up standards of education across the globe.

We carry out market research. We carry out conversations with governments and take our members around the world to share their expertise and knowledge of various exhibitions and with government conversations.

We represent, we estimate, around 80% of the value of the UK education market in our membership. But really importantly, we have never represented 100% of the education companies in the UK, precisely because of this slide. We ask our companies to comply, they have to comply with our code of practice. And our code of practice is it's aimed so schools and colleges and users can buy from trusted quality suppliers. So, it covers things like quality and standards, integrity, customer service, transparency and openness, safeguarding and data security and following all of the laws and legislation within the countries and regions where they are operating in, and also really importantly you can see there's a point about discriminatory conduct.

So, that's our general code of practice, which all of our companies sign up to, as well as us carrying out financial checks on them and asking them to provide case studies of how they have worked in the education system for a period of time. That's our general principles. I'm going to come in a little bit to some specific work we have done on inclusivity and diversity, which touches upon disability.

But here's -- now, there are many more, but just some of these companies will bring it to life because like I say, we cover all education products and services, but a specific number of our members are specialized in special education needs. And what's unique about many of these companies is very often they have been founded by a teacher or somebody with personal experience of working with learners with disabilities and additional education needs. And they have really dedicated, they are from very small companies but specialized and dedicated to a particular disability or particular way of helping support their students. So, there are many more companies, but just so that it brings it to life so you can see some of the members that we work with.

Now, actually, because they are very small, there are -- I'm going to come on to some of the factors of how governments can help in their procurement to make sure that those small specialist, expert companies can really share their expertise with schools and teachers and learners.

First of all, I wanted to talk a little bit about how as an association ourselves, we have really been trying to, and it's a journey where it's never good enough and there's always more we can do, but as part of our journey of making sure that we reflect inclusion, diversity in the products and services that our members may produce, work with schools. It really started out of, actually, the Black Lives Matter movement. But in 2021 our educational curriculum resource and tactile resources, producers, came together and said, we would really like to see

if we can agree and work on some industry principles of diversity and inclusion. And that being more general at this stage, covering race, sexual organization, disability and all aspects of inclusion. Just to make sure what we produce and make is more reflective of our audiences and users.

So, they produced a number of principles that touch on their intentions of what they are seeking to do, which is to learn from and work with all communities to reflect the communities we are producing materials for, the content itself to make sure that it represents different voices and different lived experiences, and our ways of working as an industry to make sure that a wider range of people have the opportunities to succeed in working in the industries that we represent. So, we published our industry principles of diversity and inclusion and they are on our website for anybody to see, in addition to our code of practice.

But, actually, in terms of the special needs companies that we work with as well, we want to be able to share their expertise and their learnings of working within the UK system internationally more and we work with the British government on taking those companies out to education events internationally as part of our international education strategy. We have also just agreed, now, this is very much the start of work in progress but to actually start to review that code of practice that I shared with you earlier from a very specific diversity, inclusion perspective. We have principles that our publishers follow but actually should we be looking at making sure that we include a wider amount of accessibility and diversity and disability perspective in our code of conduct.

So, that's what we are doing as an organization. But in terms -- I know we have lots of governmental organizations here on this call and just some thoughts from a trade association perspective, representing the companies that we will go and beat for some of the government contracts. What we say, I will say our experience to help the learners with disabilities, what will really help with governance in their own procurements is making sure that any frameworks that a government introduces or a local governmental organization is having the flexibility to adapt to learner needs in the United Kingdom with the Scottish government four or five years ago we had a huge issue that with all of the best intentions, the Scottish government has a very, very specific framework in place for the procurements of curriculum resources in classes. It guides teachers, in order, rightly, to make the best use of public funding to choose from a list that has been approved and a very high quality products, but when we are talking with students with a vast range of different disabilities, some of which are not yet diagnosed, that list was

probative in the sense of being able to provide the support for the very, very wide range of needs.

And we had an example of one teacher in Scotland who knew a product from one of our members that would have really helped that particular child with their special education need, and it took them more than the year that they were in that key stage within their education to get approval to buy that particular resource to help them. You know, we shouldn't have a situation where any child has to wait more than a year of their learning before they get the help that they need.

So, really just have that. It's great to think about public funding and to make statements where you can, but make sure it's not so prescriptive that it stops learners having access to resources that they need.

The second point I wanted to make is, make sure that any framework that you have or route to procurement allows schools and learners to be able to try the products before they commit. We have introduced a service code on there, lendED.org.UK that specifically allows schools to take out trials of a particular learning resource so they can try it with their own individual students to check with work in their context. And we deliberately did this after seeing the service that one of the London borrowers a special needs library that they can take out a resource and try. We have introduced a nationwide electronic version of that for the services that our members offer. And really that can save huge amounts of money and also make sure that schools get exactly the product that it they need to help support their learners with disabilities.

I would also say that make sure that technical specifications allow for the adaptation and flexibility that individual learners will need. One size does not fit all. There is multipaced learning that's needed and making sure that any specifications reflects that.

And then also not being so prescriptive following all of the guidance that we might as large organizations follow and allowing flexibility so that learners with special needs and disabilities can explore an inclusive way of learning employment. I just point anybody to the national stock college in Great Britain that leads the way in terms of work-based training in the college for their young people with a bistro and a print and design center. It's just wonderful to see. And that's been done with a very hands-on, flexible approach to helping support individual students with additional needs.

And then from the employer perspective, as I mentioned, many of the companies work in the field of special education needs are very, very small. Sometimes with very large governmental frameworks and procurement, that can

unintentionally be prohibitively difficult for small companies to be able to bid for larger contracts. So, being very aware of making sure that tender time scales are clear, lengthy so you can enable wider participation, making sure, obviously, for a range of reasons, making sure documentations in a wide range of formats and any engagement events that you hold are accessible.

That's my tips, really, to the audience who are listening. And I hope it's helpful. Here are my details. And thank you very much. I have enjoyed today.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Caroline, thank you so much for some really very practical advice and guidance. I think in the work that G3ict does around the world on digital inclusion and accessibility, we always try to work with governments with disability advocacy organizations and member organizations, but also with industry, because quite literally your members are providing the solutions to greater and improved digital inclusion. So, we appreciate that perspective. And we will get a bit more of that from our next speaker, from Microsoft, Esa, would you like to introduce yourself?

>> ESA KAUNISTOLA: Yes. Thank you, James. I'm from Microsoft again. I am delighted to be here and talk about corporate perspective on procurement as a key to inclusive education. At Microsoft we are passionate about creating products and services that help people with disabilities unlock their full potential, including at school.

We are making investments across our business to enable this and believe it is imperative for all organizations to create cultures of inclusion. Meeting the needs of all today's diverse learners and helping them build life skills has never been more important.

Over the last three decades we have learned that when technology is inclusive, we can connect people and information in incredible ways. But there is much more work to be done. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the potential of technology to change things for the better. And has also accelerated prioritization of digital solutions and bring with it a focus on accessibility as people technologies and education and social interaction.

However, remote learning and information sharing can be more difficult as digital content and platforms are not always accessible. At Microsoft we set up several online training courses to empower students with inclusive learning tools and for teachers to create inclusive classrooms. One of the tools, for instance, help improve reading fluency and build literacy skills through personalized learning experiences with reading progress that enables independent reading practice and AI assisted reviews.

Another example I'd like to mention is a school in Poland which has introduced a set of accessibility tools built into office 365, from digital white boards to stickers add-ons. And this is all to accommodate the different needs of its primary and secondary-level students who experience varying degrees of emotional, intellectual and physical disabilities.

In the words of one of the teachers at the school in our work we build on students' strengths. We motivate children to learn and foster their self-esteem.

In this context, we believe governments, including the education organizations, have a very important role to play. In improving inclusion, by ensuring they purchase, develop and use accessible information and communications technology to better support citizens including learners and the education sector.

When governments buy and develop accessible technology, it not only creates access to education and services for citizens and employees, it drives more innovative and accessible technology into the marketplace which benefits everybody.

Accessibility regulation and policies can be very powerful for helping organizations promote best practices for increasing accessible -- or accessibility and inclusion. Policies that require organizations to buy and develop accessible technologies not only help those organizations to maximize the hiring of people with disabilities, but also make it easier for citizens to access products and services.

We believe that by incorporating accessibility criteria such as EN standard 301549 in the procurement policies and requirements, governments can create economic incentives for businesses to invest in innovating more accessible products.

The goal, the ultimate goal is to stimulate competition for better accessibility, to provide equal participation for people with disabilities and to help achieve digital inclusion objectives and fulfilling eventually the implementation of UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also known as UNCRPD.

One thing is clear, to make it happen, it is not enough to make commitment for people with disabilities. Those commitments need to be -- need to involve the people with disabilities from day one. They have to be integrated in the process all through. People with disabilities are creating the future they want to see and we encourage every other organization to proactively enable this through lens, innovation and inclusion.

The easier accessibility is timeless but the pandemic and the speed of the digital revolution, speed not by the pandemic, actually, have nevertheless separated the disability divide. And with it, the urgency in doubling down the efforts to narrow the gap. We continually incorporate new learnings and are

deepening our engagement with nonprofits and partners helping them to use digital technology in order to become more. Thank you very much.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Esa, thank you so much for those remarks. And I think it's, sort of, building on the remarks by Caroline as well. I think it's really exciting and important that the industry recognizes the importance of digital inclusion of persons with disabilities in general but certainly in the education sector in particular.

So, hearing that kind of commitment and really, I think, the interest that we heard in your remarks of Microsoft, but of industry more broadly, as well, I think, interested in competing on innovation and accessibility of your products and services and the role that governments can be playing across Europe in driving that innovation and competition, I think is really an exciting opportunity. So, I am thrilled to hear that, certainly.

So, we are getting to the end of the 90 minutes for this discussion. Some of you have been putting questions in the chat. And I think our speakers have been answering and sharing resources. So, thank you very much for that.

I just want to close out the session by saying, I think we have heard today, and by design, we wanted to hear today from different perspectives on this topic of the digital transformation of education and what that means for learners with disabilities. We have heard from government. We have heard from a disability organizations, from industry, from civil society, and I am hoping that we are walking away with a more nuanced understanding of the current state of accessibility of classrooms across Europe and the world. And more importantly, I think the opportunity we have, including through procurement and standards to make dramatic improvement to that. And certainly, our organization is thrilled to be partnering with EDF and Microsoft to drive that progress.

May colleagues, Yulia and Bela have been sharing some researches. Yulia, if you haven't shared already, we will share an email. If you are interested in any of these materials, we will be posting them on our website. But also can make them available to you through email. We will be following up this event on procurement and digital transformation with subsequent discussions in different areas with our partners EDF and Microsoft, including inclusive workplaces in the role of procurement and inclusive COVID recovery in procurement.

So, we look forward to speaking with you more. Thank you to all of the speakers. Thank you to our partners at EDF and Microsoft. And thank you to all of you for participating and for your good questions and perspective. Have a good day.

(Session was concluded at 1530 a.m. CET)

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