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ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR INCLUSION, ACCESSIBILITY AND EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Today, inclusive design of education based on the implementation of digital technologies is important. Digital technologies are being used to engage diverse groups of students in the educational process, including increasing the accessibility of educational content, enhancing personalization, and providing distance learning opportunities. At the same time digital equality requires all students to have both access to digital technologies and certain digital skills to participate fully in society.

However, digital inequality can undermine digital equity and inclusion, as well as equity and inclusion in education in general, especially in relation to access to digital tools and differences in digital skill levels. To use digital tools to promote equitable and inclusive outcomes, education systems must focus on ensuring equity in access to digital resources and promoting digital skills, as well as the use of digital technologies designed with inclusion in mind for different groups of students.

Scientific findings (Andreasson, 2019) show how the strategic implementation of digital technologies in education can make it more equitable and inclusive for diverse groups of students in new ways. Digital tools are supposed to be used to empower and engage students from diverse backgrounds while creating a sense of belonging and supporting mental health. In addition, digital tools, especially those designed and implemented with inclusion in mind, can more precisely target and meet academic and special education needs. Certain groups of students who often face additional challenges, such as students with an immigrant background, students from different ethnic groups, national minorities, can benefit from the inclusive use of digital technologies. In addition, students with special educational needs, students of different gender, etc. can be supported in learning through the effective inclusion of digital tools in the educational process (Cerna et al., 2021). Differences in socioeconomic status and geographic differences also affect access, use, and outcomes for different groups of students. Digital technologies can offer many advantages, diversifying not only what is learned, but also where, when and how it is learned.

Digital inclusion in education requires minimizing the digital divide, thereby increasing access and improving the quality of learning for students from diverse groups, ensuring equitable education (European Commission, & Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021). Digital inclusion is a multidimensional concept as it encompasses factors such as access, infrastructure, use and specific learning outcomes, as well as focusing on promoting digital literacy among students and teachers (Kim, Yi, & Hong, 2021; OECD, 2021; Park, 2017).

Digital engagement should also be based on culturally relative pedagogy, enhancing multiculturalism and supporting minority cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2002). When developing digital resources that are culturally relevant, it is important that teaching methods are tailored to the cultural context of the target group (McLoughlin, 2000). Since the turn of the century, scholars have noted that culturally sensitive design is important, and that certain features can be incorporated into the design process to promote equity among diverse groups of students. Henderson's (1996) multicultural design model of inclusive learning suggests that learning resources should be designed to provide variability and flexibility for students, and to be able to interact with materials that reflect the multicultural realities present in society, include different cultural ways of learning and promote equity in learning outcomes. McLoughlin (2000) suggests adding to this design model of inclusive education mandatory cultural support (i.e., the inclusion of components such as values, learning styles and cognitive characteristics of students of the target group).

When developing the educational process with inclusion in mind, various digital tools contribute to its differentiation and individualization, allowing teachers to adapt the content of the discipline and the way it is presented in accordance with the needs and experience of students (Heemskerk et al., 2005). Digital tools such as assistive technology for assessment is being exploited nowadays in some countries (e.g., the USA, the UK) to accommodate students with special educational needs and to make better use of assessment with personalized guidance and support. For instance, in Scotland (United Kingdom), some students use computers with speech synthesis during national examinations. Using computers in the exams, all students are able to take part more equally as their communication needs are met and this can help them realize their potential.

In general, digital tools can accommodate diversity by enabling choice, personalization, and increased access to online educational resources for students from different groups. Well-designed tools can meet the diverse needs of students. Thinking about how digital tools can be used in the classroom to support different groups of students can lead to a more inclusive digital education.

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