



# Live Discussion: Assistive technologies and accessible digital learning environment for persons with disabilities – Experience and good practices from regions

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The [12th Live Discussion](#) hosted by the European Commission's European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) explored the topics of accessible learning environments and assistive technologies (ATs)<sup>1</sup> in vocational education and training (VET). In this context, panellists from across Europe representing regions, training providers and companies came together to share how apprenticeships can become more accessible and inclusive, and how digital technologies can facilitate this process.

## WELCOME SPEECH BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, DG EMPL

**Inmaculada Placencia Porrero**, Senior Expert, Disability and Inclusion Unit, DG EMPL, set the scene by offering an overview of what ATs are and how they are linked to recently prepared EU initiatives. Launched last year, the [EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#) calls on Member States to adopt targeted measures and flexible training formats to ensure inclusive and accessible VET programmes, including persons with disabilities. [The European Accessibility Act](#), to be transposed by the Member States by end of June 2022, will require interoperability and seamless interaction between accessible mainstream technology and ATs. Policy makers need to create a legal environment that allows such technologies to be fully harnessed in ways that are ethical and safe.



At the core of AT development, there is a balance to strike between making technology accessible (mainstream) and tailoring the technology according to the needs of each individual. In all cases, ATs should always pay attention to the reachability, availability and accessibility of the end-user.

**Inmaculada Placencia Porrero**,  
Senior Expert, Disability and Inclusion  
DG EMPL

## INSPIRING PRACTICES FROM EUROPE

Opening the plenary session, **Emma Theiland Nilsson**, development manager at the Gothenburg Region, Sweden, shared her experience in managing two apprenticeship projects 'GR Samsär' and 'DigInc'. The initiatives have the objectives of creating equal conditions for young persons with intellectual disabilities and to help them transition from school to working life. DigInc, specifically, aims to create a new, innovative model for apprenticeships that builds on digital experiences, and to raise awareness of the disadvantages of excluding persons with disabilities. **Sophia Karagouni**, EU Project Manager, EEA MARGARITA, Greece, described her experience of working with persons with intellectual disabilities empowering them with digital self-advocacy skills and helping them become digitally literate 'netizens'. Learning digital self-advocacy involves gaining key skills such as digital storytelling, using ATs for autonomous living, and taking advantage of digital collaboration platforms for vocational training. **Andrea Bernert-Buerkle**, EU project manager, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, shared how her region works to integrate apprentices with disabilities in standard training opportunities by using an individualised approach whereby the physical, mental or sensorial needs of each person are accounted for. Lastly, **Fabrice Goffin**, the CEO of Zorabots, Belgium, showcased robots that support students with disabilities in learning environments, including a humanoid robot – free of any judgement and prejudice – capable of encouraging social interaction in learners with autism.

<sup>1</sup> According to the European Accessibility Act, Assistive Technology 'means any item, piece of equipment, service or product system including software that is used to increase, maintain, substitute or improve functional capabilities of persons with disabilities or for, alleviation and compensation of impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions.'

## BARRIERS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES & CHALLENGES RELATED TO ATS

Gaining full access to VET and ATs remains a challenge for apprentices with disabilities. **Emma Theiland Nilsson** stressed the importance of listening to the target group and avoiding drawing imprecise conclusions about their needs. **Sophia Karagouni** emphasised that education systems should become more flexible in their recognition of skills and competences, and that there is a necessity of overcoming stigmatisation of disabilities. Unfortunately, educational choices of persons with disabilities are not only restricted by access but often also by societal assumptions of what they can and cannot do, making some people choose apprenticeships which are not aligned with their personal goals. Ensuring their freedom of choice should be a priority for all VET-stakeholders. **Andrea Bernert-Buerkle** provided examples from her region where everyday technology (e.g. smartphones) is used to support inclusion in VET-classes, allowing, for example, migrant learners to have instant translation, or those with physical disabilities to have hands-free navigation with voice recognition. Making a last remark on the challenges related to ATs, **Fabrice Goffin** pointed out that the affordability of the technology from its development to implementation remains a key barrier to address, while human accessibility and user-friendliness are essential factors to consider.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY MAKERS

In the final part of the Live Discussion, **Sophia Karagouni** drew attention to the need for fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, investing in sustainable long-term projects, and raising awareness on how various technologies can help persons with disabilities. ATs available in education and training, are not always known in the labour market, making some learners less motivated to learn how to use such technologies. **Andrea Bernert-Buerkle** stressed that workplace and educational settings should become more tailored to individual needs, and that a shift in mindset is needed among VET-stakeholders to reduce prejudice and discrimination. In Germany, for example, there is still a tendency to offer training for persons with disabilities in

*A virtual group photo of the panellists and the moderator.*

*From the top left: **Emma Theiland Nilsson**, **Sophia Karagouni**, **Andrea Bernert-Buerkle**, **Fabrice Goffin**, **Ann Vanden Bulcke** (Moderator) and **Inmaculada Placencia Porrero** (Chair)*

'special' institutions, which in many cases is not needed. **Emma Theiland Nilsson** emphasised the benefits of including persons with disabilities at workplaces or in training, as they have potential to bring new, innovative, and different perspectives. Nevertheless, support for companies should be in place as, when employing these persons, companies may need practical guidance and financial support. Finally, **Fabrice Goffin** stressed the need for raising awareness on inclusivity and accessibility in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). STEM education should include training on accessibility issues, as more professionals developing accessible technologies are needed.

## CONCLUSION AND THE UPCOMING EAFA EVENTS

The Live Discussion illustrated examples of how accessible learning environments, with the support of ATs, can help foster the inclusion of persons with disabilities. However, it also became clear that there is still a long way to go in raising awareness of the different needs that these persons have, and in ensuring the accessibility and affordability of helpful digital technology.

After hearing the panellists and the conclusion of the Live Discussion, the audience were cordially invited to the webinar on *Higher Apprenticeships and Higher VET*, on 11 May (registration will open soon). The hybrid event *EAfA European Year of Rail - The European Alliance for Apprenticeships on track!* will take place over 9-10 June. Registration is available [here](#). Don't miss these events!

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