i access

PROMOTING ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Access to information is a fundamental right of every learner, with or without disabilities and/or special educational needs. In a society that increasingly relies on ICT to communicate and share information and knowledge, it is essential that information is provided in a way that ensures every person has the opportunity of participating on an equal basis.
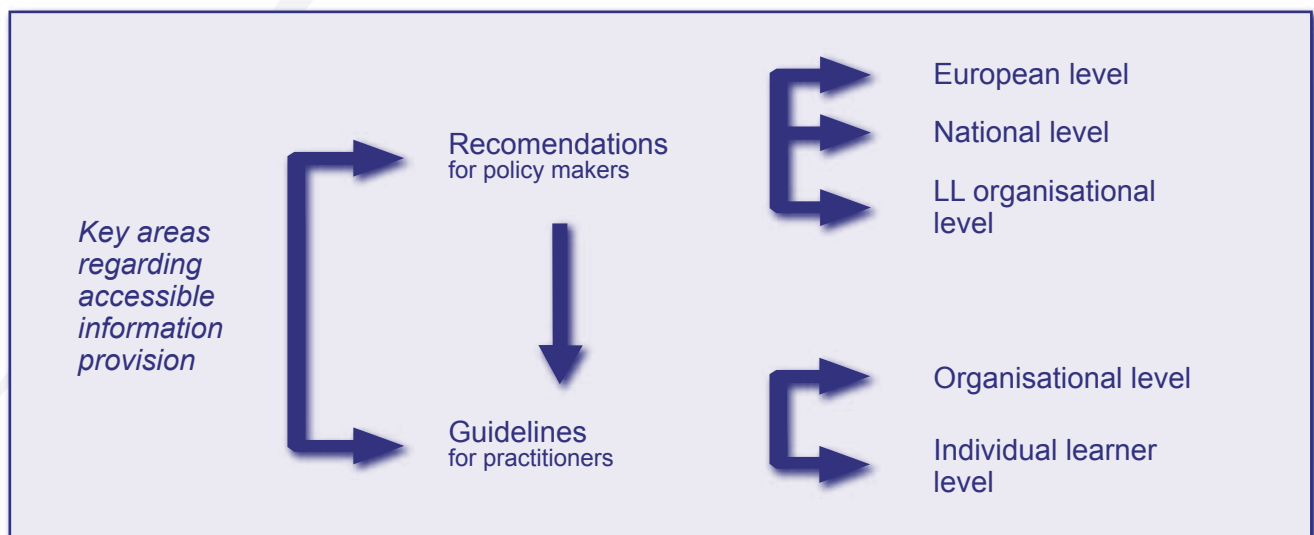
The need for accessible information relevant for lifelong learning is a recurring theme throughout all Agency projects and in 2010, the Agency was awarded the grant and the project began in March 2011 co-financed by a European Community Grant under the Lifelong Learning Transversal Programme, Key Activity 1: Policy Co-operation and Innovation, agreement number: 190583-LLP-2010-DK-KA1-KA1ECETA.

The Accessible Information Provision for Lifelong Learning (i-access) project has run from March 2011 to February 2012. 21 Agency member countries have been involved in the i-access project: Belgium (both the Flemish and French speaking communities), Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom (both England and Scotland).

Over 70 experts participated in and contributed to this project. These professionals included policy makers, journalists, researchers, ICT experts and service providers as well as representatives of international and European organisations.

The ultimate goal of the project has been to raise awareness of the issues surrounding accessible information provision for lifelong learning in order to facilitate positive developments towards accessible information provision. The main aim has been to use existing European and international policy and standards for information accessibility as a basis for discussing the implications and the practical implementation of accessible information provision within lifelong learning.

Within the project the experts have agreed to differentiate between recommendations and guidelines as is outlined in the figure below.

Key areas regarding accessible information provision

Recomendations for policy makers → European level / National level / LL organisational level

Guidelines for practitioners → Organisational level / Individual learner level

Distinction between recommendations and guidelines linked to target groups

Recommendations are targeted at policy makers for lifelong learning as well as ICT, working at the European, national or lifelong learning organisational levels. Recommendations focus upon what needs to be included within a written policy in order to direct accessible information provision in organisations;

Guidelines are targeted at educational, ICT and media practitioners and include tools such as checklists and indexes for monitoring action. Guidelines focus upon how the policy can be implemented in a practical way at the organisational, as well as individual learner level.

The collective results of the i-access project lead to guiding principles and key areas for recommendations to support accessible information provision for lifelong learning agreed at the European level by the key stakeholders in the field. The i-access Guiding Principles as well as the Recommendations are aimed at policy makers in their role as leading the implementation of accessible information provision.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

During the i-access project conference (held in June 2011) there were a number of inputs considering policy and practice related to providing accessible information for lifelong learning. Representatives of key international organisations working in the field of accessibility – UNESCO, G3ict, the World Wide Web Consortium/Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C/WAI) and the DAISY Consortium – presented their priorities and work in this field. Representatives of Adobe and Microsoft presented information on the relevance of policy for their work and provided practical information on making information more accessible.

As a result of all of the project conference debates and inputs, the i-access experts agreed upon a number of Guiding Principles that underpin any recommendations for policy and practice related to providing accessible information for lifelong learning.

Rights Principle: Access to information is a fundamental right – it empowers learners and facilitates their participation in society. This access must be provided in the earliest phases of learning and accompany a learner throughout their lifetime.

Structural Principle: It is vital that any policy or recommendation does not regard technology as an end in itself. The systemic factors that determine the use of tools for lifelong learning must be recognised and considered.

All-Inclusive Principle: Accessible information provision needs to be considered in its widest interpretation to include people with all forms of disabilities and/or special educational needs.

Synergy Principle: Accessibility benefits users with disabilities and/or special educational needs and may often benefit all users.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The Recommendations for promoting accessible information for lifelong learning draw upon a range of information sources collected and analysed throughout the project activities, including:

A review of European and international policy and recommendations on accessibility - the initial policy review was conducted as a stimulus for drafting the country survey (described below). It was then added and used as an input for the i-access project conference (also described below). As a result of the final outcomes of the project conference, the policy review was re-worked and completed in order to link to existing policy content and key issues for policy implementation. The review showed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) as the most influential of policies in relation to accessibility as it is legally binding to its signatories (including the

European Union) and directs attention to accessibility issues in both European and national level policies. The policy review also underlined the fact that on the European level there is no single policy that refers to all types of information accessibility (web, electronic documents, print material, audio, video and any form of communication). In reality, different aspects of accessibility are covered by varying sector policies.

A country survey on accessibility policy and implementation - the results of the country survey are based on 29 replies from 18 countries. The results showed that respondents were generally more aware of international policies and guidelines for accessible information provision, than European policies. Most countries represented in the survey have a national policy for accessibility as well as organisational style guides, however only half of these guides cover accessibility issues.

The i-access conference inputs and conclusions - the i-access conference was held in Copenhagen from 22-24 June 2011 and was hosted by the Agency and the Danish Ministry of Education. The aim of this conference was to identify the implications of international and European policy on accessibility for information providers in the field of education, as well as the processes that organisations need to consider in order to ensure accessible information provision. The 70 plus participants reflected on policy requirements and current practice regarding the accessibility of information relevant for lifelong learning and identified key issues relevant for developing a set of proposed recommendations.

The final project recommendations were drafted and then endorsed through a process of re-drafting based on feedback from project experts, Agency member country ministerial representatives, as well as representatives of all key stakeholder organisations involved in the conference and project activities.

The seven areas of recommendations are targeted at policy makers for lifelong learning and / or ICT, working at the European, national or lifelong learning organisational levels.

Raising awareness about accessible information for lifelong learning as a rights issue. Policy makers, organisations and professionals in lifelong learning, ICT specialists, people with disabilities and/or special educational needs and their families and support networks should be made aware of learners' rights to accessible information provision.

A multi-stakeholder approach based upon co-operation and information exchange should be taken. Highly specific policies focused upon single interest group issues alone cannot achieve the provision of accessible information for lifelong learning. Policies must be developed and then implemented based upon the principle of a multi-stakeholder approach.

Issues around accessible information provision should be covered in the education of all professionals involved in lifelong learning. ICT can contribute to effective access to learning opportunities only if all professionals in lifelong learning are educated in the use of ICT as a tool to enable equal opportunities in education.

Issues around accessible information provision should be covered in the education of ICT and media professionals. Educating media and ICT specialists on the impact of disabilities and/or special educational needs on people using ICT, it is possible to develop more accessible technology from design to production and avoid later work to make the finished product more accessible.

Accessibility should be a guiding principle for procurement of all goods and services. Goods or services should only be purchased from organisations that fully account for accessibility issues.

Research should be promoted in order to develop an evidence base for future policy design, implementation and evaluation. Long-term research efforts in this area should inform policy-making, monitoring and evaluation and should aim to identify areas for future development and work.

Compliance to policy should be systematically monitored. Monitoring of compliance can only be encouraged at present, but should be extended. Compliance with accessibility policy is monitored on an international level for signatories of the UNCRPD (2006), but currently not all countries provide these annual reports. In the long term monitoring of compliance to accessibility policy should be mandatory at the national level.

For each of the seven recommendations issues of applicability to three possible policy levels – the European, national and organisational levels – can be identified.

Both the Guiding Principles and Recommendations can be considered as a core framework to be developed, based on different country and regional contexts. The focus of next steps in work related to developing accessible information provision will be to build on the seven recommendations by developing them into guidelines targeted at practitioners who have the responsibility for implementing policy within lifelong learning organisations.

It is hoped that the Guiding Principles and Recommendations can be a stimulus for debate and exchange in and beyond Europe; in particular it is considered they can provide inspiration for discussions within different communities of practice.

This paper is a summary of the main findings of the i-access project. Within the full project report *Promoting Accessible Information for Lifelong Learning* (2012) are full details on: the i-access project; the country survey on accessibility; the policy review on accessibility; the reflections on existing resources to support the implementation of accessibility policy; a collection of resources aimed at promoting accessible information provision; a list of participating experts.

The full project report as well as all project materials can be downloaded from:
http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/i-access

Print copies of the report and more information on the project are available upon request from the Agency Secretariat: **secretariat@european-agency.org**

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