

Guidelines for the establishment of a European model for accessible distance learning for PWIDs



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The ADILE project - Accessible distance learning

The Covid-19 pandemic both amplified and exposed digital and educational barriers and inequalities ([UN Resources on Persons with Disabilities and COVID-19](#)).

People with disabilities (PWIDs) have suffered from **isolation** due to social distancing rules, while limited accessibility of ICT tools, distance learning, and access to information related to COVID-19 have led to a deterioration in their quality of life.

The use of **distance learning tools** to address these gaps proved to be a viable solution, but several problems emerged regarding the accessibility of currently existing virtual platforms for PWID. (For more detailed information about the current state of accessible distance learning in Europe, please read our [Initial Research Report](#).)

With this, the ADILE project (Promoting Accessible Distance LEarning for people with intellectual disabilities) is an Erasmus+ project that aims to promote the **empowerment** and **social inclusion** of people with intellectual disabilities via the accessibility of ICT tools for distance learning.

ADILE also seeks to contribute to the removal of social barriers through learning activities that promote civic education and inclusion for persons with intellectual disabilities.

The specific objectives of the ADILE project are to:

- Define an **online educational pathway for PWIDs**, specifically focused on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities aimed at improving autonomy in the field of active citizenship, media literacy, democratic values, and exercise of rights.
- Develop an **accessible online educational platform** dedicated to **PWIDs** in easy-to-read language, in order to foster equal opportunities for distance learning.
- Define a European **distance learning model for PWIDs**.

With the objectives mentioned above, ADILE foresees the realisation of three project results:




The **ADILE Toolkit** in accessible language addressed to PWID, which aims to improve their understanding of the world around them and increase their autonomy. The Toolkit comes with an additional document, “Guidelines for educators”.



The **ADILE Educational Platform** in accessible language addressed to PWID.



ADILE guidelines (this document) for the establishment of a European model for e accessible distance learning for people with intellectual disabilities.

All the project results are available on the **project website**. 

The project is led by a partnership comprised of 6 organisations specialised in working with persons with disabilities in the education sector:



The following text outlines the policy recommendations and guidelines in relation to the pilot action results conducted by the aforementioned organisations in their relevant countries.

For more detailed information on the national pilot actions, please refer to our [analysis of the pilot action](#).

2 Strengths and possibilities of accessible distance learning

Breaking down financial barriers to education

Accessible distance learning and teaching enables more people to engage in additional study and training from the comfort of their own homes. Removing the physical commute to a school or study centre saves time and money, both of which can be a hindrance for persons with disabilities specifically.

Removing physical / mobility-related barriers to education

The commute to educational centres and the schools themselves are often not accessible for persons with disabilities with mobility impairments (for example, students who require wheelchair access). Accessible online learning enables such students to learn remotely.

Increased independence and autonomy of persons with intellectual disabilities.

With accessible distance learning, persons with disabilities can be supported to acquire more knowledge and skills, which can help them to gain employment and, in turn, acquire more independence and autonomy. Furthermore, education provides them an opportunity to learn more about their strengths and interests.



Applicable to all types of learning and training

This model and method of learning and teaching is not confined to content specific to formal education. Instead, it is applicable and effective for more specific types of training or learning for specific topics.

Added educational value for all

Making distance learning accessible and inclusive is not just beneficial for persons with intellectual disabilities, but it makes education a viable opportunity for those who cannot reach schools physically or prefer to learn independently. This was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, where schools had to make the transition to online learning / teaching. With inclusion being a fundamental part of accessible distance learning, developing and implementing it with all types of learners in mind enables the education sector to progress.



3 Accessible distance learning: Policy recommendations to get there

3.1. Funding and legal framework

Main challenges:

Overall, there is a significant deficiency in the legal frameworks for the regulation, organisation, and assurance of high-quality and readily available accessible distance learning platforms and digital tools. This goes hand in hand with a general lack of adequate and sustained financial support on a governmental level that could be helpful in closing the educational and digital divide for persons with intellectual disabilities. Since persons with intellectual disabilities are more likely to have a higher cost of living (and, in turn, face more financial difficulties), there are also issues with the degree to which distance learning tools – for example, different devices and individual support – are available, accessible, and affordable. Furthermore, due to the lack of legislative and financial frameworks in place for accessible distance learning, there is also a lack of quality services and personnel trained for the specific educational support needs of persons with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, there is a notable absence of mechanisms for service provision, monitoring, and quality control of accessible distance learning.

National solutions:

- **Increase funding and state support for research and development:** put a financial framework in place that fosters and enables the continued development of digital tools useful to accessible distance learning.
- **Increase funding for accessibility:** financial support should be given to learners, their families, and educators to ensure that they have strong internet access and allocated funds to purchase quality devices for distance learning (e.g., tablets, laptops, and smartphones). This would be helpful in making distance learning financially viable and accessible, and shorten the digital divide.

- **Funding for IT training:** provide general ICT training to educators or professionals supporting learners, in order to equip them with the necessary digital skills, knowledge and experience to facilitate distance learning.
- **National strategic plans:** integrate accessible distance learning into the national strategic plan for persons with intellectual disabilities to work towards a common goal and mission, which includes co-creation amongst relevant actors, such as educators, service providers, and organisations of persons with intellectual disabilities. These national plans would:
 - Include state aid, EU funding frameworks, and range of funding sources
 - Provide guidelines on developing accessible distance learning platforms to a high-quality standard
 - Include a quality assurance framework
 - Provide a system for regular monitoring, evaluation, assessment, and reporting of accessible distance learning platforms, especially in relation to their impact on persons with intellectual disabilities
 - Ensure the availability and accessibility of distance learning

EU solutions:

- **Cooperation between member states:** foster the cooperation between EU Member States via the method of open coordination to bolster the exchange of good practices and information regarding accessible distance learning among national governments and relevant actors.
- **Recommendations:** work with stakeholders to produce recommendations to support the development of local, regional, and national strategies in the fields of disability, ICT, and education in the framework of the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- **Funding and grants for research and development:** provide funding and grants to support the development and advancement of digital tools for people with intellectual disabilities.



3.2. Training, upskilling, and working conditions

Main challenges:

As briefly touched upon in the 'Funding and legal frameworks' section, there is a notable lack of quality, frequent, and dedicated training programmes for education professionals specialising in working with people with intellectual disabilities. This has culminated in both a deficit in staff specialised in accessible distance education for persons with intellectual disabilities and the poor retention of educational occupations within the social sector. Educators in the pilot action also flagged that their capacity as teachers would greatly improve if they had the opportunity and funding to acquire more knowledge about accessible content and enhance their own digital skills.

National solutions:

- **Invest in training:** implement a comprehensive and sustainable training programme that enables educators working with persons with intellectual disabilities and educational platform developers to upskill and refine their knowledge of accessible content (e.g., easy-to-read and/or simplified language), accessible distance learning, and digital skills via in-job training. This can equip educators and other relevant professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge in the relatively new and rapidly evolving field of distance education.
- **More funding for overall support:** place more financial investment within organisations to ensure frequent in-job training, upskilling, mentoring, and holistic support for educators working with people with intellectual disabilities.
- **Increase salaries and improve working conditions:** invest more public funds in the social and education sector to improve the salaries and working conditions for educators working with persons with intellectual disabilities. More equitable salaries would help with job retention, as well as incentivise new professionals to train and seek employment in this line of work. With this, such allocated funds can ensure the availability of individual support, supervision, and assistance for learners with intellectual disabilities who require it.

- **Upscale and develop training materials:** create specific training materials around the topic of distance learning, which would help sustain and implement training programmes for educators working with persons with intellectual disabilities. Such specific training materials would enable educators to develop and enhance their understanding and use of digital technologies in their teaching. The upscaling of existing ADILE training materials would be a good point of departure here.

EU solutions:

- **Open support:** demonstrate support and promote the development and implementation of accessible distance learning, especially for persons with intellectual disabilities, across EU member states.
- **Training in all EU languages:** create a training toolkit and MOOCs on accessible distance learning for educators and educational platform developers in all EU languages.
- **Increase funding for training:** continue to use EU funds to support the training of staff via Erasmus+.



3.3. Diversifying educational opportunities for PWIDs

Main challenges:

There are **assumptions and stereotypes** about persons with intellectual disabilities and their digital skills that often result in them being **perceived as a homogenous group** with the same educational and digital needs. In the pilot action, there were multiple instances where both the learners and educators reported **vast differences in abilities, needs, and educational desires** of persons with intellectual disabilities, which were difficult to fulfil with the current content. With this, the platform is only accessible and useful for learners if the content matches the abilities of the students. Some students have lower literacy levels and **require more individual support**, but this is not currently possible if learners access the platform remotely. This especially poses a problem for learners whose **family members do not have the necessary digital skills** to support them with the platform at home. Meanwhile, some learners have already gained more digital skills and have the **desire for more difficult educational content**, which is currently not available on the ADILE platform. In combination, these elements spotlight the need to dismantle stereotypes about persons with intellectual disabilities and actively address their varying abilities when it comes to their digital skills.

National solutions:

- **Develop awareness programmes:** create awareness programmes to identify, unlearn, and dismantle stereotypes and assumptions around persons with intellectual disabilities and their digital skills that pervade society.
- **Contact person for learners:** have an option for learners to:
 - Meet with educators before using the platform to gauge the learner's literacy levels and educational needs, so that the appropriate learning objectives can be outlined.
 - Have an educator as a contact person, from whom learners can request assistance if they have issues using the platform or understanding the content.



- **Diversify the educational content available:** to meet the individual needs of persons with intellectual disabilities who wish to pursue distance education, a larger variety of subjects, topics, and levels of difficulty should be covered and made available. Educational opportunities should speak to the individual needs, interests, strengths, and personalities of each learner.
- **Online group classes:** make online group classes an option for learners using the platform remotely. This can be especially helpful for learners struggling to understand the platform's interface when they first use the platform or start a new module.
- **Integration of online manuals:** create manuals (in video or document form) for learners who require assistance with the earliest stages of using the ADILE online educational platform, such as opening the webpage, knowing how to click the buttons on the platform, or learning how to operate a mouse or trackpad.
- **More funds for general training:** more funding from national, regional, and local governments to support local training opportunities in digital skills for persons with intellectual disabilities and their families can enhance their independence in using distance learning platforms.

EU solutions:

- **Awareness-raising campaigns:** develop and launch campaigns to raise awareness on the diversity of people with intellectual disabilities, focusing on their individual interest and needs within education. This would seek to dismantle harmful stereotypes and assumptions about their educational desires, needs, and capacities.
- **EU Guidelines:** develop EU Guidelines for member states on accessible distance learning that take into account the diversity of interests and skills of persons with intellectual disabilities. These could be considered and mainstreamed into relevant initiatives within disability rights and education.

3.4. Standardisation of accessible distance learning

The EU's Web Accessibility Directive outlines the digital accessibility standards, but mainly within the context of public service websites and applications. With the ADILE project in mind, it is important to underline that these standards should be applied to other organisations and sectors, especially in terms of training and educational opportunities.

Main challenges:

In the pilot action, learners **needed the most assistance during the initial stages of using the platform**, especially in terms of the **practical know-how** in using digital tools and technologies, such as using a mouse. From the instructions of exercises to the learning material, overly **complex language and syntax** in the platform were also educational barriers for learners in the pilot action – this was the case in all countries where the pilot action took place.

National solutions:

- **Co-creation:** foster the collaboration between platform developers, persons with intellectual disabilities, educators working with persons with intellectual disabilities, and professionals specialising in accessibility. These inputs could help ensure that distance learning platforms are truly accessible and effective.
- **Enhance the accessibility of platform content:** use standardised and recognised easy-to-read language and visual formats in different national contexts to overcome language barriers posed by difficult words and grammatical structures. This includes:
 - Using easy-to-read and/or simplified language in the relevant national languages throughout written content.
 - Using standardised visual presentation easy-to-read pictograms and visual aids, and placing them next to the relevant text.

- Using accessible and appropriately sized fonts that are easier for learners with visual impairments to read, and can be processed by screen readers, such as Arial in font size 14. Having a 'zoom in and out' option on the platform to allow learners to enlarge the contents of the screen would also be helpful.
- Having all the text on one screen without having to scroll up and down to avoid complications in navigating the content for more basic modules aimed at learners with lower levels of digital skills.
- Offer different options of colour contrasts to choose from regarding text and background colour to accommodate varying levels of visual impairments.

**These aspects were fully implemented in the final version of the platform, after receiving feedback from the pilot action.*

- **Make the platform multimodal:** offer a variety of modalities through which to learn from on the online platform – such as audio, videos, written content, quizzes, practical learning activities, and interactive games – so that learning platforms are suitable for all learning styles, preferences, and disabilities. Here, audio and videos were the most requested feature from both learners and educators.
- **Standardisation of assessment:** implement a standardised assessment feature to ensure the fulfilment of the learning objectives on the educational platform and efficacy of the modules.

EU solutions:

- **Prioritise policy:** make accessible digital education a priority when it comes to policymaking at the EU level, so that accessibility legislation and recommendations can be further promoted on a wider scale.
- **Support accessible quality education:** support the development and implementation of quality educational content in easy-to-read and/or simplified language across EU member states to foster continuous research, development and maintenance of accessible distance learning in all EU languages.
- **Promotion of digital learning:** promote and help normalise the use of digital tools and digital learning methods within education at the European level.

4 Conclusion

In a world that is becoming increasingly digitised and characterised by digitalisation, making **online learning** truly accessible is fundamental to ensuring the **social and educational inclusion** of people with intellectual disabilities.

From this, the accessible distance learning platform developed through the ADILE project is one that works to facilitate the social inclusion and participation of people with intellectual disabilities.

This is part of working towards the full realisation of their rights that are outlined in the UN CRPD and the EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030.

This document outlines the (non-exhaustive) **advantages and possibilities** that accessible **distance learning** brings, such as facilitating the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities and creating an online learning environment that is as barrier-free as possible.

Among other **benefits**, there is evidence of accessible distance learning:

- Removing financial and mobility obstacles to education.
- Contributing to the increased independence and autonomy of persons with intellectual disabilities.



- Being of value to other types of learning, such as professional training, due to its transferable and applicable nature.




Furthermore, accessible online education can improve the **educational experience of all learners** by becoming integrated into the mainstream education sector, and bolster the inclusion of learners with intellectual disabilities.

However, there is **insufficient social awareness, financial investment, and research and development** that goes into accessible distance learning that prevent the aforementioned benefits from being fully realised. Pervasive **stereotypes** about people with intellectual disabilities lead to them being perceived as a **homogenous group** with the same educational and digital needs, hindering the diversification of educational content.

The **lack of adequate and sustained financial support** on governmental and EU levels has resulted in the slow development of quality and readily available accessible distance learning platforms and digital tools.

To overcome these difficulties, **visible social, political, and economic commitments** on both national and EU levels are required to promote - and give concrete support to - the development of online education.

Key recommendations in this document to help ensure the **equal participation of people with intellectual disabilities** within education and society are:

-  Creating *awareness campaigns* to debunk stereotypes around the educational and digital needs of persons with intellectual disabilities.
-  Allocating *more funding* to not only *upskill* and train educational professionals, but also to strengthen and sustain *research and development* into accessible distance learning.
-  Making *accessible online education a priority* when it comes to policymaking, so that accessibility legislation and recommendations can be further promoted on a wider scale.

Finally, although this project and this document focuses on the benefits and recommendations of accessible distance learning for people with intellectual disabilities, there are clear benefits for students of all abilities and backgrounds.

The inclusive nature of accessible distance learning promotes the removal of physical, financial, and social barriers to education that people without disabilities can also face, such as commuting costs. This aspect could be interesting for further research on making the educational sector more accessible for all on a larger organisational level.





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