Briefing Document

TASC Roundtable Discussion

The Pandemic, Digital Technology, and Inequality in Ireland

4 March 2021

Objectives of the Round Table

This meeting will discuss how the pandemic has affected existing inequalities in accessing and using digital technology and perhaps provoked new forms of 'digital divides.' This section of the round table will focus in particular on the impact on older people, school-age children and their parents in lower income households, new migrants and asylum seekers, and jobseekers. We will also explore the impact around the lack of access to technology and low levels of digital literacy on mental and physical health and social exclusion.

The round table will then ask what the government, civil society organisations, and businesses should do next. Breakout groups will address the following questions, amongst others:

1. What kind of investment is needed in digital literacy and broadband infrastructure going forward?
2. Who should receive this investment, e.g. SMEs, charities, schools, and so on? For what purpose?
3. How can actors from the different sectors work together to ensure supply of technology and adequate training is available?
4. Which training courses have proven most effective in reaching groups with relatively low levels of digital literacy?
5. Which groups need more support?
6. How can training be used better to improve educational outcomes and job opportunities?
7. What can be done to improve website design and apps to help groups with lower levels of digital literacy?
8. What protections need to be put in place regarding data privacy, as surveys show that populations with lower levels of formal education tend not to take as many precautions as those who are more educated regarding the sharing of personal information?
9. What kinds of data need to be collected on digital literacy and inequalities?
10. What research should be supported going forward to support frontline service providers?

What is Digital Literacy?

According to the American Library Association's digital-literacy task force, "Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills."[i] The European Literacy Policy Network, or ELINET, (Lemos, Gina and Nascimbeni, Fabio, 2016) offers a more complex definition and distinguishes digital literacy from digital competency. Digital competency was recognised by the European Parliament and the European Council in 2006 as one of eight key 'competences' each European citizen should possess (others included communication in one's own language and a foreign language and competence in math, science and technology, learning ability; entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness). (p. 3) Digital competency was also categorised alongside language, literacy, and numeracy as one of the four foundational skills for learning.

In contrast, for ELINET, digital literacy has three dimensions: an operational dimension, whereby individuals possess the skills necessary to "read and write in diverse digital media (including making meaning with and from diverse modes such as spoken and written language, static and moving images, sounds, screen design etc.)" (p. 1); a cultural dimension that allows for developing relationships online in specific cultural and social contexts; and a critical dimension that acknowledges the limitations of online resources and the purpose of data-collecting by platforms like Facebook. This last dimension implies more than passive participation online. Instead, individuals have the capacity to utilize digital resources

for their own benefit, to be creative, confident, and proactive in using digital technology for a variety of purposes, such as work, leisure, and education.

Finally, digital literacy differs from conventional understanding of literacy in that it requires developing and understanding texts in modes distinguished by their presentation and purpose. For example, some apps may use moving images and others voice or written text. Digital literacy would mean that users are comfortable navigating through diverse platforms and likewise, learning from and communicating through them, despite their dissimilarities. Digital literacy would also include their ability to use different devices as well as platforms.

Levels of digital literacy, like conventional literacy and numeracy, reflect wider inequalities in society, as well as differences in age and sometimes, place. Increasingly, lack of digital literacy is affecting emotional wellbeing and physical health, job opportunities, and individual and collective perceptions of social inclusion and belonging.

According to Eurostat figures (2020), access to the internet in Ireland rose from 82% of the population in 2014 to 92% of the population in 2019.[ii] The same analysis showed that Ireland has one of the highest rates of usage of both mobile devices and the internet in the EU, a relatively high rate of usage for social networking purposes, purchasing goods, and a relatively high level of awareness of individual privacy concerns (this data was from 2016, suggesting the figure has risen since then).

At the same time, the European Commission's 2018 Digital Economy and Society Index revealed that over half of the Irish population lacks basic digital skills[iii]. More recently, the National Adult Literacy Agency has stated that 55% of the Irish population has low digital skills[iv]. Research conducted by Accenture in 2020 found that pre-pandemic, 42% of Irish people described their digital skills as "below average"[v]. This research also revealed that over 1 in 4 of the individuals who have difficulties with digital literacy do not know where to begin to learn how to use these devices. These difficulties are compounded by lower rates of participation in adult learning and education amongst individuals with less than secondary education (10%) compared with people who have a third level qualification (75%). Almost 12% of the Irish population aged 15-64 in 2019 had less than upper secondary education (NFQ Levels 1-3).

This population, with lower levels of formal education, as well as older people and lower income households tend to have lower digital literacy skills compared to the rest of the population. In addition, families may not be able to afford devices. RTE reported that as many as 7 out of 10 students in some schools in Ireland do not have any access to a digital laptop due to cost, which has left them disconnected from schooling and their teachers during the pandemic.[vi] The same European Commission Digital Economy and Society Index in 2018 found that over half of the population aged 65 to 74 in Ireland have never used the internet[vii]. In contract, the percentage was 16% in the United Kingdom. There are a number of barriers that work to prevent older people from using the internet, including ageism, little confidence, and a lack of available local broadband service providers as well as cost[viii]. As we discuss below, the pandemic has had a significant impact on older adults, many of whom are at high risk of on-going digital exclusion and social isolation. It should be said as well that broadband availability and the lack of infrastructure is an issue for the general population, with urban areas having much more consistent access to fast, efficient broadband services versus rural areas[ix].

The implications for relative low levels of digital literacy concern not only accessing information and particular services, but also more specific educational opportunities, and ways of saving money through online banking and other tools. They also can function as a barrier to civic engagement and participation within the wider community, affect individual overall confidence and perception of belonging, and physical health. The last OECD Survey of Adult Skills, also known as PIAAC, commented that "adults who report an excellent state of health have a considerably higher literacy mean score (276) than those who report a fair (249) or poor (232) state of health. Across the levels of the literacy scale this pattern is also apparent, with proportionally fewer of those with excellent (11.7%) or very good (14.6%) health at Level 1 or below compared to those with fair (31.0%) or poor (40.3%) health." (cited in Lajoie et al, 2020, p. 20)

The Impact of the Pandemic on Inequality and Digital Technology

The pandemic has highlighted digital divides across the globe, especially in relation to access to education and employment opportunities. According to multiple agencies like the World Bank, UNESCO[x], and the OECD,[xi] approximately a billion children worldwide in over 100 countries have been forced to attend school from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the unavailability or cost of technology required to facilitate remote learning and the IT resources and training available to schools have caused some children to fall behind. The widespread and long-term consequences of these shifts are not yet fully comprehensible.

In Ireland, fee-paying schools have been more visible in their preparation for online learning,[xii] suggesting a widening difference in learning outcomes between children of families who can afford private tuition and those in less resourced schools. Beyond those students, the groups most at risk of during the pandemic of facing long-term negative consequences for life opportunities and emotional and physical health include individuals with lower levels of formal education (who may have also lost their jobs), the homeless, older people, individuals with disabilities, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and the Irish Traveller community. These groups both often rely upon in-person support services and already often suffer discrimination or limited employment possibilities. The shift to online support and widening digital gap may thus be doubly detrimental, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities going forward.

To give an example, migrant families have lower incomes than the general population on average, making it more difficult to afford broadband and ICT (Information and Communications Technology)[xiii] devices to access remote learning. During lockdown, many migrant families have struggled to adjust to online learning, not only because of technology, but also because they are more likely to live in over-crowded accommodation, making it harder to access the space necessary for focus and work. Also, migrant parents may not be familiar with the Irish school curriculum and may not have the ability to assist their children with their learning materials due to language.[xiv]

Other groups like Irish Travellers have also been affected by school closures and the discontinuation of in-person supports. For example, AONTAS adult education tutors who are teaching the Traveller community have asked to have their programmes extended because many individuals do not have the option of digital learning due to lack of broadband access, home support, and ICT equipment[xv]. Homeless individuals not only lack socialization through broadband with people around the world, but also accessible support groups and loved ones[xvi].

Finally, the pandemic has engendered what commentators have labelled a 'K-shaped recovery', which infers an unequal economic impact from the pandemic. While large firms, the public sector, and technology companies have withstood the economic downturn, other economic actors like SMEs, lower income households, and 'blue collar' workers (e.g. construction) have suffered.[xvii] IBEC has concurred with this analysis for Ireland.[xviii] In fact, Eurostat data from October 2020 showed that low income workers were three times as likely to lose their jobs as higher paid workers, and the groups most affected by the downturn included young people, temporary workers, and workers in low-skilled occupations.[xix] These trends have occurred against a backdrop of more general digitalisation and its consequences for job creation and loss. The adoption of digital technologies is disrupting traditional types of employment, with one in three jobs in Ireland forecast to be disrupted by digitalisation[xx]. A study in 2019 stated that half of Irish adults are at risk in the workforce due to their lack of knowledge around technology[xxi]. A national study in 2018 (EGFSN) found that low-level, 'low-skill' jobs, like data entry, are most at risk of being eliminated.[xxii] (DIESIS Network 2020, p. 29) Inversely, employers identified their most significant challenge as finding "people with a combination of technology and soft skills (such as the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively)." (Ibid) Another significant challenge was "attracting talented people who are highly adaptable, open-minded, and ready to learn." (Ibid)

The next section reviews how the government has responded to the digital divide and to the specific inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, and asks what should be done next, considering the challenges Ireland faces in reducing these inequalities.

Public Responses to the Digital Divide

This is not an exhaustive list but does include a number of initiatives responding to gaps in digital literacy in Ireland and inequalities in access to digital technology and digital literacy heightened by the pandemic.

1. Government

The Department of Education, through 16 Education Training Boards and other Further Education and Training (FET) support providers (such as the National Adult Literacy Agency) in offering stand alone and integrated literacy, numeracy and digital literacy courses as part of broader skills provision.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications offers the 'Digital Skills for Citizens Scheme', an initiative under the Government's National Digital Strategy for Ireland 2013. The scheme provides free informal foundational digital skills training.

The Department of Rural and Community Development provides IT foundational courses through its community services programme.

The LGMA Libraries Development Unit and Age Friendly Ireland have launched a programme (January 2021) to provide tutoring to older people on how to use and benefit from internet resources.

Libraries around the country have supported expanded use of their online resources during the pandemic.

2. Charities

The Community Foundation has helped organisations like Meals on Wheels to move their services online, provided laptops to households from particularly marginalized communities (e.g. in Direct Provision), and partnered with Camara to refurbish laptops for primary school children.

Age Action created in response to the pandemic 'Keep in Touch', which is a national learning initiative that works towards helping older people improve their digital skills. https://www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help/getting-started-kit

HEAnet successfully delivered 16,700 Dell laptops to students throughout Ireland during the pandemic[xxiii].

Tech2Students is a campaign launched by RTE, with the goal of providing 5,000 devices to those who need them most ("Tech2Students: Leave No Student Offline in 2021").

3. Business

Vodafone has committed €15 million across a number of countries, including Ireland, to investing in training to help improve digital skills[xxiv].

Deloitte has partnered with AgeAction since 2016 to create a six-week programme consisting of weekly tutoring sessions with older people seeking to improve their digital skills.

Norton, the software firm, has partnered with Empower, a charity based in Fingal, in supplying laptops and supporting schools, families, and jobseekers in the area to improve digital skills.

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[i] https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/what-is-digital-literacy/2016/11q

[ii] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals#Internet_access

[iii] https://www.irishtimes.com/business/technology/republic-has-one-of-the-lowest-levels-of-basic-digital-skills-1.3500213

[iv] https://www.digitaltimes.ie/lockdown-shines-a-light-on-irelands-great-digital-divide/

[v] www.accenture.com/ie-en/insights/local/digital-divide?c=acn_ie_digitaldividereirishtimes_11302517&n=otc_0820&dcm=24589440_5397416_279764663_136376701

[vi] www.rte.ie/eile/2021/0203/1194783-leave-no-student-offline-in-2021/.

[vii] 2018 Digital Economy and Society Index published by the European Commission

[viii] https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/attachments/supporting_older_peoples_digital_literacy_briefing_paper_6_january_2020_update_of_paper_5_first_published_march_2018.pdf

[ix] "Information Society Statistics - Households 2018 - CSO - Central Statistics Office." CSO, 12 Feb. 2020, www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isshh/informationsocietystatistics-households2018/.

[x] https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/nationalresponses

[xi] https://oecdedutoday.com/education-responding-coronavirus-pandemic/

[xii] https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/digital-divide-how-covid-19-is-deepening-inequality-in-education-1.4450418

[xiii] ICT is all en-compassing term that includes any communication device, encompassing radio, television, cell phones, computer and network hardware, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and appliances with them such as video conferencing and distance learning.

[xiv] https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/MED%20Educational%20Equity%20and%20Learner%20Cohorts.pdf

[xv] Same as above.

[xvi] www.communityfoundation.ie/insights/latest-news/ending-digital-inequality-a-huge-challenge

[xvii] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/12/k-shaped-covid19-coronavirus-recovery/

xviii https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2020/10/04/ibec-publishes-latest-economic-outlook-report

xix https://www.independent.ie/news/grim-toll-of-covid-19-on-our-workforce-ireland-hit-hard-by-job-losses-and-lay-offs-39684833.html

xx DIESIS Network Seeding Background Report (2020).

xxiwww.independent.ie/business/technology/half-of-irish-adults-lack-the-digital-skills-needed-to-compete-in-the-workplace-38468623.html

xxii DIESIS Network Seeding Background Report (2020).

xxiii "HEAnet Announced the Delivery of 16,700 Laptops to Students." HEAnet, 19 Jan. 2021, www.heanet.ie/news/heanet-announced-the-delivery-of-16700-laptops

xxiv Timuray, Serpil. "International Day of Education." Vodafone.com, 25 Jan. 2021, www.vodafone.com/news/viewpoint/international-day-education.