

ENHANCING DIGITAL INCLUSION IN ADULTS' EDUCATION: IMPACT OF THE DIGIN PROJECT ON SOCIAL WORK AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN A DIGITALLY EVOLVING SOCIETY

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Abstract. The article “Enhancing Digital Inclusion in Adult Education: Impact of the DigIN Project on Social Work and Educational Practices in a Digitally Evolving Society” addresses the very urgent topic of digital inclusion within adult education in the frame of social work. Considering further digitisation of society, effort should urgently be made to improve digital competencies among different population groups to guarantee equity of access and participation. This study aims to evaluate the DigIN project, a structured adult education intervention to enhance digital social inclusion by training educators and Adult Education Organisations. It combines a mixed-method approach of the theoretical review and the implementation of the cooperative project management model, referred to as TEAMWORK. The TEAMWORK model is a systematic framework that has been quintessential to planning and implementing cooperative projects of adult education. The study includes a desk review of the latest strategies on digital inclusion, the document analysis of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, and case studies representing different stages of the DigIN project. From the preliminary results, the proposed model of TEAMWORK appeared to be properly structuring the DigIN project to enhance collaborative outcomes, manage resources better, and keep aligned with the priorities of Erasmus+ KA204. The key findings are that it is a step-by-step process that facilitates focused teams in making and setting goals. An essential factor in developing shared objectives is vital in digital inclusion. The study concludes that the frequency of monitoring with transparent communication enhances stakeholders' input and flexibility. At the same time, robust outcome evaluation and risk management assure responsiveness to the new challenges presented by digital education. This research contributes uniquely to the knowledge of structured collaboration to reduce digital marginalisation and promote equity and lifelong learning across diverse populations. By integrating the TEAMWORK model with Erasmus+ guidelines, results were presented in a replicated framework to advance digital competence among educators and further inclusive educational practices within an evolving digital landscape. Ultimately, the study underlines digital inclusion as an integral part of social work within a digitally changing society and promotes sustainable practice to enhance adult education frameworks.

Keywords: digital inclusion, adult education, social work, teamwork project management model, Erasmus+ KA204

Introduction

Society's rapid digitisation opens opportunities and challenges in both adult education and social work. Whereas technology has become an integral part of everyday life, the challenge of digital inclusion is becoming very important and pressing. The potential is immense here, as it covers access to technology and the necessary skills and competencies to put it into practice. The article discusses the evaluation of the DigIN project, an initiative for improving digital social inclusion, through structured adult education frameworks. By enhancing the digital competencies of both educators and Adult Education Organisations, the project aims to have supportive and inclusive learning environments where everybody, irrespective of their background and previous experience with technology, gets a chance to participate fully in the use of technology (Ochoa-Daderska et al., 2024; European Commission, 2021). The research aims to find out how effective the DigIN project has been in promoting digital inclusion among educators and AEOs. Its specific subject is the implementation of digital education strategies within the adult education frameworks. The specific objectives are:

- to find out how the DigIN project increases educators' digital preparedness;
- to establish sustainable digital education ecosystems within AEOs;
- to promote transnational cooperation in developing inclusive digital platforms.

It has been realised that digital skills primarily act as facilitators of social equity and inclusion in contemporary society. As noted by Järvelä (2023) and Méndez-Domínguez (2023), recent studies identify the impact of a lack of digital competencies as further marginalisation in an increasingly digital world.

The theoretical underpinning for this research problem is provided by the sources that identify a deep gap in digital competencies across different demographic groups, resulting in increased social inequality. The article written by Gródek-Szostak et al. (2023) is thus an indicator that interventions of this nature, such as

the DigIN project, would go a long way in bridging this gap through fostering inclusive learning environments.

This article places the DigIN project within a greater context and highlights its potential for societal inclusion by developing digital literacy in a multicultural environment. The promising potential of the DigIN project gives hope for a more inclusive digital future (DigIN, 2024).

The research will follow the mixed-method approach to integrate theoretical analysis with practical applications based on the TEAMWORK project management model (Ochoa Siguencia, 2024). In this respect, the TEAMWORK model stages are team formation, establishment of goals and objectives, allocation of resources, monitoring and communication, implementation, evaluation of outcomes, risk management, and sharing the knowledge, applied in assessing the effectiveness of the DigIN project within the Erasmus+ KA204 framework. The Erasmus+ Programme guide, a priority-setting and strategy outlet for promoting digital skills among populations of different statuses, plays a significant role in the design and methodology for implementing the DigIN project.

The research includes a critical literature review regarding digital inclusion policies and strategies, document analysis of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide (Erasmus+ Programme, 2024), and case studies from diverse stages of the DigIN project. This study, therefore, evaluates both quantitatively and qualitatively the degree of fit between the aims of the DigIN project and the core priorities of the Erasmus+ KA204 programme, with particular regard to collaboration and resource efficiency in the light of impactful digital inclusion practices (Kryklii, 2021; Yadav, 2024).

The article intends to contribute to the discussion of digital inclusion in adult education, bringing in views concerning the methodologies of the DigIN project. The study reveals promising ways to build educators' capacities and inclusive practices in AEOs by highlighting the contribution of Structured Collaboration, a systematic and coordinated way of working together to overcome the challenges digital marginalisation erects. In this way, we can collaboratively begin to address the issues around digital inclusion.

The study finally argues for an approach to adults' education that will not only provide them with essential digital skills but also contribute to an inclusive society in which all citizens can participate fully in a digitally transforming world.

Research Methods and Conditions

A mixed-methods approach has been followed based on an evaluative study of the DigIN project designed to enhance digital inclusion in adult education and social work. This approach allows for the collection of a wide range of data, both in terms of quantity and quality, which offers an overall assessment of the project. The study is centred around the approach within the TEAMWORK project management model that helps structure how joint projects are designed and implemented, considering the team formation, the establishment of goals and objectives, allocation of resources, monitoring and communication, implementation, evaluation of outcomes, risk management, and the stage of sharing knowledge.

Each step is specifically elaborated to ensure that effective stakeholder collaboration will accomplish the overall aims set within the Erasmus+ KA204 framework. The research basis is a thorough literature review to contextualise the DigIN project within existing strategies for digital inclusion. Consideration of contrasting theories on the subject, including the Technology Acceptance Model (Yuan et al., 2021) and Social Equity Theory (Shi & Shaw, 2024), is also important.

As identified in the Technology Acceptance Model, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness contribute to the level of engagement with technologies. On the other hand, Social Equity Theory focuses on the structural barriers, i.e., those embedded in wider technological infrastructures, that restrict access to valued social and economic experiences of disadvantaged groups. Drawing a comparison with these divergent views, this research deepens the understanding of digital inclusion and points toward possible gaps in current strategies that do not consider crucial socio-economic factors (Abdalla, 2024).

The review is complemented by the document analysis of the priorities identified in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide to develop digital skills among all population groups, published by the European Commission in 2024. The empirical data on its implementation and results are also presented in case studies representing different stages of the DigIN project.

The study determines the extent to which the DigIN project meets its objectives in enhancing educators' digital competencies and creating inclusive learning environments through quantitative and qualitative assessments (Velinov et al., 2020). The research was conducted in collaboration with various adult education organisations across Europe. This partnership will expand the transnational perspective on digital inclusion, facilitate the sharing of best practices, and enhance access to resources.

Stakeholders' Perspectives

DigIN project started on 1st December 2022 and lasted until 30th November 2024. During this period, some relevant results have been obtained, both regarding the objectives of the project and the general priorities of the Erasmus+ programme. The administrative management and monitoring of the project were perfectly developed in the first stage of the DigIN project. Immediately after the start of the project, contact was made with the Polish National Agency regarding the agreement on the grant and reporting of intermediate reports.

Bilateral agreements were drawn up with associate partners in cooperation with all the project consortiums, establishing the tasks and responsibilities of each partner, the budget allocations, and the payment terms. Each partner organisation had its internal project team composed of a coordinator, an expert technician, a communication focal point, and a financial administrator. In such a structured way, cooperation worked well with this partnership and ensured that the partnerships were focused on the project's goals. Besides, the management and quality plan was developed to maintain excellence in the implementation of the project. The risk management strategy was included while developing this plan, which was intended to consider what could fail. Mailing lists and shared document repositories were used for internal communication via Google Drive. The regular meetings were conducted via Google Meet, which worked out as the virtual collaboration tool of choice among the partners. The project organised two transnational project meetings: the Kick-Off Meeting in Częstochowa, Poland, and a subsequent meeting in the Hague, Netherlands, in 2023. These have been great opportunities for the partners to share progress and discuss developments. Another vital area of project management was financial management. Regular checks on the financial reports of the partners were carried out so that the principles of budgetary compliance could be safeguarded. Monitoring of the project was performed half-yearly with the aim of submitting comprehensive reports to the Polish National Agency. This regular scrutiny has helped to carry out all the foreseen activities within the scheduled time frames.

In most respects, the activities undertaken in this project have taken seriously issues of accessibility and inclusivity. The events designed by the partners are accessible to persons with disabilities, with venues for both transnational meetings and local training activities being accessible. Attention has been paid to gender equality considerations during participant selection for virtual learning and multiplier events. Adaptive and transformative learning approaches have enabled the project in its attempt to provide personalised learning paths for various learner needs.

One of the guiding inspirations of the DigIN project operations is sustainability. Since the notion of sustainable learning is firmly based on the idea of a healthy ecosystem, knowledge is co-created in the communities. Thus, all the publications were prepared in an e-book format, which, moreover, has only a minimal environmental impact. Each partner organisation has established ecological practices in their offices, such as recycling initiatives, energy conservation measures, and employees' education on environmental standards (Gródek-Szostak, 2023).

The DigIN project tries to put into practice different variants of digital tools to support cooperation among partner organisations. For collaborative platforms, shared editing of documents, such as Google Drive, is supported. Trello was used for effective project management and workload scheduling. Forums and wikis allow interactive spaces for communication with the target groups. Dashboards and statistical tools are also used to assist in the monitoring and outcome evaluation.

This innovative approach to the project will also develop a pedagogical digital teaching-learning application with interactive features such as chat functions and virtual classrooms. The communication between transnational partners will be through email and WhatsApp groups for real-time communication regarding the development of ideas and activities.

It can be concluded that the DigIN project is an example of successful cooperation among different stakeholders committed to enhancing digital inclusion in adult education. The proactive support of all partners provided the possibility to reach common goals without big barriers. The following chapter discloses not only successful management practices but also underlines the contribution of accessibility, sustainability, and digital integration into modern educational projects.

Research Results and Discussion

The findings of the research have shed light on the critical steps that the DigIN project has taken toward the achievement of digital inclusion in the realms of adult education. The initial outcomes of the DigIN consortium prove the efficiency of the TEAMWORK model in designing activities within the projects. This

has resulted in excellent collaboration among the AEOs and inspired educators to actively participate. The increased participation by the educators has, therefore, led to a high increase in their confidence, both in relation to digital competencies and pedagogical approaches. Changes that allow educators to feel empowered to support their learners effectively using a wide variety of digital tools and resources, generally increasing the quality of adult education (Erasmus+ Project, 2022).

One of the most important success factors in the project has been the establishment of routine monitoring mechanisms and well-defined communication channels between stakeholders. These measures have helped to foster a culture of accountability and adaptability, making it possible to revise strategies in a timely manner to deal with emerging challenges in digital education (Promoting ICT Knowledge for the Elderly People, 2023). The focus on outcome evaluation has been instrumental in ascertaining the effectiveness of training programmes and, therefore, areas that require further refinement, including ensuring that the project is on track to meeting its intended objectives.

The results from the DigIN project have shown the critical role that digital inclusion plays in fostering social equity. The project has empowered seniors through the acquisition of digital tools and skills to take part in all societal activities, hence breaking down barriers to access and engagement. Reviewing other similar initiatives, such as the Digital Skills for Youth program, LIDA, and Data Literacy for Citizenship [DALI] initiative, develops more effective strategies related to digital inclusion.

For instance, the Digital Skills for Youth programme sets up much-needed mentorship frameworks where young learners are matched with experienced professionals. This approach aids in skills development through practical applications in real life. Similarly, LIDA, Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age, 2023; ELMI, Promoting ICT Knowledge for the Elderly People, 2023; and DALI, Data Literacy for Citizenship, 2023) initiatives have a prime focus on providing access to technology and training in underserved communities, which gives a lot of weight to community engagement and tailor-made support in achieving digital literacy. Such projects point to the requirement of collaborative approaches and adaptive strategies that take account of local context peculiarities. These principles resonate with the structured collaboration facilitated by the TEAMWORK model within the DigIN project.

The DigiPlace4all project (Magennis et al., 2015) provides a strong parallel to the DigIN project, as both aim to improve digital literacy among marginalised groups. DigiPlace4all specifically focuses on supporting people with disabilities in their transition from Vocational and Educational Training (VET) into mainstream education and employment. The project provides an online community in which informal one-to-one peer support is fostered, and members share resources and support each other in developing key digital skills.

Similarly, the DigIN project targets the development of digital competencies among educators in AEOs to create an inclusive learning environment and promote social equity. Critical community engagement and structured support systems are common themes for analysed projects in realising their goals. These projects demonstrate, through the use of peer relationships and collaborative frameworks, how targeted interventions can overcome the barriers to digital inclusion and empower individuals toward full participation in a digitally evolving society.

The findings further call for the creation of a sustainable digital education ecosystem within AEOs. The DigIN project has been designed in such a way that all learners, irrespective of their background, are able to fully utilise the opportunities opened up by a society undergoing digital transformation through the equipage of educators with the necessary competencies and resources. This long-term vision calls for continued investment in professional development, technology infrastructure, and adaptive pedagogical approaches to sustain momentum and scale.

In summary, this research shows how structured models of collaboration, such as the TEAMWORK framework followed by the DigIN project, can give very effective answers to the challenges of digital marginalisation. The DigIN project offers a replicable model for increasing digital competence among adults' educators and promoting inclusive educational practices. These programmes are of utmost importance in a society heading towards digitisation. They should be continued and scaled up to ensure that everybody has equal access to technology and learning opportunities. Continued efforts should be placed on the refinement and scaling of these interventions to make sure they have sustained effects in addressing digital divides (Frizzarin & Bellacicco, 2023).

Conclusions

Results from the DigIN project have already given ample cause to consider how digital inclusion in adults' education could be improved, especially relevant to social work in a digitally transforming society. From this analysis, the project was indeed effective in trying to respond to the urgent need for digital

competencies among educators and AEOs for an inclusive learning environment that will benefit all people regardless of their background or previously acquired experience in digital matters.

Among the main results of the study is the confirmation of the fact that the TEAMWORK Project Management Model serves as a workable structure for the implementation of the collaborative initiative. The TEAMWORK model has systematically guided the project in different stages: team formation, the establishment of goals and objectives, allocation of resources, monitoring and communication, implementation, evaluation of outcomes, risk management, and sharing knowledge. Hence, this model allows for efficient communication and cooperation among stakeholders.

The article has developed a structured process that builds digital preparedness and pedagogical capacities among educators to act confidently as trainers in the fast-evolving digital world. It also emphasises regular monitoring and free flow of communication, which allows the project to be responsive to arising challenges and changes within the needs of digital education. The study further cements the creation of a sustainable AEO digital education ecosystem.

The DigIN project has improved individual competencies and prepared the ground for long-term institutional changes by providing educators with instruments and resources that serve their needs. This change will be of great importance and ensure that all learners are in a position to access and utilise the digital opportunities for education. At the same time, it will help reduce barriers that result from digital marginalisation.

Besides enhancing respective competencies, this study emphasises transnational cooperation in promoting digital inclusion. The collaboration of diverse AEOs throughout Europe enables the sharing of knowledge and best practices that can be adapted for various local contexts. This collaboration is kind of cross-border and could be important in the creation of an inclusive digital platform for serving the needs of all citizens, building community, and sharing purpose regarding inequalities in society.

The findings of the current study confirm that structured collaboration with targeted interventions might go a long way in weakening the challenges associated with digital exclusion.

The DigIN project is a replicable model both in the field of digital competence for adults' educators and in furthering inclusive educational practices. Since society is developing continuously concerning digital transformation, long-term efforts should be made to sustain such initiatives so that technology and learning opportunities are provided equally to all. Hence, focusing on digital inclusion within adults' education frameworks would allow a different direction toward an equitable society where all people are thriving together in the digitally connected world.

Recommendations

The findings from the evaluation of the DigIN project underline how continuous effort is required to enhance digital inclusion within adults' education and social work. A few recommendations could be drawn for strengthening digital competencies among educators further and making the path to digital education equally accessible to all, based on the insights gained throughout this research.

- **Digital Education Ecosystems Sustainability.** To sustain momentum from the DigIN project, adult education organisations should be embedded with sustainable digital education ecosystems by integrating digital literacy into the heart of the curriculum and providing ongoing professional development opportunities for educators. AEOs should create a culture of continuous learning and develop educators to explore new technologies and methodologies. Such a commitment to sustainability would go a long way towards the development of educators' skills and an environment in which learners feel confident engaging with digital tools.
- **Better collaboration and knowledge sharing.** The success of the DigIN project might be regarded as illustrative of how different kinds of stakeholders can collaborate on the creation of digital inclusion. Future efforts should ensure the creation of solid networks that will contribute to knowledge-sharing processes among AEOs, community organisations, and technology providers. In themselves, such dialogue platforms and resource-sharing will enable stakeholders to tackle problems associated with digital education and share best practices found to work within different contexts, which would enhance the capacity of AEOs to be relevantly responsive to the needs of their communities in positive ways.
- **Bespoke Training Programmes.** These should be developed considering that educators have different levels of digital proficiency. To this end, such training programmes will consider the existing level of the individual educators' skills and focus on their support of higher stages of digital competency. This would mean that educators can learn at their own pace, with flexible learning options and online courses, peer mentoring, and the capacity to build a supportive learning community. By effect, the programmes will

ensure all educators become confident trainers themselves in supporting learners through their journeys of using digital tools.

- **Inclusive Design of Digital Tools.** Selection and implementation should be inclusive to guarantee equity as AEOs start embracing the application of new technologies. Inclusive methods are those that consider a range of different needs of learners, either with disabilities or having had limited exposure to technology in the past. AEOs should engage learners and community members in the review and assessment of different tools and platforms for accessibility, ease of use, and cultural relevance. In being inclusive, AEOs can level the playing field so that everyone gets a fair opportunity to succeed in learning.
- **Evaluation and Adjustments.** One of the mainstays will be the periodical evaluation of digital inclusion programmes. It is fundamentally necessary to guarantee the applicability and effectiveness of the programmes concerned in an ever-changing and technology-governed world. AEOs are tasked with the obligation to conduct evaluations of their programmes periodically. They are also expected to collect responses from educators and learners since their feedback is vital to improving some programmes. Such an iterative process helps not only identify deficiencies but also allows the organisation to change its strategies about novelties and challenges in digital education to keep them practical and relevant. A culture of reflection and responsiveness helps AEOs serve communities more effectively and advance long-term digital inclusion.

The above recommendations try to leverage the successes realised from the DigIN project by catering to ongoing challenges related to the future of adults' education. By focusing on sustainability, collaboration, tailored training, inclusivity, and constant evaluation, the stakeholders will ensure that the educational landscape is fair and that all people are empowered to handle the complexity contributed by society in digital transformation. These will significantly advance the frontiers of social equity and participation for all citizens in a rapidly interconnecting world.

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SKAITMENINĖS ĮTRAUKTIES DIDINIMAS SUAUGUSIŲJŲ ŠVIETIME: „DIGIN“ PROJEKTO POVEIKIS SOCIALINIAM DARBUI IR ŠVIETIMO PRAKTIKAI SKAITMENINIŲ POŽIŪRIŲ BESIKEIČIANČIOJE VISUOMENĖJE

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama suaugusiųjų švietimui labai aktuali skaitmeninės įtraukties tema socialinio darbo kontekste. Atsižvelgiant į didėjančią visuomenės skaitmenizaciją, reikėtų skubiai tobulinti įvairių gyventojų grupių skaitmenines kompetencijas ir užtikrinti mokymų prieinamumą bei dalyvavimą juose. Šiuo tyrimu siekiama įvertinti „DigIN“ projektą – struktūruoto suaugusiųjų švietimo poveikį skaitmeninei socialinei įtraukčiai didinti mokant pedagogus ir AEO. Derinant mišrius metodus, atliekant teorinį tyrimą, praktiškai veiklos įgyvendinamos taikant bendradarbiavimo projektų valdymo modelį, vadinamą TEAMWORK. TEAMWORK modelis yra esminė sistema, padedanti planuoti ir įgyvendinti suaugusiųjų švietimą bendradarbiavimo projektuose. Straipsnyje pateikiama naujausių skaitmeninės įtraukties strategijų apžvalga, programos „Erasmus+“ vadovo dokumentų analizė ir atvejo studijos, atspindinčios įvairius „DigIN“ projekto etapus. Iš preliminarinių rezultatų paaiškėjo, kad pasiūlytas TEAMWORK modelis tinkamai struktūrizuoja „DigIN“ projektą, kad būtų galima pagerinti bendradarbiavimo rezultatus, geriau valdyti išteklius ir išlaikyti atitiktį „Erasmus+“ KA204 prioritetams. Pagrindinė išvada yra ta, kad šis modelis yra nuoseklus procesas, padedantis sutelkti komandas kurti ir nustatyti tikslus, o tai yra esminis bendrų tikslų kūrimo veiksnys, svarbus skaitmeninės įtraukties srityje. Tyrimas leidžia daryti išvadą, kad stebėsenos dažnumas ir skaidrus bendravimas didina suinteresuotųjų šalių indėlį ir lankstumą. Patikimas rezultatų vertinimas ir rizikos valdymas užtikrina gebėjimą reaguoti į naujus skaitmeninio švietimo keliamus iššūkius. Šis tyrimas suteikia žinių apie struktūrinį bendradarbiavimą siekiant mažinti skaitmeninę atskirtį, skatinant įvairių gyventojų grupių nešališkumą ir mokymąsi visą gyvenimą. Integruojant TEAMWORK modelį ir „Erasmus+“ gaires, rezultatai buvo pateikti sistemoje, kuri skirta ugdytojų skaitmeninei kompetencijai didinti ir tolesnei įtraukiojo švietimo praktikai besikeičiančioje skaitmeninėje aplinkoje. Šiame straipsnyje pabrėžiama, kad skaitmeniniu požiūriu tokia įtrauktis yra neatsiejama socialinio darbo dalis besikeičiančios visuomenės kontekste, ir skatinama tvari praktika, skirta suaugusiųjų švietimo sistemoms tobulinti.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: skaitmeninė įtrauktis, suaugusiųjų švietimas, socialinis darbas, komandinio darbo projektų valdymo modelis, Erasmus+ KA204

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