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УДК 378:373.3.091.12.011.3 –051]:004(410) (043.5)

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TOWARDS A BROADBAND SOCIETY FOR ALL: THE CENTRALITY OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS.

We now live in a digital world with broadband and ICTs driving the ongoing reorganization and transformation of life and work experiences. It is estimated that nearly half of the world's population (that is, 3.7 billion people) make use of the internet. Youth are at the forefront of internet adoption with 70% of 15 to 24 year-olds online globally [2, p. 12]. Worldwide smartphone users now exceed 2 billion. These individuals are living in an “always-on” state of connectivity. Indeed, rather than switching between being either “online” or “offline”, contemporary broadband users are perhaps more accurately described as operating in a permanent state of “onlife” [3, p.24]. Even the lives of people who do not have personal access to these technologies are also increasingly dependent on broadband because many of the significant institutions in their lives are centred on the use of digital systems and digital data. As we approach the 2020s, broadband and information and communication technologies (ICTs) are no longer an additional or optional aspect of everyday life. Instead, digital technology is now a “total social fact” — a central determinant of modern life that affects ‘most if not all areas of social life, and is itself generative of new social practices, ties and relations’ [4, p.20-21].

The development of technology-related skills, competencies and dispositions is a key consideration when addressing the challenges of the broadband society. As such, education providers and policymakers around the world are faced with a common challenge — that is, how can education support the development of digital skills for all individuals in their roles of citizens and workers?

This emphasis on “for all” relates to global concerns over continuing inequalities associated with the use of broadband technology and ICTs. Indeed, alongside all of the potential benefits and improvements just outlined, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that people’s ability to engage with digital technology is differentiated along a number of lines, notably socio-economic status, race, gender, geography, age and educational background [2, p.10-14]. While no longer a headline issue in popular and political discourse, the spectre of the “digital divide” nevertheless underpins any discussion of the potential benefits of broadband technology and ICTs.

In global terms, digital inequalities continue to be well-documented and, in many instances, divides across lines of geography, gender, age, physical abilities, socio-economic status, language, and educational attainment are growing. These digital inequalities and disadvantages raise the need for stakeholders across public and private sectors to pay close attention to broadband and ICT policies, especially as they relate to education [5, p.9-12]. Having reached a point where the ability to make meaningful use of digital technology determines, to a significant extent, an individual’s ability to participate in modern societies and economies, then the need for action and intervention is obvious.

Nations organization for education, UNESCO is working to demonstrate how digital technologies and skills can accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal for Education: “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning”. Digital skills can be seen to support progress towards most (if not all) of the specific SDG4 targets and indicators. As an example, classroom computers and internet access facilitate ‘inclusive and effective learning environments’. Digital skills can also help expand and mainstream global citizenship education and foundational goals of ensuring universal access to quality primary and secondary education, alongside equitable access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education [1, p.8].

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