Digital inclusion: What does equal access to education mean in the digital age?

By: By Zohra Yermeche, Program Director for Connect To Learn at Ericsson

The COVID-19 crisis, and the impact which it has had on learning across the world, has highlighted many of the digital disparities which exist in today’s world. At a time when many of the world’s students shifted from physical to digital, we were also faced with the hard truth that today there are still 3.6 billion people in the world who are unconnected.

For students in the connected half of the world, the story is much different. While 1.2 billion children were affected by school closures across much of the world, our recent Consumer COVID-19 report found that students were able to substitute physical learning by spending 230 percent more time on digital learning tools such as Google Class, Epic! and Seesaw Class.

This of course is a significant rise, but it is also an acceleration of a trend which we have steadily been tracking since our first Connect To Learn program exactly ten years ago.

The State of Broadband 2020 report estimates that there are twice as many people today who use the Internet compared to 2010. This rise in digital literacy, together with the imminent period of rapid digitalization of the economy, means that ensuring fair and equal access to both education and future job markets will rest on the extent of digital inclusion within our societies.

What is digital inclusion and why is it so important today?

Today, technology plays a much bigger role in the quality and scope of how we learn, such as new digital learning platforms which are estimated to reach 350 billion USD by 2025; what we learn, with a growing emphasis on programming, robotics, AI and automation; and how we can use it in the job market, with digital skillsets increasingly becoming a prerequisite of tomorrow’s workforce.

The changes which are happening today show the disparity between the developed and undeveloped world. If you are not connected, that shows you the leap which you have to make between the connectivity aspect, access to education and benefits which are derived from that.

Closing this digital divide, with those who are not connected or not considered to be digitally literate, is imperative to ensuring a fair distribution of digital opportunities across countries, locations, gender, socioeconomic status, and age.
Impact of digital inclusion on GDP and the job market

Ten years ago, geo-political discussions largely focused on competence development for teachers, with little priority given to digital policy beyond essential connectivity requirements.

Today, the policy landscape is beginning to look quite different and the emergence of the digital economy is driving this change. For example, when we look at digital inclusion in the context of the job market, it is predicted that the 5G digital economy alone will create 22.3 million jobs worldwide in the coming decade. This has repercussions on GDP too, as having a workforce that is not digitally skilled is of course not compatible with a digitized economy.

As such, we already see today how governments are prioritizing digital inclusion in their policy agendas, notably at this year’s G20 summit. There seems to be more emphasis and regulation to support digital education, and the impact that has on an awakening of the rest of the economy.

While governments priority in digitalizing their societies is on setting up the tools, providing connectivity to enable tomorrow’s digital services, it’s also important that people know how to use them and how to use them responsibly. Digital literacy and capacity building are some key elements that governments and private enterprises should continue to work on in the next few years. These efforts must be well coordinated, scaled up and based on evidence-based policymaking, as laid out in the UN Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (page 8).

Access to education in the digital age

In 2010, we co-founded the Connect To Learn initiative with the Earth Institute at Columbia University and Millennium Promise, with a focus on delivering connectivity and ICT tools to enhance teaching and learning in unconnected, underprivileged and largely unrepresented communities.

Since our first projects in the Millennium Villages, we’ve helped to connect and increase the digital inclusion of more than 200,000 students worldwide. As the program has evolved, we have increased our efforts to close the digital divide not just in terms of connectivity, but from a content, syllabus and platform side which is fundamental.

As a technology company, we quickly discovered that we could offer so much more than connectivity, but furthermore can help improve learning processes and methodologies so learning can become more impactful. For example, through partnerships with like-minded organizations, we have helped to digitalize and disseminate content through digital learning tools such as mobile apps.

One of the biggest differences from ten years ago is also that the nature of technology in an educational context, both as a medium and a means to enter the job market was still relatively immature as the landscape has evolved, we’ve come to understand the need to personalize and individualize learning so that we can improve learning outcomes in a meaningful way.

Giving people access to the right type of content is one aspect, another equally critical aspect is the human element. On top of the digital layer, students will still always need the engagement, inspiration and activation that comes from teachers and trainers who know about the topic. I believe that, even in the digital age, technology will never be able to replace this interaction, but rather can serve as an increasingly innovative medium for those critical learner-instructor interactions, such as through the Internet of Skills.
Digital inclusion through public-private partnerships

Today, there is a significant need for digital skills courses. Key technology areas such as AI, robotics and app development are advancing at such a rapid pace, which can make it difficult to ensure an effective transfer of competence to emerging workforces.

Such is the pace of change for topics such as these, public academic institutions will invariably struggle to take learning beyond a basic theoretical level. Public-private partnerships will therefore be key to addressing this, by developing advanced curriculums and delivering the necessary quality and scale of access.

As a sustainability pioneer in the private sector, we’ve understood the power of partnership, which is why we’re investing heavily in building out those partnerships with like-minded entities to create sustainable solutions in order to address the issues which the education sector faces today. A good example of this is the Ericsson Digital Lab program which is now live in several countries in partnership with local schools and community learning centers. The aim here is to share those competences that we have in-house on a much broader scale, addressing those critical skillset demands which are needed in tomorrow’s workforce.

This year, in response to the impact which COVID-19 has had on learning, we continuing these efforts by joining the UNESCO-led Global Education Coalition, launching Ericsson Educate and partnering with UNICEF to map school connectivity as part of the Giga project.

Through digital methodologies, and with a focus on improving digital skills for students across all communities, our commitment is to ensure that future generations continue to have the skills and knowledge to find opportunity in a changing digital world. This was what we set out to do when we launched Connect-To-Learn ten years ago, and this will continue to be our priority in this next critical decade of action.

Learn more

In 2020, Ericsson’s Connect to Learn program celebrates ten years of bridging the global digital divide. To find out more about our various programs, visit our Connect To Learn page.