



SENnet: Special Education Needs Network

Progress Report

Public Part

Project information

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Executive Summary

The Special Education Needs Network (SENnet) brings together policy-makers, experts, researchers and practitioners working to improve accessibility to learning with ICT for students with disabilities in schools.

The focus in SENnet is on raising mainstream teachers' awareness and competence in using ICT to support students with SEN in schools, including those who have transferred from special schools to mainstream education. To do this there are three lines of activity in the network:

1. **Research:** to document and analyse good practice in using ICT for all, with a focus on short, accessible video testimonies and exemplars. This work is aimed at policy-makers and mainstream practitioners
2. **Content:** to improve access to digital resources by developing systems and vocabularies and applying them to existing repositories. Beneficiaries of this work are standards bodies globally, teachers, and those responsible for collections of online learning content.
3. **Awareness:** to identify, adapt and develop online self-access resources to support teachers in the use of ICT with SEN students. This work is very much for teacher-focused and practical.

The network core comprises experts in ministries of education or national agencies in seven countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Portugal and Turkey). They are expert in different types of disability and inclusion, in using technology for students with special needs and in teacher education and education policy. Some participants are leading lights in the domain of open source materials, others in organising teacher training courses, in developing specific tools, in dyslexia, international standards, etc. In addition to the core partners the consortium includes national members of the SEN Working Group at European Schoolnet and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.

In the first 18 months of the network's existence, network members and invited experts have met face to face five times (in Belgium, Italy, Denmark) to share developments in national policy and practice, including peer learning visits to schools and centres. The network has published four reports, and produced four video case studies. The experiences have helped participants appreciate both the complexity of 'special needs' but also the contribution that ICT can make and the wealth of good practice (not always widely known) in Europe.

In the coming months the network will continue its programme of workshops and activities, ensuring that the results are accessible by as many people as possible and aiming to develop links with related networks, projects and initiatives. At the end of the network's funding period, it will be integrated into the Special Needs Education Working Group coordinated by European Schoolnet.

Further information about SENnet can be found at <http://sennet.eun.org>.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES..... | 5 |
| 2. PROJECT APPROACH..... | 7 |
| 3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS..... | 9 |
| 4. PARTNERSHIPS..... | 11 |
| 5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE..... | 13 |
| 6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES..... | 14 |

1. Project Objectives

The Network's objectives are:

1. **Research:** to identify, analyse and disseminate
 - a. Barriers and opportunities to implementing the principles of inclusion of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream schools
 - b. Effective approaches for special schools serving as resource centres to all schools
2. **New learning environments:** to map and analyse, develop scenarios and design:
 - a. New learning environments that integrate learners with SEN, with particular reference to the role of ICT and to specific special needs
 - b. Digital resources for learners with SEN to use in these environments for both access and learning
3. **Teacher competence development:** to develop awareness and competences
 - a. Enabling teachers, school leaders and others in schools to understand, promote and practise inclusion of learners with SEN in mainstream classrooms, and make full use of ICT.

SENnet benefits and impacts on users are as follows:

- People in the **participating institutions in the network:** Ministry of Education (MoE) personnel responsible for SEN in schools, expert organisations (e.g. dyslexia) working to improve learning for students with SEN and national agencies working to support school and teacher development. The benefit of participation for them has been primarily sharing knowledge across borders, learning from each other, sharing issues, challenges and solutions, working to common purposes to produce and access to outputs of use with their own national stakeholders. In some cases teachers and experts associated with partners have been involved in testing and commenting on draft outputs.
- The **end users and stakeholders of the partners** are benefiting from the outcomes. They will increasingly be school head teachers and teachers, and advisers/ teacher educators, within ministries of education in Portugal and Turkey and supported by agencies with teacher education or special needs remits in Austria, Denmark, Estonia and Belgium. The Network is working to increase their awareness of the possibilities, good examples and new approaches for integrating learners with SEN in mainstream schools – particularly through the use of ICT – and using special schools as resource centres. Online training modules are designed to be embedded within national in-service training programmes (after translation and localisation), and this has already happened in Portugal and Estonia Through them there is some expected impact on parents and carers of learners with SEN and on the students themselves, indeed the general public.
- **Activities**, notably workshops and seminars open to others, are publicised via SENnet, European Schoolnet and partner channels. Efforts have been made to link to Comenius projects working in the area of SEN and the Network has actively engaged with them and their outputs, e.g. ICT4IAL (<http://www.european-agency.org/news/electronic-bulletin/may-2013/?searchterm=ICT4IAL>) and FIESTA (<http://fiesta-project.eu/web/>).

- **Outputs** of this project are being disseminated to the wider network through meetings, newsletters (reaching 22 000 teachers), conferences and social networking channels. Policy-makers include outputs of the Network on their national portals and learning platforms. Ministries in the SEN Working Group (eg Hungary, Poland, Switzerland) are closely associated with the work of the Network, through sessions at meetings and involvement in studies.
- **Advocacy.** Efforts are made to raise the profile of special needs, and improve accessibility to activities, resources and information in projects, and to reach teachers and those supporting them in other projects led by EUN, e.g. Creative Classroom Lab, Living Schools Lab, eTwinning, INSAFE and iTEC.
- 4. **Wider networking.** During the project, closer links with the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education have been developed and this has resulted in concrete activities related to co-operation, knowledge-sharing and joint conferences in the area of special needs education.

2. Project Approach

To achieve the objectives the following types of activities take place:

- Objective 1 (analysis):
 - Analysing national and EU-wide issues related ICT and SEN
 - Identifying, documenting and translating case studies, including video clips
 - Producing guidelines
 - Undertaking a survey of MoEs
 - Organising workshops and online seminars
- Objective 2 (new learning environments):
 - Building a repository of learning resources,
 - Improving tagging of existing resources enabling easier access
 - Carrying out a survey of MoE etc. resources
- Objective 3 (teacher competence development):
 - Developing and adapting training modules for teachers
 - Building and animating an online community of practice

The activities are operationalised through at least three workshops a year to exchange experiences and improve information flow between policy-makers, and an annual conference. Of particular importance is an online platform for education ministries based on existing examples at EUN¹, e.g. LINKED² which demonstrated how policy-makers, researchers and practitioners can be networked through such a platform.

A discrete WP deals with on-going and end-of-project evaluation, and an evaluation plan has been produced.

Dissemination is an important part of SENnet. A large proportion of the budget, hence personnel time and travel and subsistence, is devoted to WP6 Networking and Dissemination. This is in recognition of the need for the Network to reach beyond its membership, involve key players and impact on education systems.

SENnet will implement an ambitious dissemination plan comprising the production of information and communication tools and promotional activities to various stakeholders. SENnet targets a wide and varied range of people: heads of schools, teachers, advisers, education leaders in territorial authorities, inspectorates...

Means to inform and influence them used collectively in the project and by individual partners are:

- Web portal (<http://sennet.eun.org>)
- Communities of practice of teachers
- Publicity material: brochures and printed resources
- Participation in major conferences, education shows, trade fairs etc.

¹ <http://moe.eun.org/web/special-needs-wg/special-needs-working-group>

² <http://linked-project.wikispaces.com/>

- Annual conference for education key stakeholders (Eminent conference gathering 250 participants organised each year by EUN).
- Articles and research papers
- Press releases. EUN's press releases alone reach at least 200 educational journalists in all EU countries.
- Newsletter items and news flashes. EUN's existing newsletters alone have more than 40,770 subscribers across the various newsletters for teachers. News flashes emailed to existing networks of teachers, reaching a total of 200 expert teachers belonging to specific advisory groups, and to 22,000 teachers from European school networks managed by EUN.
- Social networking channels, communities and services, specifically YouTube, RSS feeds, blogs, and tweets.

The project will contribute to the creation of resources and in-service materials in the area of SEN in schools and the objective is to guarantee permanent traffic in SENnet so that the community continues to exist and serve the needs of learners.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

In the first 18 months of the network's existence,

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All results are freely available at <http://sennet.eun.org>.

Progress towards objectives is as follows:

- **Research.** Each year a study theme is agreed upon by network members, according to current priorities and issues in the area of special needs. In 2012 it was the integration of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools and the role of technology to support it. A report (D2.1) was produced together with a series of short sub-titled video case studies of examples of good practice and innovation in each partner country. In addition, an annual report on innovation in ICT and SEN was produced, bringing together developments in policy and practice. The topic in 2013 is Universal Design for Learning, and the annual report will focus on the use of digital games to support students with disabilities. In addition, European Schoolnet's annual Insight survey of ministries of education included questions on special needs for the first time in 2013. As well as SENnet outputs, the SENnet website carries news, research findings, tips and details of new products. Five peer learning workshops have taken place including visits to schools and centres in Belgium, Italy and Denmark.
- **New learning environments.** The network members have shared experiences in developing innovative classrooms (under the generic heading of the Future Classroom Lab') and in using digital resources in a wide range of contexts. It emerged that access to digital learning resources could be improved if they were more consistently categorised and described, so that they are more 'discoverable' in searches. The focus of work is the Learning Resource Exchange (LRE, <http://lreforschools.eun.org>) containing over 300,000 free open educational resources in different repositories. Efforts are being made to develop and apply a standardised vocabulary to describe resources (using the W3C Access for All application profile) and to identify the best national materials for learners with disabilities via a survey of national experts in EdReNe (<http://edrene.org>), and to tag and upload them to the LRE.
- **Teacher competence development.** Many studies show that well-supported teachers can make change happen, and so SENnet has developed a modular online course for teachers on inclusion of SEN pupils in mainstream schools (<http://moodle.dgfdc.min-edu.pt/course/view.php?id=482> - *ID and password needed contact Ida Brandao ida.brandao AT dge.mec.pt*). It is currently being piloted and adapted for different countries. The course content is as follows:

Inclusion of SEN pupils in mainstream schools

- Strategies to include SEN pupils in mainstream schools
- Physical and architectural accessibilities

Adjustment measures for SEN pupils

- What is ICF? Advantages of the instrument. How to apply it to classify SEN pupils functions and participation?
- Identification of adjustment measures
- Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- Individual Transition Plan

Universal Design for Learning

- UDL Principles and the curriculum
- Multiple Intelligences theory
- How pupils learn and the importance of visualization

Computer Accessibilities

- Web accessibility rules
- Windows configurations for special needs

Assistive Technologies

- Assessing needs for special technologies
- Vision
- Hearing
- Mobility
- Communication
- Learning disabilities

Open Educational Resources and Learning Design

- Finding OER - creating, reusing, adapting, making accessible
 - Analysing and using learning design models and tools

4. Partnerships

The network core comprises experts in ministries of education or national agencies in seven countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Portugal and Turkey). Each country has specific circumstances, policies and practices with regards to special needs education, as well as common issues and challenges. The experts are specialists in different types of disability and inclusion, in using technology for students with special needs and in teacher education and education policy. Some participants are leading lights in the domain of open source materials, others in organising teacher training courses, in developing specific tools, in dyslexia, international standards, etc. In addition to the core partners the consortium includes national members of the SEN Working Group at European Schoolnet and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.

The project is led by European Schoolnet (EUN), a consortium of 30 ministries of education (MoEs). This network offers significant opportunities for leveraging the activities and outcomes of the proposed network. Since its creation in 1998, EUN's work has aspired to be inclusive, as testified by the existence of a SEN Working Group, chaired by the Belgium Flemish Community education ministry, focusing on improving knowledge of innovations, awareness of the role of ICT and support for learners with special needs in the 30 countries.

Other partners are either ministries of education or organisations close to and funded by MoEs. They have experience in matters relating to SEN provision in schools and are well placed to benefit from the Network, provide case studies of good practice and disseminate the results of the activities. The partners are:

- **VDIES**, nominated by the Belgium (Flemish Community) education ministry, is a national organisation specialising in dyslexia
- **EDUGP**, Austria's largest educational server, has a repository featuring a large number of resources including some being adapted to students with special needs.
- **INDIRE** is the Italian government's agency for teacher training and school development with responsibility for supporting special needs education nationally
- **TLF** plays a similar role in Estonia, i.e. teacher training and innovation, with a responsibility for SEN
- **DGE**, a member of European Agency network, is the Portuguese education ministry; SEN is one of its responsibilities
- **UNI-C**, like TLF and INDIRE, plays a central role in teacher education and innovation in Denmark, including the area of special needs, and it has a particular strength in digital learning resources.
- **MONE**, the Turkish ministry of education, is a second MoE directly involved in the Network; SEN is one of its responsibilities.

Activities are designed to complement the work of the European Agency for Special Needs, to support the flow of information and guidance in the field of special needs education in Europe, in particular its work on teacher education for inclusion, covering practical aspects of in-service education rather than teacher supply and initial training and countries not involved in the Agency's projects, e.g. Italy, Turkey.

The Network also aims to build on work in the ICT in Education for people with disabilities³, taking into account the publication, good practices and recommendations arising from the project and focusing on dealing with disabilities in schools. An ICT update study took place in 2011-13 and partners are collaborating closely on areas of common interest.

³ <http://www.european-agency.org/news/information-and-communication-technology-ict-in-education-for-people-with-disabilities-new-agency-collaboration>

5. Plans for the Future

In the coming 18 months the network will continue its programme of research, workshops, training and resource development, ensuring that the results are accessible by as many people as possible and aiming to develop links with related networks, projects and initiatives.

- **Research.** The theme chosen for 2013 is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and a report on the topic will be published in late 2013, including video clips to exemplify good practices around Europe. The annual report on innovation will focus on the use of serious games and inclusion, following a successful workshop and hands-on sessions in June 2013 on the topic. The 2013 Insight survey of ministries will include questions on special needs. A workshop on UDL, teacher education and digital content, followed by a peer-learning visit to a school takes place in Austria in October 2013. At EUN's annual EMINENT conference in Finland in December 2013, there will be a SENnet strand, and a major event is planned with EdReNe in November 2013 on accessibility to digital resources.
- **Innovative learning environments.** A report on a survey investigating the availability of digital resources for learners with special needs will be published later in 2013 and the first set of resources tagged according to international standards will be available in the Learning Resource Exchange. The vocabulary developed and the application profile will also be published, to encourage their use by others. Access to all will be improved to the six areas of the Future Classroom Lab at European Schoolnet in Brussels and to the innovative technologies in use in each.
- **Teacher professional development.** The modular course will be opened to all following trials, and versions in other languages will be produced and made available. Partners in SENnet will adapt and translate modules and introduce the course to teachers in their countries.

In addition, dissemination and advocacy efforts will continue in the network member organisations and networks, with the aim of raising awareness of the role of technology to support learners with special needs, and the importance of building in accessibility into all information and activities.

At the end of the network's funding period (November 2014), SENnet will be integrated into the Special Needs Education Working Group coordinated by European Schoolnet.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The proposal is made in response to the Call, section 1.3.4 Development of Special Needs Education (SEN) towards inclusion of all young people, in particular those with disabilities:

“Building on diversity and implementing the principles of inclusion in education and training requires the rethinking of learning environments, resources and teachers’ and school leaders’ competences, the examination of barriers and the identification of opportunities.

Networks should identify and disseminate effective approaches that:

- Promote mainstreaming, including widening the roles of special schools so that they become resource centres
- Train teachers, school leaders and other school staff in promoting inclusion.”

The partners in this proposal believe strongly that SENNET will contribute towards to the drive for inclusion in European education systems, the achievement of regional, national and European policy objectives and towards the objectives of the EU 2020 Strategy. We believe that our pooled experience and knowledge can significantly contribute towards imagining and designing new learning environments making full use of technology and research into effective pedagogies. Our access to teachers enables us to help build up their knowledge and competences in both the use of ICT and how to support and integrate learners with SEN.

SENNET supports the goals of the Lifelong Learning Programme through its focus on inclusion and ensuring that every young person achieves their potential, developing new skills for new jobs. The Network operates within the principles of subsidiarity and the open method of co-ordination, to make lifelong learning and mobility a reality through creating new learning environments emphasising strongly personal learning paths and high engagement with learning, improving the quality and efficiency of education through the use of technology and online resources and a high quality teacher force able to cope with the full range of SEN displayed by students. SENNET also promotes, by definition, equality and social cohesion through its focus on mainstreaming and integration while respecting diversity and individual needs. Finally the Network aims to enhance creativity and innovation through key competence development and the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders inside and outside school education systems for the benefit of every child.

SENNET contributes specifically to the achievement of General Priority 5: Promote social inclusion and gender equality, tackling as it does issues related to early school leaving and special needs, and to the strategic priority of promoting access to learning opportunities for people with disabilities applying to the programme as a whole.

