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Dealing with Digital Inequality: Refocusing our Approach towards Young People, Technology and Social Exclusion

It is now well-established that young people's engagements with IT are (dis)advantaged by a range of wider relational dynamics such as social class, gender, race and educational background. Consequently, attempts to deal with digital inequality which focus primarily on the technological aspects of IT use are generally ineffective in achieving sustained change. This paper argues that efforts to democratise the opportunities and outcomes of IT use face two sets of problems which require a more nuanced and socially-aware approach towards young people, technology and social exclusion.

First is the pressing need to ensure that young people's self-appropriation of ITs is not curtailed by a lack of economic, cultural or social resources. These barriers may be addressed, at least in part, by imaginative social policy interventions which focus on informal contexts and modes of IT engagement. As the focus of this conference suggests, such interventions can include informal education programmes which build upon young people's existing modes of IT engagement. There is also scope to develop interventions which support the informal provision of IT in community and domestic settings.

Second, though, are a set of more deep-rooted issues about IT and social inclusion which are less easily addressed. These primarily involve altering the assumptions and expectations of policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders. On one hand there needs to be a serious reworking of prevailing assumptions about the relevance, utility and meaning of IT use for young people. On the other hand all parties also need to reconsider the relevance, utility and meaning of what they consider to be 'socially inclusive' activities. The paper therefore concludes by discussing how sustained change in present patterns of digital inequality may only occur if increased efforts are made to empower young people to use ITs for their own modes of participation in society rather than adhere to the agendas of polity and economy.