Sustainable Development, Digital Inclusion and Outcome-Driven Practice for SEND Learners in Further Education

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Abstract

This conceptual discourse interrogates the imperative of digital inclusion for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) within Further Education (FE), positioning digital competence as a critical component of sustainable educational futures. Framed within the context of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive, equitable, and quality education, the paper argues that digital inclusion for SEND learners is not merely a procedural requirement but a fundamental structural necessity. Contemporary global research underscores the pernicious effects of digital marginalisation, disproportionately impeding SEND learners' equitable access to educational opportunities and societal participation. Despite the central role of digital transformation within UK policy, SEND learners remain at heightened risk of exclusion from the benefits of this progress, exacerbating educational inequities. Drawing on qualitative evidence, including semi-structured interviews with practitioners and a thorough analysis of institutional strategies, this study exposes the persistent misalignment between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Findings reveal a troubling gap in SEND learners' digital education, where engagement with low-level digital tasks undermines their potential for autonomy, employability, and civic participation. However, institutions employing differentiated curricula and assistive technologies offer promising models for fostering learner agency and sustained participation. This paper concludes by advocating for a paradigm shift in FE—transitioning from compliance-based inclusion to a model centred on outcome-driven accountability—thereby reconceptualising digital competence as a core indicator of sustainable social and educational progress.

Keywords

Digital Inclusion, SEND Learners, Sustainable Development, Education for Sustainable Development, Digital Competence, Further Education, Policy-Driven Practice, Assistive Technologies.