# Report from the AAATE International Stakeholder Forum 2015

## Introduction

On September 11 2015, the AAATE arranged an international stakeholder forum, as a session during the 2015 AAATE conference in Budapest. During the session, results from a survey among AAATE National Contact Persons were presented, followed by a discussion with a panel consisting of persons representing different stakeholders. During the discussion, the audience were invited to comment and join the discussion using an online tool. The survey and the discussion focused on barriers and opportunities to advancing the field of assistive technology in Europe.

## Results from the survey

Results are not common for all responding National Contact Persons, but rather the gathered responses from the nine persons responding.

### Opportunities

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has advanced the field of assistive technology. This means better opportunities in education, employment and social participation. It has also given end-user organisations arguments to influence policy. In at least one country, a result of the convention is that users have the right-of-law to receive necessary assistive devices, interpreters and rehabilitation, and as a result there is high general competence among professionals and technology providers.

Improved and accessible mainstream technology means increased use of mainstream ict among persons with disabilities, less stigma than using traditional assistive technology, and possibility of reducing costs. It generally means there is less need for adaptation and personal assistive technology. 3D-printing can be used to make personal assistive technology at low costs, e.g. keyguards.

Possibilities mentioned concerning routines and systems for providing assistive technology/products are: In assistive technology centres run by public sector, 35% of devices/technology is refurbished keeping costs low. A new system for assessing disability and functionality is being introduced in Cyprus. It has potential, even though critics of the system claim it has an approach that is too medical.

### Barriers

National Contact Persons in several countries report that there is need for raised competence among assistive technology professionals.

Various barriers in policy was reported, e.g. that local/regional independency leads to different routines and rules for provision of devices/technology, that public procurement contracts are too long thereby hindering innovation. The use of personal assistants may hinder technological innovation and use of assistive technology, since it means person do things for the end-users rather than letting end-users do the things themselves with the help of technology. There is also increased demand for assistive technology/devices due to the demographic change. In one country there is lack of specific policy regulations and legislation concerning assistive technology. One country’s system for financing assistive technology is reported to be too bureaucratic.

Barriers related to costs of assistive technology are that less of them are reimbursed in the Scandinavian countries than before, and in several other countries, not all assistive technologies/devices are reimbursed. Two National Contact Persons report that the assistive technology provision process takes too long time, while several others request standardized methods of assistive technology provision. One respondent wishes for improved co-operation between rehabilitation professionals and assistive product companies. Several of the respondents say that there is lack of competence of the potential of assistive technology among the general population. Lack of digital competence among persons with disabilities is also seen as a barrier.

Another barrier mentioned is the lack of objective/independent information about assistive technology directed towards end-users, which hinders their empowerment.

### Ways forward

Possible ways to further develop the field of assistive technology is to increase collaboration between academic researchers, product developers, service providers and other assistive technology professionals, on a national and international level. Another is to let end-users be more involved in assistive technology development.

More research is requested, to identify the social impact of assistive technology use, assistive technology costs and benefits. In general, more resources for research and development are requested.

## Topics discussed in the panel

Based on the results from the survey, the panel identified key factors that needs to be dealt with:

* **The perception of assistive technology**: More awareness is needed about what assistive technology is and why it is important. The same is valid for the approach to disability and assistive technology. The old medical model is still prevailing in many organisations dealing with assistive technology and persons with disabilities. A more user-centred approach is needed since it relates to different aspects of the individual’s life.
* **Different languages**: Stakeholders don’t speak the same language, since they have different drivers and objectives. A common platform for discussion is needed, in order to discuss strategies to reach policy makers and create impact.
* **Economic aspects**: The cost of devices is still a barrier. Economic situation in many European countries is not that good, and tax money needs to be spent with care. This can be done by improving procurement and service delivery processes. Another aspect related to costs is that localisation is expensive. Markets are small and localisation is needed due to e.g. translation of software or hardware and other adaptations to cultural and linguistic needs.
* **Technology development**: There are big opportunities in mainstream technologies. This means that, for many persons, needs can be met with lower costs. However, this raises costs for special technologies since fewer persons use them.

The panel discussed strategic actions and areas for the future:

* **Legislation and standardisation**: Need for further legislation, especially on accessibility.
* **More research on the use of assistive technology** **is needed**
* **Impact the development of a new disability strategy** from EU and the Council of Europe.
* **Get in contact with the UN committee monitoring the implementation of CRPD**
* **Reflect on strategies to reach out to end-users and individuals**

## Input from forum participants

During the forum, attendees gave input using an online survey tool. That input was anonymous, but attendants were members of AAATE and AAATE conference participants. The input, apart from feedback on the work done by National Contact Persons, the panel, naming of the session etc., were:

Barriers and opportunities:

* In ICT, human-computer-interaction researchers also work in this space but have different definitions for “Assistive technology” (ISO standard)
* Any idea on quality assurance and information provision in assistive technology app market? So far this market seems open, not controlled (no reimbursement)?
* Medical model is still used widely. GATE shall support the social inclusion model!
* In education, making assistive technology solutions to all who need them to assure full inclusion
* Improved communication opportunities among assistive technology professionals and between users. [possibly as a comment to presentation of results from the survey]
* Overcoming barriers between stakeholders by adopting a same driver: more people with disability use effectively appropriate technologies.
* Hector Minto [panel member] highlighted to pros and cons of iPads – embrace new technology but be aware of the issues.
* Curious about “and accessibility in the session title; it’s a huge and separate field with different experts, e.g. group who wrote ISO Guide 71 was diverse.

Relevant stakeholders and possible actions forward

* Stakeholders are first and foremost people with disabilities, followed by family/caregivers, employers, policy makers and assistive technology professionals.
* Help mobilize people with disabilities to organize, advocate, and lobby for their needs and rights.
* Action: implement existing laws/policies: educate stakeholders; seek broader allowances for AT provision beyond a narrow medical purpose.
* Challenge still of connecting to and informing those making the economic decisions in government.
* Human support is also about knowledge building.
* Involve users in the meetings between the different groups as then they will have to talk in the language of the end user.

## About the survey among AAATE national contact persons

Nine national contact persons responded to the survey that took place during spring 2015. They are based in Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK. Some respondents gave their personal view on barriers and opportunities, while others have surveyed colleagues, end-user organisations etc. from their own country (up to approx. 40 persons in one country).

## About the panel

During the international stakeholder forum, a panel consisting of high-level representatives of a number of important European organisations commented on the results of the survey and gave their view on important barriers and opportunities for the advancement of assistive technology in Europe. The panel discussions were led by Andreas Richter, board member, and Evert-Jan Hoogerwerf, president of the AAATE.

The panel members were

* Alejandro Moledo from EDF, the European Disability Forum
* Katerina Mavrou of ANED, the Academic Network of European Disability experts
* Luc Zelderloo of EASPD, the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities
* Hector Minto of Tobii Dynavox