Chapter 7

Prosumerism in Higher Education—Does It Meet the Disability Test?

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7.1 Introduction: The Contribution of Prosumerism to Higher Education

‘Prosumerism’ was first coined by Alvin Toffler in his book ‘The Third Wave’ to denote people who produce some of the goods and services they then consume themselves—for example by making their own clothes, building their own cars, or cultivating vegetables for their kitchen (Toffler, 1980). Toffler envisaged a time when consumers would increasingly play a role as co-collaborators in production and supply chains, with the capacity to alter the design and the attributes of a product they wanted. A good contemporary example is recent trends in the fashion industry towards promoting more sustainable producer and consumer behaviours through new processes like ‘mass customisation’—combining personalization with mass production; ‘crowd design’—using crowdsourcing to create designs that can be customized into products; ‘closet sharing’—the setup of a private or community-powered ‘infinite wardrobe’ so that customers don’t own a clothing item but rent it for the time it’s needed, and ‘DIY fashion’—digital clothing models used by independent designers produced directly by customers using 3D printers.¹

In the Higher Education sector, prosumerism has been associated with the shift towards ‘learner-centred’ teaching and learning activities, with the emphasis on student engagement and the co-production of knowledge. The argument is that greater student engagement in the teaching and learning process, and greater co-ownership of learning content, has a beneficial effect on learning outcomes (Bryson & Han, 2007; Barklay, 2010). A typical approach applied across a spectrum of learning settings, including higher education, is the application of a ‘blended learning’ pedagogy,

¹https://issuu.com/tcbl/docs/sustainable_fashion_market.

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combining face to face teaching with a wide range of digital tools, with different tools being applied for different pedagogic purposes. For example, ‘mind-mapping’ tools aim to support students to link concepts and visualise them; simulations are applied to help students develop problem-solving and ‘trouble-shooting’ skills; wikis are applied to support collaborative learning and student blogs to disseminate the content created by students in their assignments. A recent development has been the migration of the ‘flipped classroom’ approach from K12 education to the higher education setting. Flipped classrooms replace educator-generated class content with student-generated content. Students are required to complete preparatory work and bring it to the classroom, where it is used to support greater interactivity between students as a group and between students and their teachers (Berrett, 2012). Adherents of the flipped classroom approach argue that it offers a number of advantages over conventional forms of teaching and learning. It allows students to learn at their own pace; it frees up class time for critical review and problem-solving; it provides students with more opportunities to learn ‘twenty-first-century’ skills that are more relevant with regard to subsequent job searching—and it fosters student ownership of their learning and their learning content. This, in turn, is linked to evidence of greater student engagement, improved peer learning and interaction, improved creativity and self-confidence, increased student performance and higher levels of student satisfaction (Wilson, 2014; Vasilchenko et al., 2017).

Equally, the increasing popularity of Personal Learning Environments (PLE’s) in the educational field has been seen as evidence of the increasing adoption of a ‘constructivist’ pedagogy that emphasises a shift in the role of the educator from transmitter of information to facilitator of knowledge production. As Atwell (2007) argues, through PLEs, students—formerly consumers of knowledge—become producers, through creating and sharing content. Typically, PLEs bundle together different tools—including social media, wikis, blogs, multimedia and sharing platforms—in order to aggregate different learning services that, together enable learners to build and manage their own learning spaces, under their control, bring together different sources and contexts for learning and bridge educational institutional environments with the world outside. Other writers make an explicit connection between PLEs and prosumerism. PLE’s enable students to choose the services and applications they need to generate or consume content. They actively participate in determining the aims and delivery of their learning experience. The diversity of tools embodied in a PLE supports a wide range of flexibility that learners can use to their advantage to customise the structure, content and delivery of educational services according to their own personal needs and ‘learning styles’. In this way, the learner makes the transition from a passive recipient of information to the ‘protagonist’ of a learning experience. The processing of information can be managed by each learner using a set of tools that they choose, allowing each learner to tailor the learning process to their own needs and circumstances (Kompén et al., 2019).

A further indication of this increasing shift towards engaging students as more active co-creators and co-producers of their learning is the recent move towards

equipping educators with the competences they need to work with students as co-collaborators. In November 2017, The European Commission's Joint Research Centre, JRC-Seville launched the European Competence Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu).² The Framework consists of 6 'competence areas', each of which covers a number of specific digital competences—making 22 competences in total. The competence areas that are most relevant to prosumerism are Area 3—Teaching and Learning; Area 5—Empowering Learners and Area 6—Facilitating Learners' Digital Competences. Within these areas, there are particular competence that have a significant bearing on the extent to which students in higher education institutions can be supported to play an active role in the co-production of knowledge. These cover the following. Competence 3.3—Collaborative Learning—requires educators in HE institutions to enable learners to use digital technologies as part of collaborative assignments; competence 3.4—self-regulated learning—requires them to use digital technologies to enable learners to plan, monitor and reflect on their own learning, share insights and come up with creative solutions; competence 5.1—Accessibility and inclusion—requires them to ensure accessibility to learning and resources for all learners, including those with special needs; competence 5.2—differentiation and personalization—requires them to use digital technologies to address diverse learners' needs, by allowing them to advance at different levels and speeds; competence 5.3—Actively engaging learners—requires them to use digital technologies to open up learning to new real-world contexts, which involve learners themselves in hands on activities, scientific investigation or complex problem-solving; competence 6.3—Digital Content Creation—requires them to use digital technologies to support learners to express themselves through digital means and to modify and create digital content in different formats, and, finally, competence 6.5—digital problem-solving—requires them to incorporate learning activities that help learners to transfer technical knowledge creatively to new situations. A key aim of this framework is to change the educator's role from a 'transmissive' communicator of knowledge to a role in which educators work with students to help them become 'creative, collaborative participants in a knowledge-based, interdependent world' (Caena & Redecker, 2019).

Because of the recency of this initiative, there is no available evidence to show either that educators currently have the necessary competences to support co-collaboration or that the application of these competences in the classroom leads to the learning outcomes attributed to co-produced learning, as cited above. A very small (unpublished) trial carried out by JRC-Seville with a group of English language teachers which assessed their digital competences according to the DigCompEdu framework suggested that overall the level of digital competences was relatively high. However, on a number of the digital competences linked to 'prosumerism'—like differentiation and personalization and self-regulated learning—scores were lower than average.³

²<http://europa.eu/!gt63ch>.

³Internal JRC-Seville Report, unpublished.

Work carried out by the author on further developing the DigCompEdu assessment tool—which included a review of state of the art in the use of digital technologies to support student collaboration, personalisation of learning, self-regulated learning, active engagement and digital content creation—suggested that the adoption of pedagogic approaches, including the use of digital tools, to support student–educator collaboration, co-design and co-production, is not widespread and the techniques and practices used across educational sectors, including higher education, varies considerably.⁴ This conclusion chimes with other reviews carried out in the field. For example, a structured review of the use of the flipped classroom in higher education, which analysed 28 studies in the field, concluded that, whilst there is indirect evidence emerging of improved academic performance and student and staff satisfaction with the flipped approach, there is little conclusive evidence that it contributes to building lifelong learning and other twenty-first-century skills in undergraduate education and postgraduate education (O’Flaherty & Phillips, 2015).

7.2 The Growing Influence of Prosumerism on Higher Education

The debate over whether the use of co-production methods, techniques and practices in the learning environment leads to better teaching and learning outcomes reflects a much broader debate over prosumerism itself in the education landscape, and particularly in higher education. It has long been recognised that the shift from a conception of knowledge that is abstract, disciplinary based and valued for its own sake to an acknowledgement that experiential learning is also of value has been welcomed. The adoption of constructivism into academe has had a decentring effect, drawing on local and particularised knowledge to challenge dominant disciplinary discourses, structures and power relations. Knowledge is now seen to serve different purposes. One clearly discernible tendency relates to knowledge being valued for what Lyotard (1984) termed its ‘performativity’. In terms of educational purposes, it represents a shift away from critical enquiry (enlightenment) and personal transformation towards learning experiences where knowledge utilisation is uppermost. This explains the increasing interest in the student learning experience, and a shift towards more student-centred teaching and learning. This has been driven by quality agendas, a greater responsiveness on the part of institutions to the changing demographic profile of students entering higher education, a recognition of the importance of informal learning processes, as well as the notion of the need to provide ‘learning rich settings’ (Knight, 2001).

However, there has been a strong thread in the literature that has been critical of this shift towards ‘individuation’. Malcolm and Zukas (2001), for example, refer to what they see as the dominant psychological paradigm in teaching and learning

⁴Cullen (2019). Deliverable 2: Report on the content and structure of DigCompEduSAT (unpublished).

in HE, and the narrow way in which pedagogy has been conceived. They point to the way in which our understanding of the teaching and learning process has been dominated by the explicitly psychological visions of the learner and teacher. Thus, the research and practitioner literature on teaching and learning in higher education is highly individualistic in focus and preoccupied with the learning bit of the self. The model of the learner most strongly represented in the literature is a bundle of behaviours, attitudes and dispositions—often wrapped up in the concept of preferred ‘learning style’ or ‘learner identity’. Failures in learning are readily attributed to deficits in learners, lack of appropriate abilities, skills dispositions of strategies; and occasionally deficits in individual teachers.

In turn, several analytic studies of higher education have observed the interiorisation into institutional values and purposes of external social and cultural forces. It is suggested that instrumentality, usefulness, adaptability and ‘fit’ for the existing system have become the dominant values in discourse about the aims of higher education (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). Whilst some commentators welcomed such responsiveness of the system to the changing society as enabling individuals and organisations to keep pace with cultural change and to advance themselves in the changing cultural context, a counter view has held that the university, as a key institution in the society, offers more value to the society if it can stand apart from it in some measure, adhering to cultural traditions of modern enlightenment rather than being captured by the utilitarian agenda (Barnett, 1994). Usher (2001) and Bagnell (2001) point to the lessening of the power of academics to define what constitutes worthwhile knowledge and serious learning in the face of the increasing trend towards the individuation of knowledge and the decentring of learning. Meanwhile, the shift towards participation in consumer markets, it has been argued, has created a cultural context in higher education in which social agendas are defined by the interests of individuals through their choices as consumers and producers, which results in the dominance of economic considerations in the cultural realm. Consumerist culture, and the commodification of knowledge has come to shape institutional and learner behaviour in the formal education system. The relationship between teacher and learner is reconstituted as a market relationship between producer and consumer.

Those responsible for the management of higher education have been more exposed to external environmental forces than academic staff at the front line of teaching and learning. The proximal forces having greatest impact on universities are mediated through political/channels—policy directives, accountability requirements and mechanisms. Such instruments convey the values of the new learning patrimony, fuelled by new economic and managerialist concerns. Successive waves of policy initiatives are expressions of governmental performativity agendas and the growing demand for greater accountability from the education system. This preoccupation with greater accountability, it has been argued, has led to the increasing dominance within higher education of three key discourses: ‘assessment’, ‘employability’ and ‘managed learning environments’. Students are expected to acquire the capabilities and competences for managing knowledge as part of a lifelong learning or ‘learning to learn’ agenda, rather than being expected to assimilate knowledge. There has been a shift to operational criteria—what students are able to do, and their ability to apply

knowledge. ‘Employability’—a set of generic skills considered useful in employment contexts, is embodied in course documentation, module descriptors, and built into records of achievement or transcripts. The employability agenda is also reflected in a host of schemes and projects aimed at creating working relationships between higher education institutions and employers.

Curriculum planning has largely gone down the outcomes led path, within a rational planning model. The ingredients of such a model include a tight coupling between goals and objectives, curriculum and choice of instruction methods, and assessment of learning and evaluation—consistent with the view of the universe as determinate and linear. As Knight (2001) observes, rational curriculum planning has a commonsense quality about it that fits well with the managerialism of the public sector. Such a model, he suggests, is ill-suited to the complex learning with which higher education institutions are concerned. Complex learning is indeterminate and non-linear. It calls for attention to the quality of the learning environment and learning communities. Curriculum planning needs to be concerned with the spaces, interactions, experiences, opportunities and settings in which formal learning takes place. In such a process model, curriculum planning becomes mainly a matter of orchestrating good learning processes with each other, the content (the topics that subject/area experts identify as worth studying), the available learning time and other resources.

The concept of the managed learning environment, it is argued, has changed from a time and space bound setting—the lecture room, seminar or tutorial and the laboratory—to a much more fluid setting which includes combinations of real time learning and virtual learning; and formal learning in an institutional setting alongside other modes of learning in workplace, community or simulated settings, and which includes more fluid social relations between teacher and learners.

7.3 Critique of the Influence of Prosumerism in Higher Education

In recent years, this critical view of the increasing trend towards centralising the student experience as the key determinant of ‘success’ in higher education has been amplified to deliver a critique of ‘prosumerism’ itself. A major influence on this critique has been George Ritzer whose seminal book *The McDonaldisation of Society*, argued that principles of fast food restaurants have come to dominate virtually every aspect of society (Ritzer, 1996). Ritzer identified four main principles of McDonaldisation—predictability, calculability, efficiency and control—that characterise how fast-food restaurants operate but which can also be applied to a wide spectrum of social structures and processes. In higher education, these four principles, it is argued, have converted universities into ‘McBusinesses’, turning students into consumers who buy degrees made up of bite-sized, credit-rated modules, enslaving universities into competing with each other to top national and global

league tables and re-constructing lecturers as facilitators of the ‘student experience’ (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002). Ritzer later argued that the focus of capitalism has shifted from exploiting producers, to exploiting consumers, to exploiting prosumers. In the McDonalds case, Ritzer suggests, prosumers do unpaid work. Instead of having waiters in McDonald’s, they have the prosumers carry their own food and clear their own tables. In the case of the new online global capitalists—like Amazon, Facebook and Google, the business model is supported by prosumers who not only consume products but who do all the advertising and product endorsement that formerly would have been done by expensive sub-contractors (Ritzer, 2015). Ritzer describes universities as ‘the velvet cage of prosumption’. Students are increasingly seen, and see themselves, as consumers of education who are there to get their money’s worth. Universities are set up to attract students (and their parents) to the university and then to keep them on campus to spend money. Yet fewer students have access to good teachers because of the high cost. Poorer students are now poorly educated. The wealthier students go to the most expensive universities and still have access to the best education, although they may not take full advantage of it (Ritzer, Jandrić, & Hayes, 2018).

What this suggests is that, rather than serving as an antidote to the entrenchment of traditional power structures, through the democratization of education, the prosumer’s engagement mostly serves to reinforce the interests of the status quo. As Comor (2011) argues, ‘the prosumer seems more likely to become, at the very least, the subject of ongoing exploitation and, quite possibly, an agent of increasingly complex forms of possessive individualism’. Alvesson (2013) refers to the ‘massification’ of higher education, as it is increasingly influenced by the principles of McDonaldisation, arguing that it raises fantasies about success in life, national greatness and a fast-track to top jobs that are unlikely to be fulfilled.

Cole and Bradley (2018) go further, arguing that the prosumer ethic in higher education serves to contribute to the dominance of global capitalism as a one-world system. They suggest that the marketing of prosumerism in education as ‘personalisation of learning’—aimed ostensibly at providing opportunities for creative collaboration—is in fact a smokescreen for a more sinister agenda that aims to do two things: extend the culture of surveillance and commodify knowledge in order to make it more marketable. By encouraging students to increase their use of platforms like Facebook in their collaborative learning, the prosumer ethic makes them more vulnerable to exploitation of their personal data. By encouraging students to act as unpaid contributors to knowledge creation and affective capital—as a result of educational institutions exploiting their student experience—the prosumer ethic serves to contribute further to unpaid customer input into the production process.

An important question these critiques of prosumerism in higher education pose is what is the connection between prosumerism and social inclusion. Some studies suggest that, in order to be good prosumers, students need to have access to a wide range of content production resources. For example, students with access to a wide range of content production resources are likely to dominate in the world of social media. Access to social media has in turn been shown by a number of studies to be a key determinant of prosumer capability and success. But as long as content

production resources are not evenly distributed, then not all prosumer voices will be heard (Ha & Yun, 2014).

A good test, therefore, of whether the current drive towards making higher education students more ‘prosumerist’ leads to improved learning outcomes is whether higher education provides opportunities for disadvantaged students to play a full role in the co-production of knowledge. Students with disabilities are arguably best placed to answer this question. The following sections of this chapter present the results of research carried out by the author on the extent to which higher education institutions in the EU are supporting the participation of students with disabilities in collaborative learning.⁵

7.4 Research Context and Methodology

The main objective of the research reported below was to assess the extent to which policies and practices in higher education within the EU at national and trans-national level enable disabled students to play an active role in collaborative learning. The methodology was based on ‘scientific realist review’ (Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005). This analysed policy and practice in the EU overall and in a selected range of member states: Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Poland and the UK. As Pawson puts it, doing a realist review entails ‘feeling your way’ through the available literature to find out how to do something that may involve many different ways. In practice, the review starts with a search of the literature, covering both bibliographic (‘academic’) databases and ‘grey literature’ (e.g. conference papers and online sources) to identify key policies and practices that support the integration of disabled students in collaborative learning. The longlist of items generated by the search process was then narrowed down to a shortlist of relevant material using ‘inclusion-exclusion’ criteria based on domain relevance, target group relevance, geographical relevance and quality of the evidence on impacts provided. Each item in the shortlist was then analysed using a content analysis procedure (Stemler, 2001; Neuendorf, 2002).

7.5 Research Results

Until the Amsterdam Treaty of 1996, the EU’s approach to disability was based on a ‘medical’ understanding and a medical model. This supported the view that disability was the result of physical or mental impairments that affect the individual. The 1996 treaty—particularly Article 13—offered an alternative perspective on disability—the ‘social model’—that incorporated references to the effects of environment, culture and surroundings. A subsequent Council of Europe Directive, also in 1996,

⁵This research was partly supported by a grant from the European Commission’s ‘Tempus’ programme.

reinforced this shift in understanding and policy orientation, asserting that ‘The core value of equality—rendered here as equal opportunities—is now seen as the central benchmark against which economic and social structures must be assessed’. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency, established in 2007, provided the EU and member states with expertise on courses of action in human rights—including the rights of people with disability (although not expressly mentioned in the legislation). At the trans-national level, and across virtually all member states, there is a legislative framework in place which in principle supports the integration of students with disabilities within the higher education system. This has as its foundation the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Accessibility, equal opportunities and social inclusion for people with disabilities are also referenced in the EU general budget, for example, in areas relating to: Employment and Social Affairs, Energy and Transport, Environment, Regional Policy, Education and Culture, Communication, External Relations, Enlargement, Commission’s Administration, Statistics, European Personnel Selection Office and Administrative Expenditure related to Policy Areas. Disability is also highlighted in the key over-arching policy ‘EU2020’.⁶ This provides a ‘new strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’. To achieve the objectives outlined in the Strategy, the European Council agreed to set EU headline targets, which serves as a benchmark for the national targets that the Member States will need to submit to the Commission. EU2020 includes seven ‘flagship initiatives’, some of which have direct relevance for people with disabilities, for example, the ‘Platform against poverty’, ‘Youth on the move’, ‘An agenda for new skills and jobs’ and the ‘Digital Agenda’. These key policy instruments have been supported by a number of additional communications, and mandates, notably the Communication on eAccessibility, focusing on improving the consistency of eAccessibility requirements in Public Procurement; the Single Market review, focusing on Consumer Empowerment and the promotion of accessibility standards, Mandate 420, focusing on accessibility of the Built Environment and Mandate M 376, focusing on accessibility issues in ICT products and services for public procurement.

Within the higher education sphere, the over-arching legal and policy background for the EU has been shaped by the European Disability Action Plan 2003–2010 aimed at mainstreaming disability issues within all relevant EU policies and the EU Disability Strategy 2010–2020 which emphasises equal access to quality education and lifelong learning as key factors in enabling full participation in society. Against this background, accessibility of education and lifelong learning to persons with disabilities has gradually become a more prominent issue on the agenda of EU policymakers. Shared objectives and a framework for co-operation between countries were agreed by education ministers under ‘ET2020’, which included a commitment to ensure that European Union’s education and training systems became ‘accessible to all’.

However, a realistic picture of disability in higher education is difficult to establish, since comprehensive European Commission statistics are only available from

⁶Commission Communication ‘Europe 2020: a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’.

2011.⁷ These show that disability is a key factor in shaping inequalities within education, with 63% of the EU 16–18 age group reporting some form of physical or mental restrictions in education, compared 83% reporting no restriction and in higher education 48% reporting some form of physical or mental restrictions in education, compared with 85% reporting no restriction.

The literature shows a number of commonalities with regard to the situation and needs of students with disabilities in EU countries. In general, young disabled people have less chance to access higher education than their non-disabled peers. For example, in Norway, 9% of young disabled people entered higher education compared to 21% of the general population of this age. In Malta, 4.4% of disabled people reached higher education against 10% of non-disabled people, whilst in Spain, only 5.4% of disabled people had a university education compared to 19.1% for non-disabled people. In the UK, only 28% of disabled young people enter higher education by the age of 19 compared to 41% of non-disabled young people, yet amongst those students who declare disability and complete their first degree (Bachelor), 56% attain at least an 'upper second' class degree, almost the same as for non-disabled students (59%).⁸

Young disabled people are also more likely than non-disabled youth to experience disruption to their studies. According to the OECD, disabled students tend to be more likely to follow part-time courses than non-disabled students, to drop out after the first year and are less likely to graduate (OECD, 2016). The OECD research on young disabled people' transition to tertiary education and employment also shows that disabled young adults are less likely than their non-disabled peers to access the most professionally promising courses. The ANED report shows that, in Germany, disabled students tend to have more erratic pathways during their studies; need more time for their studies, are more likely than non-disabled students to change their courses and/or university and are less likely to gain a university degree. In the absence of appropriate support systems, such difficulties impact more greatly on students with more severe or complex impairments.

Because education systems have largely remained subject to the particular legal norms and practices of member states, rather than dictated by trans-national institutions, support for disabled students varies significantly across the EU. Some countries implement preferential enrolment procedures. Portugal imposes an admissions quota for disabled students; in Germany disabled applicants may be granted a privileged access by the national authority responsible for the allocation of university places; in Greece, 5% of all places are reserved for disabled students; in Hungary, disabled students are given 50 points more for their entry exam; in Norway disabled young adults who do not have an upper secondary school diploma can access tertiary education, on condition that they obtain this diploma during the first semester of university studies; in the UK further education Colleges and Universities may also provide 'access

⁷Directorate General Employment, Social affairs and equal opportunities, Unit Integration of People with Disabilities (2010).

⁸Source: ANED, 2011.

courses' to students who have not gained entry level at school, which may be targeted to social groups with low participation rates, including those with disabilities. However, these incentives are not universal across all member states.

Similarly, provision of support to students with disabilities once they have enrolled varies from country to country. In Ireland, for example, there is a fund for disabled students which pays for adapted learning aids (e.g. computers, printers, scanners, dictaphones), human support (e.g. personal assistant, note taker, educational support, specific courses) and transportation costs. In Denmark, youth eligible for special education support (SPS) are entitled to assistance and counselling for needs assessment, technological aids, interpreters, and note takers. This variability in provision reflects the fact that in most countries it is the responsibility of universities, rather than the public authorities, to provide disabled students with support. This pattern also extends to financial support in general, where the EU situation is characterised once again by varying practices. These appear to be broadly linked to the cost of fees. In the Nordic countries, where costs tend to be relatively high, financial support is more likely to be linked to contingencies. In Norway, for example, students can apply for a state-funded study loan from the State Bank (*statens lanekasse*), which will be partially transformed into a grant if they successfully pass their examinations. In Denmark, the 'handicap supplement' compensates for the loss of income due to difficulties in accessing to employment during university studies for students eligible for the special education allowance, as such income would normally be necessary to pay the interest on a student's loan. In other countries where tuition fees are not very high, young disabled people may have free or reduced tuition fees as in Germany, Iceland and Spain.

A key determinant of the extent to which disabled students can play the role of 'prosumers' in the higher education sphere is the extent to which they have access to the digital tools, and supporting pedagogies, that enable them to learn at their own pace, build, manage and control their own learning spaces, bring together different sources and contexts for learning and bridge educational institutional environments with the world outside. In this context, the research shows there is no strategic, holistic and integrated system in place either at trans-national nor national level to embed assistive technologies, for example, that support better choice and control of disabled students over their learning experience. Whilst some anecdotal examples of innovation in assistive technologies and assistive pedagogies could be identified, there is no strong evidence base that prosumerism is making a positive contribution to the learning experience and the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. Some examples of good practices highlighted include:

- London University—the Institute of Education and University College—have dedicated Disability Assistive Technology rooms which provides a range of facilities and tools including: specialized software (e.g. Text Help Read & Write; Inspiration); ergonomic aids (foot rests; adjustable seating; tracker ball mice); a Student Enabling IT Suite, which includes tools like: Dragon Naturally Speaking (a speech

recognition programme which enables voice-activated typing); Inspiration (software to convert a visual idea into an essay template); Texthelp (text-to-speech technology); Zoomtext (enlarges all that is seen on the screen)

- Thinking about Dyslexia—a UK HEI web-based service on dyslexia which includes video interviews linked to resources on inclusive teaching methods; mind-mapping, podcasting, webCT and students tape-recording lectures and meetings
- Active Learning in Computing (ALiC)—a UK initiative on improving teacher sensitivity to specific impairments in e-learning delivery. This includes simulations of visual, motor, hearing and cognitive impairments, which illustrate the implications for disabled students of taught material, and of how e-assessment might cause problems.
- WISE (Wiring Individualized Special Education)—an Italian initiative aimed at supporting homebound students. Centred on a dedicated portal, WISE supports a community of practice to disseminate resources, good practices and expertise to support the integration of home-bound students within a more active student community.
- University of Macerata (Italy) provides support to students with disabilities through the work of the University Centre of Orientation (CAO), which provides specialist services for students with disabilities, including a ‘front office’ to support ‘drop-in’ services; physical support; specialised tutoring; counselling; organisational support; assistive technology; use of the Learning Management System; personalised exams; tuition exemption; specially equipped rooms
- Warsaw University, Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD)—is the centralizing agency set up to implement the provisions of the Act on Higher Education. It provides: on-going assistance for students and university applicants who have disabilities or chronic illnesses; support for university staff who teach students with disabilities; mobility adaptation of University premises; transportation provision; ICT solutions—including adapted keyboards: trackball devices, Magic Wand Keyboard, ‘HeadMouse’, text magnification software, portable transmitter–receiver sets; digital library.

As these examples show, turning legislation and policy into practice has proved problematic, and support for disabled students varies significantly across the EU. This is because in most countries, unlike in the school sector, provision of support in the Higher Education sector is not obligatory, and is largely left to individual institutions to make their own interpretations on what is adequate provision. Most of the effort to support the needs of disabled students has been focused on providing support for students with disabilities whilst they are studying. This support has been concentrated in three main areas: Financial support—for example, block grants to HEIs and ‘tailored’ support for individual students; Access and mobility—for example, providing ramps; wheelchair access and transport; and Technical/Pedagogic support—for example, providing photocopies; tape recordings; transcriptions; braille documents; e-exams; note-takers; signing facilities.

Less effort has been devoted to other key areas of need for students who are studying in HEI’s, in particular: raising awareness amongst student peers and teaching

Table 7.1 Summary of provision of support for disabled students in the EU and selected countries

Policy														
	EU			UK		SI		IT		GR		PL		
Endorsement of UNCRDP														
Endorsement of EU Disability Action Plan and Disability Strategy														
Provision of national policies														
Implementation														
Pre-study (improving access)														
Financial support														
Accessibility (built environment)														
Accommodation														
Use of ICTs and assistive technologies														
Adapted content (e.g. digital libraries)														
Organisational support and governance (e.g. dedicated support staff)														
Awareness-raising and training for staff and students														
Post-qualification support measures														
Outcomes and Impacts														
Level and quality of data														
Level and quality of monitoring and evaluation of impacts														

and support staff of the issues faced by disabled students and how to address them; providing training for staff in order to improve the level and quality of support; developing dedicated services for students with disabilities—for example, Disability Officers and Student Counselling Services. The areas that have remained particularly under-developed, and where the main gaps in support are highlighted, are in the ‘pre-study’ and ‘post-study’ phases of student life.

To summarise, Table 7.1 provides an analytical summary of state of the art in the EU and in the selected countries in terms of three dimensions:

- The policy context—the extent to which UNCRDP principles are endorsed; the extent to which EU policy actions are incorporated and the level and comprehensiveness of national policies to support disabled students in HEI’s
- The level of implementation of these key policy instruments and their objectives, in relation to pre-study; financial; accessibility; accommodation; use of ICTs

and assistive technology; use of adapted content; organisational and governance support; awareness-raising and training; post-qualification support

- Outcomes and impacts—the level and quality of available profiling and evaluation data on disabled students; their needs, and the effects of policy and practice.

Each aspect is assessed on the basis of the evidence, on the following scale:

Level	
	1 – Not covered or very low
	2 – Variable
	3 – High

Table 7.1 shows:

- In terms of policy, on the whole, the provisions of the UNCRDP have been, in principle ratified and endorsed. However, there is much less evidence that key EU policy instruments on disability and education are being addressed. In turn, national policy aimed at promoting support for disabled students has been relatively well-developed in the UK, Greece and Italy.
- In terms of implementation, the least-developed areas here are in the phases of the study course that come before and after studying itself, that is, the pre-study phase (focusing on helping disabled young people to apply for HEI places) and the post-qualification phase (focusing on preparing disabled graduates for the job market). Measures to provide financial support for disabled students have been relatively well-developed, with the exception of Slovenia. Similarly, measures and practices for study support are relatively well-developed, though provision is variable between and within EU countries. Most countries and many HEIs are now routinely using ICTs to support study for disabled students, through digitisation of teaching material, online digital libraries and the use of assistive technologies.
- Adaptations to the built environment and to accommodation facilities are two areas that are relatively well-developed across the EU, although again the level and quality of provision is uneven, and depends on a number of factors, including the length of time the HEI has been established; the interpretation of the UN and EU directives in national legislation; the spatial configuration of the HEI.
- Conversely, awareness-raising and staff and student training in providing support for students with disabilities rates relatively poorly.
- With the exception of a small number of initiatives operating at the trans-national level—for example, the ANED (Academic Network of European Disability Experts)—and ad hoc research operating at the national level (e.g. the UK HEFCE survey of universities) there is very little systematic data collected at transversal or national levels on the profiles and needs of disabled students—particularly ‘prospective’ students—and even less on the effects of the implementation of policy and practices aimed at supporting their integration and active engagement.

7.6 Conclusions

This Chapter has looked at the ‘prosumer’ trend in higher education in the EU, considering, on the one hand, the alleged benefits associated with supporting greater control by students over the design of their courses; its content; assessment of course outcomes and contribution to the ‘student experience’. This is set against a counter-argument that prosumerism is turning higher education institutions into so-called ‘McBusinesses’, in which student data are used to increase surveillance of students and monetise the student experience, whilst the knowledge produced by students, acting in co-production mode as unpaid workers, is harvested to increase the profit margin of educational enterprises.

It was suggested that a good test of prosumerism is the extent to which it supports social inclusion—in terms of better integration of marginalised and vulnerable groups into the educational institution and in terms of supporting them to play a more active role as co-producers of knowledge. An appropriate test case, it was suggested, is the position of students with disabilities. Research was then presented to provide an overview of the extent to which policy and practice in higher education in the EU generally and in five selected countries is enabling students with disabilities to learn at their own pace, build, manage and control their own learning spaces, bring together different sources and contexts for learning and bridge educational institutional environments with the world outside. The research shows that turning legislation and policy into practice has proved problematic, and support for disabled students varies significantly across the EU. Whilst some anecdotal evidence of good practices, for example, involving assistive technologies and pedagogic practices that support better choice and control of disabled students over their learning experience, there is no strategic, holistic and integrated system in place either at trans-national or national level that supports better integration of disabled students and supports disabled students to play a more active role as co-producers of knowledge.

The evidence base on the positive effects of prosumerism in higher education is therefore not enhanced by the research. The jury is still out on whether prosumerism has a beneficial effect on learning outcomes or whether it represents an increasingly pervasive threat to traditional, ‘liberal’ values of academe.

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