

Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) - Malta

About FITA

The Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) is the principal advocate and coordinator for making information communications technology (ICT) accessible for disabled people in the Maltese islands. Our information services assist disabled individuals in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device, intended to increase, maintain, or improve the individual's quality of life.

FITA's principle function is to provide support to disabled individuals in overcoming or removing barriers to education and employment through ICT. Through empowerment and social inclusion disabled persons need to rely less on family and state support. In ensuring that due steps are taken to minimise the digital divide, we aim to enable individuals to contribute productively to society and the economy.

FITA is interested to participate under ICT-PSP 2010 objectives 1.1; 2.5; 3.1; 3.3; 3.4; as well as themes 4 and 6 (see further down for more details).

Background and Structure

FITA was officially established by the Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) and the National Commission Disabled Persons (KNPD) on 2nd October, 2001. with the goal of facilitating the integration of disabled persons who find themselves at a disadvantage in a particular environment, by providing equitable and appropriate enabling accommodation.

The aims and objectives of the Foundation are the following:

- To promote equal opportunities for all, in particular in relation to information technology matters;
- To provide training services in information technology to disabled people;
- To gather and disseminate information and to increase awareness on information technology matters
- To liaise with and facilitate public and private endeavours in respect of the creation of equal opportunities in respect of information technology
- To offer advice and consultancy services to private and public organisations in information technology and its use by disabled persons

The Foundation's Board of Administrators includes representatives from different stakeholder groups, including the ICT Industry, Disability NGOs, Education, Employment and Government.

FITA operations are the responsibility of its Executive Coordinator, Mr. Stanley Debono. The total staff contingent of eight individuals, includes five disabled persons, and is structured so that most staff members are responsible for clearly distinct areas of FITA's operations.

Past EU Project Involvement

Initiatives under the EU Leonardo Programme

2003

Work Experience with the British Computer Association for the Blind, wherein our primary ICT Accessibility Audits Officer was awarded the British Trainer Certification Scheme certification.

2003-06

GetResults – Train the Trainer Course in Entrepreneurship, wherein we helped design and produce a Course for Entrepreneurship. Malta Enterprise and Gasan Group supported FITA in this initiative. FITA's responsibilities involved

- the production of specialised pedagogic training material
- development of a good practice guide and quality assurance procedures
- the translation of the course material to English
- consultation on the accessibility of the material produced

2007

FITA participated in the Access to Professional Training (APT) (Pilot Project), which was lead by De Montfort University in the United Kingdom. This programme also involved other partners including the University of Malta, KNPD and Bulgarian partners. The main aim of this programme was to support students (29 participants in the case of Malta) with disability in their post-secondary education. FITA was responsible for the assessment, implementation and training of the project's core online educational platform.

2008

Mobility and Orientation Training (MOT) enables visually impaired persons to learn how to orientate themselves and move about in their every day lives, be it at home, at their place of

work, and even in the outside world. This MOBAVIP (Transfer of Innovation) project seeks to address the need of MOT to be provided for Blind and Visually Impaired persons in Malta. FITA's responsibility involved the evaluation and design of accessible resources and publications. The project includes partners from the UK and Germany.

Initiatives under the EU 7th Framework Programme

2008

The TACMON project, of which FITA is a partner is developing innovative tactile display technology, which allows the display the text in Braille, as well as graphical information on an electronically refreshable, user-friendly tactile surface.

The TACMON project is being implemented in collaboration with 17 partners from 10 countries: TACMON project coordinator is Hungary Information Technologies Association - Informatika Vállalkozások Szövetsége. The partnership also includes four R&D centres from Switzerland, Spain, Hungary and Scotland, and 12 technology transfer and innovation centres and companies from Latvia, UK, Malta, Greece, Germany, Czech Republic and Switzerland.

More information can be found at: <http://tacmon.mfkk.hu>

Initiatives under ERDF

2008-13

The Maltese Speech Engine Project will be developing a SAPI compatible speech engine, which will integrate with existing assistive and educational technology in order to promote the use of e-services, Maltese literacy and ICT accessibility.

Past achievements in this area include the integration of the speech engine developed by Prof. Paul Micallef with MS Word with the help of three very capable University students, sponsored by MITA.

This project is part-financed (85%) under Operational Programme I – Cohesion Policy 2007-2013, Investing In Competitiveness for a Better Quality of Life. FITA is collaborating with a number of disability NGOs and the Education Division on this project.

Initiatives under Grundtvig (Life Long Learning Programme)

2009

In December 2009 FITA obtained funding for a training course organised by e-ISOTIS focusing on EU Project Management. One of FITA's services officers attended this course,

which apart from the theoretical project management aspect, indirectly also tackled practical issues like accessibility.

Past Achievements

Software Packages

FITA collaborated with the Ministry for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications and Microsoft Corporation on a number of occasions in 2003, 2005 and 2007 in the distribution of software packages to disabled persons.

Computer Refurbishment Workshop

For different reasons, not all disabled persons may make the most effective use of a brand new computer. In some cases FITA may consider that disabled persons, can effectively benefit from using older computer equipment, which better matches their needs. To this end, FITA set up a computer pooling scheme, whereby refurbished computers are issued on loan at no cost, to disabled persons who can benefit from them. Starting from May 2006, this initiative has grown to include a new workshop at the Physically Handicapped Rehabilitation Centre in Paola. This initiatives is run in collaboration with the Malta Community Chest Fund (MCCF).

National ICT Strategy

Apart from being represented on the National Information Society Council (NISCO), FITA is partly responsible for Stream 2 of the National ICT Strategy 2008-2010. To this end two disabled persons were employed in order to run Accessible ICT training courses for persons with a visual impairment and persons with an intellectual impairment.

Educational software in Maltese

Through the help of a number of partner organisations, FITA is developing educational programs targeted towards individuals who's first language is Maltese.

Work Experiences

Starting in 2008, FITA collaborated closely with the Employment Training Corporation in order to organise work experiences for disabled persons and promote their chances to obtain longterm gainful employment. Out of the six disabled persons benefiting from this scheme, four moved on to obtain employment and continue their studies.

Research Studies

In 2007, FITA published research focusing on the use of ICT by disabled persons and their related expectations. Current research projects target the use of ICT by disabled persons, the potential for Maltese Speech Synthesis and trends in web accessibility of Maltese websites.

Areas of Primary Competence

Since its inception in 2001, FITA has participated in diverse initiatives, all of which have enabled us to develop a network of professional contacts and gain expertise in the following areas:

- ICT Accessibility Audits, covering Web, Software and Hardware
- ICT Training for persons with a visual and/or intellectual impairment
- Design and production of accessible publications and training materials
- Accessibility of international conferences and information events

Potential Areas for ICT-PSP 2010 Collaboration:

Theme 1: ICT for health, aging and inclusion

1.1 ICT for patient-centred health service

Accessibility consultancy and evaluation across e-infrastructure

Theme 2: Digital Libraries

2.5 Use of cultural heritage material for education

Theme 3: ICT for government and governance

3.1 Enlargement of eProcurement Pilot PEPOL

3.3 Inclusive eGovernance: flexible, personalised and multi-channel based service delivery targeted at the socially disadvantaged (e-Accessibility of Public Digital Terminals (PDT))

3.4 User Centricity for e-Governance (Assistive technology and accessibility)

Theme 4: Open Innovation for Future Internet-enabled services in "smart" cities.

FITA can assist with the adoption of standards and guidelines and also provide evaluation services of specific implementations.

Theme 6: Multilingual Web

Especially relevant impact on the Maltese Speech Engine project.

FITA is open to potential suggestions from other project proposers, should their goals and objectives be likely to benefit from FITA's participation whilst promoting e-accessibility for disabled persons.

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