

Foreword by AAATE President

The field of Assistive Technology (AT) is getting more and more attention, on global as well as local/national levels. After a period in which AT in many European countries almost disappeared from the political and policy radars, we are now seeing an increased awareness of its relevance again. The GATE initiative of the WHO that has led to the adoption of an important resolution on improving access to AT plays an important role in that, and also the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is an important driver. More ‘down to earth’ countries start to realise that AT can play a role in tackling the enormous challenge to maintain high quality affordable health and social care systems.

This growing attention for AT is a good thing. Technology can be a powerful tool to enable people with disabilities to live the life they want to live and make them as independent of care and support as possible. And technology can indeed reduce the burden on our healthcare systems. But that does not happen as a matter of course, because the same technology can also be a barrier to full inclusion of people with disabilities in society, and an extra complicating and costly addition to an already complex healthcare system if not properly used and implemented. Here lies a fantastic challenge for the international professional and research and development communities: how to make sure that AT is developed, used and implemented in the best possible way, so that its potential is harnessed and contributes to full inclusion of people with disabilities. That is a global challenge; we know that in many countries people with disabilities have very limited or no access to AT and that in many other countries the match between needs and technologies is far from optimal. So, there is work to be done!

The above explains why the motto of the AAATE conference in 2019 is “Global Challenges in Assistive Technology”. For the AAATE this conference is a key element in its activities. The aim is to bring experts in the field of AT – professionals, researchers, developers, teachers, policy-makers and users – together to exchange knowledge, discuss progress, develop ideas and challenge each other to deliver the best possible contribution to this important field.

The more than 200 contributions to this conference clearly show the breadth of the field, the many challenges, the great opportunities, interesting research questions, possible future directions, global collaboration and many more topics. The AAATE conference is unique in its attempts to give a comprehensive overview of the ‘AT world’ crossing the boundaries of technology specialisations, user groups and stakeholder categories. The abstracts presented in these proceedings together give a good overview of what is going on and what will be future trends. This will help to define research and policy agendas and stimulate new collaborations and links.

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