Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. notes that today's society is being driven faster into the 'digital age' in education as a result of the societal restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. calls however for it to be kept in mind that when we refer to education and training we are referring to developing the critical thinking of young children, impressionable teenagers and curiosity-driven adults, to the empowerment, through physical and intellectual skills, of tradespeople, professionals, manual workers, maintenance people, service sector employees, entrepreneurs and farmers — in short, always about people;

3. warns that it is important to make a distinction at this point between digital education and online or remote learning which was hastily imposed during the first lockdown of society and which was adapted during the restrictions that followed. Today's reality is not in line with the European vision of digital education;

4. agrees that the COVID-19 crisis has at the same time shed light on the key enabling factors for effective digital education and training and that it has accelerated the pace of this change and revealed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and limitations of digital education;

5. recalls that the organisation of education systems is a national competence without prejudice to the internal division of powers in each Member State; however, new challenges require increased European coordination or stronger and supporting policies within the European Education Area: international technology standards and EU recommendations need to be applied;

6. restates (¹) that the support of local and regional authorities for education and digital inclusion is pivotal both for pupils/students and for members of the public;

7. welcomes the efforts done by the European Union to increase the digital skills of European citizens in the last two decades, culminating in the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 and the objective of facilitating the delivery of high quality, inclusive, accessible, effective, engaging education while integrating distance, online and blended methodologies;

8. emphasises the importance of the concept of digital cohesion, as outlined in the Digital Europe for All opinion (²), as an important additional dimension of the traditional concept of economic, social and territorial cohesion defined in the EU Treaty. Calls for it to be extended to the educational sphere and to be taken into account in the next Treaty changes. This is a necessary step in order to address societal challenges in light of ever-growing digitalisation needs, while making sure not to leave any person or region behind;

(¹) CoR opinion 'Achieving the European Education Area by 2025', March 2021.
(²) COR-2019-03332, CoR opinion, Digital Europe for all: delivering smart and inclusive solutions on the ground, adopted in October 2019.

Digital literacy for everyone

9.   is aware that the importance of digital skills goes beyond the labour market, having an increasingly important role in the private and public lives of our citizens, in particularly for learning, access to information and products, as well as public and private services, social inclusion, leisure and many more everyday applications;

10.   recommends that the Digital Education Action Plan should build on best practise as has been exemplified in other sectors e.g. business while retaining the expertise of the educational professionals and the important inter-personal engagement in the classroom;

11.   is convinced that it is imperative to ensure that digital education trickles down also to the most vulnerable people and groups and facilitates social cohesion. The European Union must work hard to create a society where everyone can take part, regardless of age, gender, social background, ethnicity, physical and intellectual capacity;

12.   warns, furthermore, that the connectivity of rural educational facilities and those in remote and island locations will be crucial to overcoming the disparities caused by the population being more dispersed and isolated than in large cities, and stresses that the digital gap between large cities and rural, remote and island areas needs to be properly addressed by the Digital Education Action Plan and the national measures which will implement it;

13.   calls on the European Commission to promote actively the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive digital education and urges the Commission and the Member States to identify, invest in and share digital education features that are designed for and adapted to people with disabilities; the education and skills needs of vulnerable groups must also be taken into account and addressed by ensuring they have equal access to high-quality basic education;

14.   it is also important to consider the needs of national minorities and enable the creation and access to contents that are in line with their right to study in their native language;

Intersection of digital education and the digital transition

15.   points out that from now on society and the European and world economies will seek out people with the skills and abilities to become the architects, builders and natural members of this new digital world and highlights the therewith connected need to invest in defining, developing and acquiring basic and advanced digital skills;

16.   regrets that, although gradually increasing, even 35 % of the active labour force in Europe today does not have basic digital skills ([3]), while 90 % of jobs today require at least a minimum of digital literacy. With the envisaged digital transition, the amount and level of the basic digital skills needed will rise substantially;

17.   is deeply concerned about the fact that there is a clear basic digital skills divide between employed and unemployed, older people and adults with a lower level of education ([4]) and a clear increase in the digital education gap between women and men. Encouraging girls to pursue studies in STE(A)M subjects (to reduce the digital gender gap) will be a step in the right direction; calls on the European Commission and the Member States to utilise the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Digital Europe Programme, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and the European Social Fund to promote participation of women in STE(A)M and to ensure that funding decreases this gap through support for digital education providers;

18.   also expresses concern at the clear digital divide in rural areas throughout the education community (teachers, pupils and families). Calls on the European Commission and the Member States to use the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the European Social Fund to ensure that funding reduces this gap through targeted investments in those regions that face demographic challenges and suffer from an ongoing, significant lack of investment, defining stable, sustainable projects that have an impact on the education community as a whole;

([3])   European Court of Auditors 'EU actions to address low digital skills', Review No 2, 2021.
([4])   Ibid.

19. with this aim also supports the objective of the Skills Agenda to ensure that 70 % of 16- to 74-year-olds have basic digital skills by 2025;

20. recommends furthermore that all training and apprenticeship programmes incorporate a digital element, going beyond the Digital Opportunity traineeship and regardless of the skill being taught, and that the proposed European Exchange Platform create content for these courses akin to an International Computer Driving License — ICDL — in addition to the European Digital Skills Certificate that will be based on a self-assessment approach;

21. stresses the need to make digital education an integral part of lifelong learning and calls on private and public sectors to take up their responsibility for educating and training citizens so that they remain competitive and fit for the labour market while developing fully in their personal lives;

Digital education — opportunities and challenges

22. believes in the strong benefits that the digitalisation of education can have if it is learner-focused, age-appropriate and development-oriented. Such education would guarantee accessible, inclusive education, make available resources to achieve quality education for all and enforce the right to education as a fundamental human right;

23. calls for direct public funding aimed at the development of new teaching models and promoting 21st century skills at all education levels, from school to university, as well as at further simplifying the structure of EU funding programmes, thus allowing a broader pool of participating stakeholders and an expansion of industry-academia partnerships;

24. calls for more ethical use of artificial intelligence and data in education and training for educators and for research and innovation-related activities to be supported through the Horizon Europe programme;

25. calls on the European Commission to make the different programmes and measures accessible and raise their profile via 'easy-to-use information and communication' and by supporting the decentralised delivery system via the different EU networks, such as the Digital Innovation Hubs;

26. offers its help in the dissemination of the Connecitivty4schools awareness-raising campaign;

27. is concerned at the increase in digital violence and harassment and stresses the need for education to prevent such behaviour;

28. calls for a voucher system to be used at the outset, with the involvement of the regions and cities, to kick-start research and development in digital education opportunities;

29. is alerted by frustration regarding inadequate connectivity and equipment that was voiced by many pupils and teachers throughout European cities and regions over the last year; restates, on the one hand, its message [5] that priorities in local educational infrastructure development need to be changed, and that LRAs will support the switch to modern, functional, digital and green education infrastructure in their communities; calls on the other hand for national governments, through either EU, national funding or partnership schemes with local businesses, to provide all teachers and pupils with a suitable digital educational device, along with free access to digital communication and education apps and platforms;

30. emphasises that the global pandemic has highlighted the irreplaceable skills of the teacher. Human interaction, moderation, encouragement, demonstration, explanation, correction, assessment, advice, support, expertise and knowledge — all of these are provided by teachers. Asks for those skills to be developed also to fit in the digital frameworks, as teachers play a particularly crucial role in the use and inclusion of digital technology for teaching and learning;

31. cautions however that educational technologies should remain a tool and not replace in-person education because human interaction is crucial to the well-being and development of students, including teacher-student and student-to-student communication;

[5] CoR opinion 'Achieving the European Education Area by 2025', March 2021.

32.   is concerned by recent study results (⁶) that indicate that only 40 % of teachers feel prepared to use digital technologies in teaching;

33.   suggests that teacher training models across the European Union become more aligned through enhanced co-operation among our universities and among continuing teacher training centres, and urges for the creation of physical 'hubs' in university cities so that teachers across the education system can avail of in-service and quality continuing professional development; in addition, suggests that the content of continuing teacher training courses be made openly available so that it can be reused in day-to-day teaching;

34.   embraces the idea of Digital Education Content Frameworks; however, would like to be reassured that funding will be provided at regional level to ensure that all teachers feel part of the hub and that regional languages are supported with the adaptation of resources for all;

35.   advocates that the European Digital Education Content Framework have its own technology incubator to create content which is standardised according to the Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) and of high quality, in line with the Open Education Resources (OER) model, and support teachers and other professionals in the creation of content, study programmes and resources in line with the above criteria. It is essential that cooperation be strengthened and educational materials and good practices shared; recommends that this unit support national education departments in assessing technological applications so that money is spent on the best technology, rigorous scrutiny is undertaken and any data harvested is used appropriately;

36.   calls on the Commission, through suitable measures, as part of the Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and InvestEU programmes, *inter alia,* to support the creation of pan-European platforms for the broad dissemination of educational content and tools in an inclusive and multilingual way, taking into account regional languages;

37.   highlights the EU's investment in digital culture, singling out the example of Europeana, which in providing digital content on European history and culture has helped to diversify teaching in schools across the European Union;

38.   supports and calls for multiplying initiatives such as the Joint Research Centre's digital school project, allowing for free and accessible Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs);

39.   emphasises the need for a digital culture among the education community. In an age when all knowledge can, it seems, be accessed on the internet, it is crucial for the education community to be able to distinguish and filter hard facts from opinions and to be able to independently analyse and collate data;

40.   it is also important to find ways to assist parents in supporting their children in accessing digital education;

41.   notes that families, students and education professionals have reported serious incidences of cyber bullying; also notes that pastoral care for pupils and students of all ages continues to be provided and funded;

42.   calls on the Commission to address the specific nature of educational data and the risk posed by the lack of regulation on their exchange and storage; also calls on the Commission to involve the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) in reflection on the creation of specific status for data relating to pupils and learners, and to raise awareness among all involved parties in the digital education (teachers, students, pupils, learners and parents) about the importance of cyber security and also to find ways to continuously enhance cyber security in this field.

Brussels, 7 May 2021.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

(⁶)   OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), 2018.