



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC/VI-039

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OPINION

Digital Education Action Plan

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- recognises that developing the digital skills of the EU workforce is essential to tackle the transformation of the labour market and to avoid skill gaps or mismatches;
- emphasises the potential of digital transformation for upward mobility, shaping better educated and informed citizens, stimulating civic engagement, democratising knowledge, enhancing access to and the consumption and production of information, with a view to ensuring a healthy digital identity and active and responsible digital citizens;
- requires that a greater focus must be put on strengthening adults', children's and young people's critical thinking and media literacy so they can judge and overcome the overwhelming diffusion of fake news and the risks of an uncritical use of information available on the web or digitally accessible information
- stresses the need to reduce the existing digital divide considering the different determinants of the phenomenon, e.g. residence in different geographical and demographic contexts, languages of communication, different educational levels, gender- and age-specific differences, possible disability, belonging to disadvantaged socio-economic groups;
- believes that the DEAP Plan should be adequately supported by the new Multiannual Financial Framework as well as from resources from national budgets to be allocated not only to connectivity and infrastructures but also to development of digital skills and competences development at all levels of education
- recalls the fundamental role of local and regional authorities in the implementation of education and training policies and that therefore the process of adapting the education systems to the standards of the digital era should involve all levels of governance (European, national, regional and local).

Rapporteur-general

Domenico Gambacorta (IT/EPP), President of the Province of Avellino

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Digital Education Action Plan, COM(2018) 22 final

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Digital Education Action Plan

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Key messages

1. underlines that education, since the Bologna process, has been playing a crucial role in creating a European space for dialogue and cooperation about the fundamental principles – freedom of expression, tolerance, freedom of research, free movement of students and staff, student involvement and the co-creation of lifelong learning – that reflect the basic values of present-day European society;
2. points out that the commitment of EU Member States to providing young people with the “best education and training” has been confirmed in recent declarations (Bratislava, September 2016; Rome, March 2017) and summits (Tallinn, May 2017; Gothenburg, November 2017; Brussels, January 2018);
3. highlights how the digital revolution will continue to significantly change the way Europeans live, study, work and relate to one another and that digital skills and competences are fundamental alongside literacy and numeracy, in order to help citizens to meet the challenges of a constantly moving, globalised and interconnected world;
4. agrees that acquisition of digital skills and competences needs to start at an early age and carry on throughout life, as part of educational curricula for early childhood and adult education;
5. recognises that developing the digital skills of the EU workforce is essential to tackle the transformation of the labour market and to avoid skill gaps or mismatches;
6. sees digital education as a necessity and an opportunity to address educational challenges, e.g. providing scope for more personalised and inclusive teaching for persons with special educational needs and disabilities, migrants and persons in Member States' care systems;
7. points out that the development of digital competences is a wonderful tool for developing new entrepreneurial talent, for achieving autonomy in carrying out individual or complementary tasks, as well as for working in multidisciplinary or geographically diverse teams;
8. emphasises the potential of digital transformation for upward mobility, shaping better educated and informed citizens, stimulating civic engagement, democratising knowledge, enhancing access to and the consumption and production of information, with a view to ensuring a healthy digital identity and active and responsible digital citizens;
9. stresses that ill-prepared users are particularly prone to suffer from the many risks hidden in an unaware use of digital resources, including cyberbullying, phishing, “sexting”, “sextortion”,

IGD (Internet Gaming Disorder), digital work-related stress symptoms, FOMO (“Fear Of Missing Out”);

10. requires that a greater focus must be put on strengthening adults', children's and young people's critical thinking and media literacy so they can judge and overcome the overwhelming diffusion of fake news and the risks of an uncritical use of information available on the web or digitally accessible information;
11. indicates the risk that the massive introduction of algorithms and machine learning systems based on artificial intelligence and data analytics poses to pedagogical freedom as well as neutrality, data security and privacy concerns;
12. mentions some results provided by “The Survey of Schools: ICT in Education”¹ (2013), which found that:
 - ✓ infrastructure provision at school level varies considerably between countries;
 - ✓ only around 50% of students in the EU are taught by a teacher who has a positive attitude about his or her ability to integrate digital technologies in a pedagogically valuable fashion into teaching activities;
 - ✓ only around 25-30% of students are taught by teachers for whom ICT training is compulsory;
13. points out consequently the crucial role of teachers and educators in guiding learners toward innovative practices of knowledge creation through appropriate links between formal, non-formal and informal learning, assuming that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to scaling up digital innovations in education;
14. highlights that teachers, school directors and other educational operators need support and relevant training to efficiently find their way to combine traditional education methodologies with the opportunities provided by digital technologies;
15. suggests to this aim a cooperation between private and public stakeholders, involving educational technology suppliers, via sectoral organisations where they exist, in order to provide teachers training together with free digital educational materials, also resolving cross-border copyright issues;
16. points out the risks of large digital companies, and GAFAM in particular (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft) imposing their standards in education, by providing their hardware and/or software and educational resources, for which it would be necessary to establish rigorous controls in relation to data protection and copyright;
17. stresses the need to reduce the existing digital divide considering the different determinants of the phenomenon, e.g. residence in different geographical and demographic contexts, languages

¹ Survey of Schools: ICT in Education. Benchmarking access, use and attitudes to technology in Europe's schools. Final study report, European Commission, 2013.

of communication, different educational levels, gender- and age-specific differences, possible disability, belonging to disadvantaged socio-economic groups;

18. insists on the need to better exploit EU financial support in order to ensure that schools and educational establishments - including not only establishments providing compulsory education, but also those covering other stages of education, such as early childhood and adult education establishments, schools of music, etc. so as to guarantee access to lifelong learning - can be equipped with the necessary high-speed and high quality broadband infrastructure, in particular those located in geographically, demographically or socially challenges areas;
19. suggests that, coherently with the implementation of digital innovative resources and practices, new assessment resources and techniques should be tested, such as rubrics, and then introduced in combination with more traditional ones, to exploit the potential that rapid feedback loops offer for a more personalised and efficient learning process;
20. remarks that, in accordance with the principles inspiring the Lifelong Learning Platform, in order to achieve enhanced learning experiences and outcomes, the place of the learner must be at the centre, sharing goals on the basis of his views and values, so avoiding the risk of a role of passive technology consumers;
21. welcomes the Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) as short-medium term tool for the stimulation, implementation and scaling up of purposeful use of digital and innovative education practices in schools, VET and higher education as part of the "European Education Area" and the "New Skills Agenda for Europe"², complementing the "Recommendations on Common Values and Key Competences";
22. recognises that the priorities set out in the DEAP are in line with the complex and numerous challenges posed by the digital revolution;
23. believes that the DEAP Plan should be adequately supported by the new Multiannual Financial Framework as well as from resources from national budgets to be allocated not only to connectivity and infrastructures but also to development of digital skills and competences at all levels of education;
24. emphasises that, to integrate digital technology into our educational systems and to actually achieve the goals of the DEAP, a more fruitful cooperation of all the involved and potential stakeholders is a prerequisite, ensuring convergence, synergies and a cross-disciplinary expertise as well as interoperability of the various systems;
25. considers it vital to ensure a significant effort to coordinate and to integrate all the initiatives and actions also improving dissemination policies, in order to avoid that available opportunities are mainly exploited by educational and political institutions which are better capable to cope with the "jungle" of calls for funding supports;

² COM(2016) 381

26. recalls the fundamental role of local and regional authorities in the implementation of education and training policies and that therefore the process of adapting the education systems to the standards of the digital era should involve all levels of governance (European, national, regional and local).

Making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning: digital competences and skills for the digital transformation

27. points out that, even if the access to digital infrastructure is only one aspect of the digital divide, the lack of funding and insufficient and inoperative equipment and bandwidth still represent a barrier for the use of ICT for teaching and learning;
28. calls for support for the creation of national strategies and frameworks, for more dialogue between stakeholders, and for more support for teachers to gain new methodological expertise;
29. hopes for the launch of a vast campaign of training initiatives for teachers and educational operators to strengthen their actual digital skills, with particular reference to those with low aptitude and experience in digital technologies;
30. welcomes EU support for the digital readiness of both general and vocational schools by strengthening their digital competences and by making the SELFIE self-assessment tool reach one million teachers, trainers and learners by end of 2019, in synergy with any assessment tools adopted by individual Member States;
31. points out that ICT contributes to innovation in processes and organisational arrangements, and considers tools such as the European e-Competence Framework (e-CF) useful for referencing ICT competences and skills across Europe;
32. recognises the added value of a voucher scheme, focusing on disadvantaged areas, and of implementation of an appropriate toolkit for rural areas;
33. approves of a framework for issuing digitally-certified qualifications and validating digitally-acquired skills that are trusted and multilingual and considers it crucial that the framework be fully aligned with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) and the European Classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO);
34. encourages cooperation between industry and education and other forms of public-private partnerships in order to develop digital competency training programmes and to ensure that digital careers are equally accessible, regardless of socio-economic background or physical disabilities.

Developing relevant digital competences and skills for the digital transformation

35. points out that school communities need to support all learners and respond to their specific needs in order to ensure full inclusion;

36. considers it crucial to reduce the learning gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds and to capitalise on the potential of personalised teaching and new learning tools, and to benefit fully from open educational resources and open science;
37. hopes for the development of a Europe-wide platform for digital higher education offering learning, blended mobility, virtual campuses and exchange of best practices among higher education institutions;
38. welcomes the new European Digital Competence Framework for Educators offering guidance in developing digital competence models;
39. underlines the importance of promoting and facilitating the development of teachers' digital skills from an integrated perspective and within a Framework of Professional Skills for Teachers, covering the initial, access and ongoing training of teachers;
40. acknowledges the importance of mobility and therefore calls to strengthen the focus of the next Erasmus+ programme and other relevant EU funding programmes to support the adaptation of education and training to the digital age;
41. underlines the importance of cooperation in education and of concerted efforts. Calls for a joint European platform open to various stakeholders, in order to develop benchmarks and indicators to monitor more closely progress in ICTs by various education providers in schools and other learning environments. This work needs to be undertaken in close cooperation between the Member States, in order to capitalise on past experience, identify existing monitoring methods, etc.;
42. stresses the importance of digital competences for all citizens as in the revised European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, including the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens in five areas (information and data literacy; communication and collaboration; digital content and creation; safety and well-being; and problem-solving); and encourages teaching and learning in which digital competences are integrated into the other skills to be developed;
43. supports the proposed (i) EU-wide awareness-raising campaign targeting educators, families and learners to foster online safety, cyber hygiene and media literacy; and (ii) the cyber-security teaching initiative building on the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, to empower people; and (iii) efforts to promote and disseminate good practices in order to be able to use technology confidently and responsibly;
44. encourages the entrepreneurial spirit of regions and cities and the move towards open innovation, within a human-centred vision of partnerships between public and private sector actors, universities and citizens;
45. expects to be kept updated on the policy lessons from how the actions are implemented and to be invited to contribute to the emerging discussion on future European cooperation in education and training.

Improving education through better data analysis and foresight

46. hopes for the adoption of a shared and common methodological framework for the definition of indicators able to capture the digital divide and calls for a significant effort to build and collect reliable and easily accessible data for its evaluation and monitoring;
47. draws attention to issues that arise when personal data and student files are stored with private operators, often in another part of the world. In particular, specific attention has to be paid to whether these operators are prepared to sign user agreements with numerous local, regional and national authorities;
48. also raises concerns about "data mining", i.e. how to respond to businesses using pupils' and school employees' data to be sold to others, and notes that it is also important, not least for local and regional authorities, to clarify how long relevant administrative data and similar documents can be kept publicly accessible;
49. looks forward to the launch of planned pilots to leverage the available data and to help the implementation and monitoring of education policy and also welcomes the planned toolkit and guidance for Member States;
50. considers it important to initiate strategic foresight on key trends arising from digital transformation for the future of education systems, in close cooperation with Member State experts – and including the local and regional level representatives, – and making use of existing and future channels of EU-wide cooperation on education and training;
51. encourages user-driven innovation as key for early adoption of innovation solutions that tackle educational challenges. The user's perspective is often not sufficiently considered, which could limit the possible solutions to a challenge; and welcomes, in this context, the exploration of ways of promoting citizen engagement, participation and user-driven innovation;
52. highlights that this Action Plan should also support the European Semester, a key driver for reform through the education- and training-related country-specific recommendations;
53. supports the efforts to advance governance of school education systems and recalls that good Multi-Level Governance (MLG) can improve performance in education and training, strengthen participation, nurture the establishment of innovative mechanisms, promote an inclusive education system designed to look at the whole person and develop lifelong learning systems;

54. welcomes the dialogue announced by the EU Commission on the implementation of the proposed actions and measures and expresses its availability to engage and continue to cooperate with the EU Commission, along with Member States, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the European Investment Bank Group, to take forward the proposed agenda and ensure alignment with priorities in current and future EU funding programmes.

Brussels, 10 October 2018

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Karl-Heinz Lambertz

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Digital Education Action Plan
Reference(s)	COM(2018) 22 final
Legal basis	Art. 165 TFEU; Art. 166 TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(i)
Date of Commission letter	17 January 2018
Date of Bureau/President's decision	15 May 2018
Commission responsible	SEDEC
Rapporteur	Domenico GAMBACORTA (IT/EPP)
Analysis	May 2018
Discussed in commission	25 June 2018
Date adopted by commission	-
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	
Date adopted in plenary	10 October 2018
Previous Committee opinions	Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture (Draft opinion) Modernising school and higher education ³ Investing in Europe's youth and the European Solidarity Corps ⁴ A New Skills Agenda for Europe ⁵ Recognition of skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning ⁶ Opening up Education ⁷ European higher education in the world ⁸ Rethinking Education ⁹ Modernisation of Higher Education ¹⁰ Agenda for new skills and jobs ¹¹ Digital Single Market: Mid-term review ¹² Digital Agenda for Europe ¹³
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	NA

³ CDR 3139/2017

⁴ CDR 851/2017

⁵ CDR 4094/2016

⁶ CDR 3921/2014

⁷ CDR 6183/2013

⁸ CDR 5961/2013

⁹ CDR 2392/2012

¹⁰ CDR 290/2011

¹¹ CDR 401/2010

¹² CDR 3224/2017

¹³ CDR 104/2010