

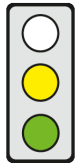
DIGITAL EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

cepPolicyBrief No. 2020-15

KEY ISSUES

Objective of the Communication: The Commission is announcing numerous measures to reset digital education which will promote digital technologies and teaching methods and equip learners with digital skills.

Affected parties: Companies, educational institutions, teachers and learners.



Pro: (1) The Digital Education Action Plan may promote the Europe-wide development of digital skills.

(2) A European digital education certificate will improve the comparability of digital skills.

(3) Encouraging dialogue between Member States and industry on new skills needs may counteract the lack of skilled labour.

Contra: The Commission should not impose targets on concepts for mixed face-to-face and online learning formats. The Member States are best placed to identify and define such formats.

The most important passages in the text are indicated by a line in the margin.

CONTENT

Title

Communication COM(2020) 624 of 30 September 2020: **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027** – Resetting education and training for the digital age

Brief Summary

► Context and objectives

- The digital transformation is significantly reshaping society and the labour market [p. 1].
- 90% of all jobs in the future will require digital skills yet 35% of EU workers lack such skills [p. 14]. Digital skills particularly include the ability to use digital programmes as well as knowledge of the risks and opportunities offered by digital communication.
- In recent decades, there have been numerous initiatives in the EU to promote digital skills and digital technologies such as training apps and educational platforms. So far, however, EU initiatives to promote digital skills and digital technologies have been short-lived and limited in scale. [p. 2]
- The Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 sets out a long-term approach to the design of digital education and training [p. 3].
 - General education covers school and university education as well as further education.
 - Vocational education covers vocational education and training.

► Priorities of the Action Plan

The EU Commission’s Action Plan sets out two priorities:

- Priority 1 – “Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem” [p. 10] – aims to [p. 10, 11]
 - equip educational institutions with digital technology and
 - enable teaching staff to use digital teaching methods.
- Priority 1 includes the following sub-targets [p. 10, 11]:
 - effective digital capacity planning and development, i.e. expanding access to digital technologies and content for teachers and learners,
 - high-capacity internet connectivity for educational institutions and learners, i.e. fast internet access and the availability of sufficient devices such as computers, as well as
 - support for teachers with training
 - in digital teaching methods
 - in digital educational content of the “highest [...] educational quality”.
- Priority 2 – “Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation” [p. 13] – aims to equip learners with digital skills [p. 2].
- Priority 2 includes the following sub-targets [p. 13– 15]:

- learning a critical approach to handling disinformation [see [cepPolicyBrief 2020-13](#)], personal data and information-overload,
 - acquiring a basic knowledge of financial matters and new technology such as artificial intelligence,
 - acquiring a sound digital understanding by way of computing education in schools and
 - encouraging hands-on experience for learners by expanding EU initiatives such as “[Digital Opportunities](#)”.
 - The Commission is announcing numerous measures to implement the priorities. The most important measures are set out below.
- ▶ **Recommendation on the enabling factors for successful digital education**
- By 2022, the Commission wants - in dialogue with the Member States - to define the enabling factors for successful digital education and with this aim submit a proposal for a Council Recommendation.
 - The Commission includes as enabling factors [p. 11]
 - closing gaps in internet connectivity and equipment for teaching staff and learners by using funding from the EU, Member States and the private sector as well as through the re-use of suitable hardware,
 - supporting education and training institutions with know-how on digitisation,
 - addressing the availability of assistive technologies, i.e. highly developed technical systems to support the activities of people with disabilities,
 - dialogue between stakeholders in business and in educational institutions as well as
 - guidelines developed by Member States on digital pedagogy and professional development for teachers.
- ▶ **Recommendation on online and distance learning**
- By the end of 2021, the Commission wants to develop “a shared understanding” based on experiences during the COVID-19 crisis regarding concepts for [p. 11]
 - blended learning formats for face-to-face and online teaching; the concepts should be “effective, inclusive and engaging”;
 - online and distance learning in primary and secondary schools.
 - The Commission intends to submit a Council Recommendation on this [p. 11].
- ▶ **Development of a European Digital Education Content Framework**
- The Commission wants to develop a European Digital Education Content Framework. The Framework will [p. 12]
 - build on European cultural and creative diversity,
 - include guiding principles for “specific sectors of education” and their needs, such as high-quality instructional design and multilingualism,
 - guarantee interoperability, i.e. the exchange of data between different technologies and
 - ensure “certification”, “verification” and “transferability” of educational content.
 - The Commission wants to launch a feasibility study on the creation of a European education platform. On the platform will be shared online resources such as online courses [p. 12].
- ▶ **Supporting connectivity in schools**
- The Commission wants to support the Gigabit connection of schools to the internet within the framework of the “[Connecting Europe](#)” facility and calls on Member States to include this in their national investment projects [p. 12].
 - The Commission wants to raise awareness in the Member States for EU funding opportunities, particularly for the purchase of digital equipment and e-learning applications and platforms for schools [p. 12].
- ▶ **Development of a European Digital Skills Certificate**
- The Commission wants to develop a European certificate which will provide evidence of digital skills and be recognised by governments, employers and other stakeholders in the EU [p. 16].
 - The level of digital skills will be classified with the aid of the [European Digital Competence Framework](#) [p. 16]. The European digital competence framework divides the skills into eight levels ranging from “basic knowledge” to “highly specialised” [European Digital Competence Framework 2017, p. 13].
- ▶ **Improving the provision of digital skills in education and training**
- The Commission wants to support the professional development of teachers, particularly by exchanging best practice on teaching methods, such as for high-quality computing education (informatics) at all levels. The Commission intends to submit a Council Recommendation on this [p. 16].
 - The Commission wants to encourage dialogue between Member States and industry to identify new skills needs [p. 16].
- ▶ **Establishment of a European Digital Education Hub**
- The Commission wants to establish a European Digital Education Hub [network] [p. 17].
 - The hub will [p. 17]
 - connect national authorities, the private sector, experts, education and training providers and civil society,

- facilitate exchange of best practice and digital learning content between the actors, addressing issues such as interoperability, inclusion and common standards for digital education,
- enable the implementation of the Action Plan and development of digital education.

Policy Context

The Action Plan is based on the first Digital Education Action Plan adopted in January 2018, which runs until the end of 2020. In conjunction with the European Education Area initiative [[COM\(2020\) 625](#)], it will support the transition to a digital Europe [[COM-Press Release](#)]. In addition, the Action Plan will help to achieve the targets of the European Skills Agenda [[COM\(2020\) 274](#)] and provide the Member States with guidance in prioritising the financing of digital education within the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility [[COM\(2020\) 575](#)].

Options for Influencing the Political Process

Directorates General:

- DG Employment and Social Affairs (leading)
- DG Competition
- DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

ASSESSMENT

Economic Impact Assessment

Ordoliberal Assessment

The progress of digitalisation means that digital education has become a requirement for individual success in the labour market. For 78% of European businesses, the lack of digital skills among their employees is, according to [EIB Investment Report 2019](#), the main obstacle to new investment. Digital skills are thus an essential factor for the competitiveness of European companies.

The Digital Education Action Plan from the Commission **may support the Europe-wide development of digital skills** and is basically therefore appropriate. At the same time, the long-term seven-year approach and the broad scope of the Action Plan – ranging from the access to digital technologies to the development of skills – will help to ensure that the varying needs of the Member States can be met.

However, the measures chosen to implement the priorities – depending on their exact design – are not entirely appropriate:

Defining the enabling factors for successful digital education in dialogue with the Member States is appropriate as this will set up the most important building blocks for digital education to be agreed between the Member States. As the factors will also form the basis for further measures under the Action Plan, a proposal should be submitted soon – before 2022 if possible.

It remains unclear what the Commission means by a “shared understanding” regarding concepts for online and distance learning and, in this respect, blended learning formats. **The Commission should not impose targets** such as “effective, inclusive and motivating” **on concepts for mixed face-to-face and online learning formats because Member States are best placed to identify and define such formats**. This problem could also arise in relation to the Digital Education Content Framework. In that case, though, the Commission has avoided it because, in the proposal on the European Framework, it does not - as yet - define any educational content. Guaranteeing interoperability is appropriate as exchange between the Member States is only possible if the digital systems can communicate with one another.

Supporting the Gigabit connection of schools to the internet is certainly one of the more effective ways of using the existing EU fund “Connecting Europe”, worth 30 billion euro, as schools require a digital infrastructure for digital learning and digital teaching methods. The [Digital Economy and Society Index 2020](#) shows major differences in progress between the Member States when it comes to the roll-out of broadband. The connection of rural areas, in particular, is difficult. The provision of EU funds may accelerate the roll-out of such connections especially in poorer countries insofar as failure is due to lack of funds. Other obstacles exist, however, as indicated by the fact that out of the € 5 billion budget available to schools under the [German Digital Pact](#) only € 15.7 million was actually paid out in the first 15 months. In this case it is not the money that is lacking but implementation structures.

A European digital education certificate will improve the comparability of digital skills. This will increase cross-border mobility of the workforce and thereby strengthen the internal market. In the field of digital skills, however, it is doubtful whether levels of ability can be classified in the same way as linguistic proficiency because digital education is extremely varied and very different skills are required depending on the subject matter, industry and field. During the COVID-19 crisis, it has become clear that teaching staff are often insufficiently prepared for the digital transformation and lack digital skills. Professional development for teachers and the exchange of best practice on teaching methods are therefore appropriate political objectives. The EU can only provide a framework for exchange

and cooperation between the Member States. Precise requirements must be left up to the competent national authorities.

Encouraging dialogue between Member States and industry on new skills needs may help to ensure that vocational training is aligned more closely with need and will therefore counteract the lack of digitally skilled labour as well as unemployment.

Legal Assessment

Legislative Competency

The EU can contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing the action of the Member States [Art. 165 (1) TFEU]. In addition, the EU supports and supplements the action of the Member States in the area of vocational training in order to facilitate adaptation to industrial changes - in particular through vocational training and retraining [Art. 166 (1) and (2) TFEU]. In this context, the Council can, on a proposal from the Commission, adopt non-binding recommendations [Art. 165 (4) and Art. 166 (4) TFEU]. The proposed measures lie within the powers of the EU because they serve primarily to encourage cooperation between the Member States and to support and supplement the action of the Member States and are not binding upon the Member States.

Subsidiarity

Unproblematic. A high level of digital education across the EU will strengthen the internal market. This aim cannot be adequately achieved by the Member States acting alone. It is therefore appropriate to coordinate the measures of the Member States. The measures proposed by the Commission thus also provide added value.

Conclusion

The Digital Education Action Plan may encourage the Europe-wide development of digital skills. The Commission should not impose targets on concepts for mixed face-to-face and online learning formats because Member States are best placed to identify and define such formats. A European digital education certificate will improve the comparability of digital skills. This will increase cross-border mobility of the workforce and thereby strengthen the internal market. Encouraging dialogue between the Member States and industry on new skills needs may counteract the lack of skilled labour.