

BRUSSELS, January 2021 - Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education reaction to the European Commission Communication on Resetting education and training for the digital age

On 30 September 2020, the European Commission launched the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027¹ as part of the Education Package. The updated Digital Education Action Plan includes lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis as well as from the Open Public Consultation, to which Lifelong Learning Platform participated. It sets out a long-term vision including two strategic priorities with fourteen actions to achieve them: fostering the development of a high performing digital education ecosystem and enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation. **The Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP) welcomes the longer duration of the Action Plan** as it allows for a greater impact and the possibility of scaling up, **as well as the broadening of its scope to learning in all forms**, as it now also covers non-formal and informal education, going towards a more holistic view of education.

In 2017, LLLP released its annual position paper on “**Reimagining Education in the Digital Age**”², a comprehensive opinion of education and training stakeholders on major issues and opportunities the digital transformation brings to the field. Three years later, many of the recommendations still apply and are today even more important to deal with, in the context of a global pandemic. Key issues remain to be addressed particularly for the inclusion aspect of digital education, such as tackling the digital divide or the lack of basic skills; ensuring safety and wellbeing in face of challenges posed by the digital world; the need for longitudinal and unbiased research, and finally investment in teachers and educators, particularly in their professional development. The aforementioned remain key areas the Union needs to work on so as to ensure everybody is prepared and nobody is left behind in the digital transformation.

Although the pandemic has shown us just how unprepared we are to start the digital transition in sectors like education and training, it has also demonstrated the need and willingness of stakeholders, like education and training providers to embark upon it. In this sense, we appreciate that the Action Plan looks at short-term needs related to the pandemic, in addition to a broader, longer term outlook in the form of the two strategic priorities. We expect the Commission to **keep focusing on learners’ needs throughout the implementation of the Action Plan**, and to meaningfully consult and include the voices of all stakeholders, including civil society organisations.

Inclusion to bridge the digital divide

The Covid-19 crisis and the sudden unexpected move to online and distance learning sharply put the barriers of inequalities in our societies into the spotlight. As recalled by the European Parliament, in the

¹ European Commission, Communication Resetting education and training for the digital age: Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1602778451601&uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0624>

² Lifelong Learning Platform Statement, Reimagining Education for the Digital Age, 2017 http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigitalPaper_final-1.pdf

first Covid-19 wave, a staggering 32% of pupils in some Member States did not have access to education for months³. During this crisis, we have come to better understand that obstacles to digital learning go beyond the lack of digital skills and include the absence of stable broadband access, scarcity of equipment, as well as no quiet place in the home to concentrate. Unsurprisingly, these hurdles are most present in households with lower socioeconomic means and for learners from disadvantaged groups.

Striving for inclusion of all learners, from all backgrounds, entails targeted actions towards disadvantaged learners. In this sense, we see positive efforts in the field of gender equality as well as for learners with disabilities, but are disappointed not to see targeted actions towards other groups of marginalised learners, such as learners from challenging socio-economic backgrounds, learners from ethnic minorities or with migration backgrounds, or senior people. In this sense, we call for more attention on how non-formal and informal education and training providers often help connect with hard-to-reach learners. **Mastering basic skills is essential to inclusion**, as mentioned in our 2017 Statement on Reimagining Education for the Digital Age⁴, advanced or new digital skills depend on basic skills, which remain an issue in the EU⁵. To ensure all learners have equal opportunities we deem it critical that this gap be addressed.

LLL is glad to see the lifelong learning approach to education being integrated into the Commission's Action Plan, however adult learners' needs are left behind, moreover, the emphasis on the labour market needs risks placing learners' needs aside once more.

Lastly, fighting discrimination is key to achieving healthy, democratic and equitable societies. Every tool at our disposal should be used to achieve this, including by supporting and promoting civic education, which is sadly missing from the Action Plan. We know from experience that hate speech and discrimination proliferate online, more often than ever crossing over into the offline life⁶. Combatting disinformation by **supporting learners to develop critical thinking and digital literacy as well as promoting active citizenship** can help shape a better, more inclusive and safer online environment for all. In this regard, the upcoming common guidelines for teachers and educational staff is an appreciated step in the right direction, provided synergies be made across all relevant EU policies and initiatives⁷.

Mental health and wellbeing online

In the Public Consultation launched by the Commission in view of the Action Plan, civil society organisations such as LLLP and its members, emphasised that guidance and focus is needed on support for mental health during the Covid-19 crisis. The end of the pandemic is still not in sight and we have not yet averted a mental health crisis. **Measures need to be foreseen to support learners, staff and the**

³ European Parliament resolution of 22 October 2020 on the future of European education in the context of COVID-19

⁴ Lifelong Learning Platform Policy Statement 'Reimagining Education for the Digital Age', 2017

http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigitalPaper_final.pdf

⁵ Lifelong Learning Platform Reaction on the ET2020 Monitor, 2020

<http://lllplatform.eu/?p=20212>

⁶ Plan international [Free to be Online](#) Report girls, Amnesty International Research [Toxic Twitter](#).

⁷ Such as the EU Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ganda_20_1135

larger community to enjoy good mental health and wellbeing. The envisioned Council Recommendation on online and distance learning for primary and secondary education foreseen by the end of 2021 should include this dimension.

The reference to mental health is also an important one in the context of digital education outside of the Covid-19 pandemic, as there is evidence which points towards digital technologies taking a toll on human wellbeing, especially for younger people. We therefore encourage the updating of the DigiComp, not only with regard to AI but also to mental health, this could be an expansion of section 4 of DigiComp.

To ensure safety standards, as stated in LLLP's 2017 position paper⁸, measures to tackle the hazards of digital technology are needed. These include **learning about risks and rights in the online world**, and improving health and digital health literacy⁹, in partnership with stakeholders.

An effective Action Plan needs investment and research

As for **investment in education infrastructure and materials**, resources for schools are fundamental to sustain the digital transition. Such investment is equally important for other learning environments and providers such as non-formal and informal education providers. We urge to equally allocate adequate resources to VET centres, adult learning centres and others. We are firm in our belief that investment must be made in people, not just in technology¹⁰. What's more, as **the role of teachers and educators** has been evolving in the digital age, we call on decision-makers for enhanced support in implementing digital technology in learning environments, through investments in their continued professional development. Teachers and educators should be consulted and involved in defining their training needs, we highly discourage a top-down approach when it comes to identifying educators' training requirements.

While we appreciate the Commission's recognition that more systematic research on the future of education and training is needed, we stress that research should not solely concern the impact of Covid-19, as the Action Plan covers the period 2021-2027. Therefore, as mentioned in our 2017 paper **we ask for the inclusion of research in the priority areas**, as well as for **investment in cross-disciplinary, longitudinal research to assess the long-term impacts of digitalisation on learning**¹¹.

Conclusions and recommendations

We invite EU and Member State policy makers to consider more thoroughly our recommendations and issues raised in our 2017 paper. As highlighted in our response to the European Education Area

⁸ Lifelong Learning Platform Policy Statement 'Reimagining Education for the Digital Age', 2017

http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigitalPaper_final.pdf

⁹ EuroHealthNet, Making the link: health, education, and inequality, 2020

https://eurohealthnet.eu/sites/eurohealthnet.eu/files/publications/PP_Health-Education_online_0.pdf

¹⁰ Lifelong Learning Platform Policy Statement 'Reimagining Education for the Digital Age', 2017

http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigitalPaper_final.pdf

¹¹ European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, Position Paper on the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

<https://q8h.86d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ECSWE-Position-Paper-on-DEAP-2021-2027.pdf>

Communication¹², we welcome the focus on the Digital Transition in education and training but expect to see similar ambitions and equal value to the Green Transition. Moreover, synergies and interactions between the Twin Transitions should exist without inhibiting each other. For instance the development of a European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC) is a welcome step in the right direction to making validation of learning achievements possible, if it is approached with care and contributes to greening as well. It will be crucial to ensure that **while we undergo the digital transformation, social gaps are not widened** and that no citizen is left behind in accessing digital education and training in this process.

Lastly, **we strongly encourage broad cross-sectoral cooperation and consultation** in order to achieve the objectives set out by the Action Plan, this includes education and training providers as well as civil society organisations. Ensuring we give a European common answer to digital education requires coordination at national, regional and local level. For this, the Digital Education Hub can play a key role. We look forward to the publication of the Action Plan's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to monitor and assess the impact produced, and we ask that in the review foreseen for 2024 - as well as the development of the various guidelines¹³ and frameworks¹⁴ proposed - education and training providers, learners, parents and civil society organisations be consulted and involved in transmitting the grassroots reality.

¹² Lifelong Learning Platform Reaction to the Education Package, 2020

http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/LLLP_European-Education-Area_reaction-1.pdf

¹³ Such as the ethical guidelines on AI and data usage in teaching and learning and the guidelines for teachers and education staff to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation.

¹⁴ Including the European Digital Content Framework and the update of the European Digital Competence Framework.