

Research for CULT Committee - Education and youth in post-COVID-19 Europe – crisis effects and policy recommendations

Purpose

The present study makes a first assessment of the resilience of education systems of EU Member States (MS), and of EU education and youth programmes, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The study analyses policy responses and best practices in education and youth work throughout the first and second waves of the pandemic, and provides knowledge that will help to build more resilient education systems and youth sectors in the future.

Key findings and recommendations

Learning from the crisis and building resilient national systems

A resilient education system is one that can adapt and transform itself in the face of adversity. This is crucial to its recovery from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Enhancing resilience requires careful assessment of the impact of the current crisis, as well as the prediction of future crises, to inform policymaking.

a. Support collaborative decision making and crisis management

No EU Member State had in place disaster mitigation strategies for education. Throughout the pandemic, crisis management and decision-making processes rarely involved consultation with youth, or with representatives of the educational sector. Gathering knowledge at EU level may prove particularly valuable for the sharing of experiences. Consultation should also be sensitive to local needs, and reflect lessons learnt from bottom-up initiatives.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on “Education and youth in post-COVID-19 Europe – crisis effects and policy recommendations”. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3eKdaO8>

| Challenge | Recommended EU action |
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| Insufficient cooperation with stakeholders during the pandemic | The EU should work towards a coordinated system that enhances collaboration and cooperation between relevant stakeholders. The European Commission should support collaborative spaces and platforms that enable better synergies and partnerships between different levels of education and between different sectors. |
| Lack of longer-term thinking for resilience | The EU should support the smooth and accessible flow of knowledge, practices and peer-learning with regard to the continuity of education in times of crisis. |

b. Improving the quality and accessibility of education

Educational and legal systems in EU MS have proved sufficiently flexible to allow for *ad hoc* adaptations of education. Of greater concern are their capacities to ensure **quality and accessibility**. Key challenges to the provision of practical and interactive education that emerged during the first wave remained unaddressed during the second wave. Educational content delivery was often contingent on students having appropriate technology and internet connectivity available at home, as well as the necessary independent learning skills to work remotely.

To address these challenges, it is imperative to adopt a different approach to learning that allows a more holistic understanding of education, and emphasises the wellbeing of both students and teachers.

| Challenge | Recommended EU action |
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| Lack of available tools for online learning, and lack of skills regarding the use of digital technologies | The EU should further support national education stakeholders in advancing EU strategies on education and digitalisation to promote high-quality, inclusive, forward-looking education and training systems that harness technology and support all learners, irrespective of gender, age or background. Investments in technological infrastructure and innovation should support the closing of the digital divide and ensure access to education for all families. |
| Lack of solutions for situations in which online learning is not an option | The planned European Digital Education Hub (presented in the Digital Education Action Plan) could serve as a platform for collaboratively developing new solutions and approaches that effectively combine online and offline education. |
| Lack of common standards, interoperability, accessibility and quality assurance of digital learning content | The EU should facilitate the creation of spaces, both online and offline, for cooperation and exchange beyond national and beyond European contexts to allow education communities of practice to learn beyond their national contexts and even beyond the European context. At the same time, it is important to identify, support and enlarge existing networks and platforms to promote the development of consistent quality standards. The EU could assist Member States in developing frameworks to measure and assure the quality of virtual education, as part of a coherent, EU-wide strategy. |

c. Ensuring support to students, young people and families

Many teachers were unprepared for digital education, and lacked appropriate pedagogical and digital skills. Similarly, some institutions, such as those within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, possessed a lower capacity to transform and innovate in the event of adversity or unforeseen events. Remote learning also necessitated the active participation of families. Overall, no uniform or consistent formal support was provided to youth workers, teachers or parents; the support that was provided often consisted of informal, self-organised or impromptu training arranged on a bottom-up basis. It is time to reconsider our approach to learning, which must go beyond academic progress to holistically include support networks, as well as children and youth's **social and emotional wellbeing**.

| Challenge | Recommended EU action |
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| Limited focus on socio-emotional wellbeing, and on safe learning spaces in the digital context | At EU level, the promotion of mental health should be seen as a crucial element in advancing the quality and resilience of education. The EU could facilitate the exchange of good practices and resources to promote and maintain the mental health of young people, particularly those facing inequalities. |
| Lack of efficient school–community/family partnerships | The EU should continue to promote the exchange of good practices through the School Education Gateway, as well as facilitating family–school partnerships and promoting relevant practices to implement such partnerships. |

d. Ensuring smart funding and digitalisation

Funding needs to be reconsidered and reprioritised. This is particularly important, given that funding for education is likely to decrease in the EU and worldwide after the pandemic, due to likely cuts in government subsidies, the inability of students to afford fees, and lower numbers of international students. The technological capabilities of countries must also be improved. Accordingly, funding should be extended to ensure the development of appropriate technology infrastructure. An ambitious vision has emerged towards a stronger public education system that can build on public–private coalitions, involving in particular the EdTech sector.

| Challenge | Recommended EU action |
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| Digital divide | The EU should ambitiously address the opportunities and challenges of digital transformation in education and training, and should foster the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem. |
| Insufficient digital literacy of students and digital competence of educators and training staff | The EU should better support MS by facilitating networking between national stakeholders with regard to the process of digitalising education (e.g. through the European Digital Education Hub and the DigCompEdu framework). |

Improving EU funding programmes in the field of education and youth, and their responsiveness to the crisis

DG EAC provided significant autonomy and flexibility to national agencies to handle extensions and unforeseen costs due to COVID-19. However, to modernise and improve EU education and youth programmes and enhance their resilience and sustainability, Erasmus+ and the ESC should be made more inclusive, innovative, digital and green.

| Challenge | Recommended EU actions |
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| Slow decision-making processes and the inflexibility of funding programmes at EU level intended to enable swift responses at national level | <p>EU institutions and bodies should critically assess their internal efficiency and crisis management teams. EU legislation on education should provide flexibility in the event of unforeseen crises.</p> <p>EU institutions should develop strategies to guide their responses to future crises. Risk mitigation strategies should be put in place to ensure that the EU can act quickly and effectively in the event of a future crisis.</p> <p>EU institutions should continue to collaborate effectively with and build the capacity of national agencies, which will play a leading role in the post-COVID-19 recovery.</p> <p>EU institutions should promote the use of Erasmus cooperation projects to support the digital transformation plans of primary, secondary, VET, higher and adult education institutions.</p> <p>Support should be given to existing platforms to advance the discussion of sector-specific challenges and struggles, as well as negotiating the delicate balance between a coherent strategy at EU level, and national-level flexibility.</p> |

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3eKdaO8>

More information on Policy Department research for CULT: <https://research4committees.blog/cult/>



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