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DRAFT REPORT

on shaping digital education policy
(2020/2135(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

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Rapporteur for the opinion (*):
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CONTENTS

	Page
MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION.....	3
EXPLANATORY STATEMENT	9

MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on Shaping digital education policy (2020/2135(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in particular Article 14 thereof,
- having regard to Article 2 of the Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, concerning the right to education,
- having regard to the motion for a resolution of the Committee on Culture and Education of 22 September 2020 on the future of European education in the context of COVID-19,
- having regard to its resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences¹,
- having regard to its resolution of 11 December 2018 on education in the digital era: challenges, opportunities and lessons for EU policy design²,
- having regard to its resolution of 12 June 2018 on modernisation of education in the EU³,
- having regard to its resolution of 14 September 2017 on a new skills agenda for Europe⁴,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 9 June 2020 on shaping Europe’s digital future⁵,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 26 May 2020 on European teachers and trainers for the future⁶,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 18 November 2019 on the key role of lifelong learning policies in empowering societies to address the technological and green transition in support of inclusive and sustainable growth⁷,

¹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0054.

² Texts adopted, P8_TA(2018)0485.

³ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2018)0247.

⁴ OJ C 337, 20.9.2018, p. 135.

⁵ OJ C 202 I, 16.6.2020, p. 1.

⁶ OJ C 193, 9.6.2020, p. 11.

⁷ OJ C 389, 18.11.2019, p. 12.

- having regard to the Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning⁸,
- having regard to the Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning⁹,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 30 May 2016 on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training¹⁰,
- having regard to the Council recommendation of 19 December 2016 on upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults¹¹,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 27 May 2015 on the role of early childhood education and primary education in fostering creativity, innovation and digital competence¹²,
- having regard to the Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning¹³,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 entitled ‘Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age’ (COM(2020)0624) and to the accompanying staff working document (SWD(2020)0209),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (COM(2020)0625),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 1 July 2020 on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (COM(2020)0274),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 17 January 2018 on the Digital Education Action Plan (COM(2018)0022),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 14 November 2017 on strengthening European identity through education and culture (COM(2017)0673),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 May 2017 on school development and excellent teaching for a great start in life (COM(2017)0248),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 7 December 2016 on improving

⁸ OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1.

⁹ OJ C 189, 15.6.2017, p. 15.

¹⁰ OJ C 212, 14.6.2016, p. 5.

¹¹ OJ C 484, 24.12.2016, p. 1.

¹² OJ C 172, 27.5.2015, p. 17.

¹³ OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

- and modernising education (COM(2016)0941),
- having regard to the report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) entitled ‘Education responses to COVID-19: an implementation strategy toolkit’,
 - having regard to the report by the OECD entitled ‘OECD Skills Outlook 2019: Thriving in a Digital World’,
 - having regard to the report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) entitled ‘Skills for a connected world’,
 - having regard to the report by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training of 4 June 2020 entitled ‘Digital gap during COVID-19 for VET learners at risk in Europe’,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinions of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A9-0000/2020),
- A. whereas inclusive, quality education is the cornerstone of the green and digital transitions;
- B. whereas digital technologies are reshaping society, making basic digital skills and digital literacy now essential for all citizens;
- C. whereas 43 % of Europeans lack basic digital skills, with significant disparities within and between the Member States and on the basis of socioeconomic status, age, income, education level and employment; whereas the Skills Agenda aims to ensure that 70 % of 16- to 74-year-olds have basic digital skills by 2025; whereas data shows a lack of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and in computing studies, that women are underrepresented in high-tech jobs, and a persistent gender pay gap;
- D. whereas digital technologies harbour substantial potential for teachers and learners across education sectors and settings;
- E. whereas access to high-quality digital infrastructure and equipment that is adapted to educational needs is a prerequisite for digital learning; whereas the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden digital transition in education have laid bare the gaps in access across the Union;
- F. whereas the sudden shift to online and distance learning also revealed alarming gaps in the digital skills of teachers, parents and learners and in their ability to use digital technologies effectively;
- G. whereas the shift to online and distance learning has exacerbated existing inequalities, leaving disadvantaged and vulnerable learners and learners with disabilities further

behind, increasing drop-out rates across education sectors, and revealing an absence of pastoral and social support in the digital environment;

- H. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic will herald profound changes and may well not be the last pandemic; whereas it would be unforgivable not to be properly prepared to deliver full-scale quality digital education for all in the event of a potential second wave;

The revised Digital Education Action Plan: vision, governance, funding and measuring performance

1. Welcomes the updated Digital Education Action Plan as a further step towards a more comprehensive digital skills and education strategy; believes that the plan will have been a success if, by its completion, digital education is considered a significant part of education policy and has delivered clear, consistent and positive results in terms of access and quality across the Union;
2. Commends the decision to align the plan with the multiannual financial framework (MFF), as this allows for a longer-term perspective and ties it in with the relevant funding instruments; underlines the importance of the plan in delivering the European Education Area;
3. Notes, however, that delivering the plan effectively depends on coordination across a broad range of programmes; calls on the Commission to ensure effective synergies between these programmes;
4. Points to the importance of the ‘Connect’ and ‘Reskill and upskill’ flagship investment priorities in the Recovery and Resilience Facility for driving the digital education agenda; calls for 10 % of the facility’s funding to be allocated to education and encourages the Member States to increase their education funding;
5. Underlines the value of pilot projects and preparatory actions initiated by Parliament in ensuring more Union-wide cooperation to tackle the educational gaps between Member States, regions and rural and urban areas; calls for their mainstreaming into programmes;
6. Welcomes the Commission’s scheduled mid-term review of the plan and its intention to ramp up data collection; reiterates the need for a clear implementation timetable; remains convinced that the plan needs a clearer governance and coordination structure, in which Parliament should be involved, to monitor developments and performance on an ongoing basis; calls on the Commission, therefore, to establish a forum bringing together the Member States, Parliament and other relevant stakeholders and experts; urges the Commission to better integrate digital education into the European Semester exercise;
7. Welcomes the Digital Education Hubs as a first step towards a co-creation process involving key stakeholders; calls on the Commission to supervise implementation at national level and ensure fair representation and independence within the hubs; calls on the Commission to fully involve Parliament in creating European and national hubs and in nominating relevant stakeholders;

Fostering a high-performing digital education ecosystem

8. Deplores the persistent digital divide in the Union; regrets the fact that in some Member States, like Romania, efforts to provide access to quality digital education have failed, leaving more than 30 % of pupils without access to education for several months; shares the Commission's analysis that fast and reliable internet and quality digital equipment in educational establishments, non-formal settings and the home are prerequisites for effective digital education;
9. Insists that broadband should be considered a public good and be universally accessible as a critical step in closing the digital divide; calls for specific measures to enhance access for remote, rural and mountain areas with low connectivity and limited access to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, blockchain, new educational devices or gamification, in the light of their growing importance and potential; calls for a new initiative on AI and robotics for education;
10. Welcomes the plan's focus on supporting school and university connectivity through the Connecting Europe Facility and efforts to publicise EU funding opportunities; calls on the Commission to work closely with Member States, local authorities and stakeholders to ensure that EU support dovetails with national schemes, in particular to support disadvantaged groups; calls on the Commission to target support at other educational establishments besides schools;

Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation

11. Insists that greater attention be devoted to teacher training as the plan is rolled out so as to ensure that teachers not only possess digital skills, but can also teach them; calls for a pan-Union initiative to develop new pedagogical methods for the digital environment; underlines the increasingly important role played by parents and tutors in distance learning and calls for them to be given special training and support mechanisms;
12. Underlines the challenge of cyberthreats, cyberbullying, data and privacy protection, dangerous online games and disinformation in the digital environment; warmly welcomes, therefore, the increased focus on digital and information literacy in the revised plan; looks forward to the swift adoption of the Media Action Plan and the guidelines for teachers and educational staff; calls on the Commission to be more ambitious and to launch large-scale digital literacy campaigns;
13. Underlines the need to enhance tools at Union level to open up lifelong learning opportunities and to enable full and quality access to university and post-university courses and materials; calls on the Commission to create an Online European University with distance and online education content available across Europe;
14. Recalls that special attention should be paid to digital proficiency for lower-skilled adults, persons with disabilities, persons from vulnerable groups and older people; points out that in 2018, just 4.3 % of low-skilled adults used any form of adult learning;
15. Deplores, therefore, the continued absence of measures targeting lower-skilled adult learners and older people; stresses that this omission undermines the essential lifelong learning dimension of digital education and hampers efforts to ensure that everyone has

essential life skills; calls on the Commission, therefore, to work with regional and local authorities to put further measures in place to ensure that these population groups can truly benefit from the digital transition;

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16. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Introduction

According to UNESCO, nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries – 94 % of the global learner population – were affected by the closure of education and training institutions at the height of the COVID-19 crisis with over 60 % of learners around the world still being impacted.¹ The same story played out across formal and non-formal education settings – crèches, pre-schools, VET colleges, universities, youth clubs and adult education colleges closed their doors and, in many cases, when the infrastructure was available to them, shifted online. Digital education was more than a tool; it became a necessity and a widespread solution to face the lockdown and provide education to as many learners as possible. This new reality underlined the need for a European approach to digital education and for the EU to work with global institutions and actors, like the United Nations, the World Bank and the Council of Europe, in identifying tailored solutions for the new challenges.

While there has been much innovation and remarkable creativity by educational establishments and their staff, enabling many to continue learning, the overall picture has been of a rushed digital transition, which has left those who were already behind even further behind. In some parts of the world, remote learning is virtually impossible to deliver. In Romania, close to 1 million children, representing 32 % of pupils in Romania, did not have access to education for several months due to low access to basic infrastructure². By contrast, around 90 per cent of high-income countries have offered remote learning, mostly online³, but this still leaves 10 per cent of schoolchildren with no form of learning, with huge inequalities according to socioeconomic status. Research⁴ has shown that, even in wealthy Member States, not all households have one usable device or an Internet connection. These are the bare basics for any form of online learning.

The pandemic has highlighted many other gaps in the digital education ecosystem. Apart from access in the first place, schoolchildren need teachers who are digitally proficient enough to deliver effective online learning and a ready-made set of resources for the online environment. Digital tools are useful for teaching and learning. But education requires more than having access to digital devices; it calls for an integrated approach, taking into consideration the psychological, social, pedagogical and practical requirements of teaching and learning. Parents are also key in guiding children online. Learners with learning difficulties or special educational needs require tailored support that has too often been lacking. Despite everyone's efforts, the lack of digital skills among teachers and trainers and

¹ Up-to-date figures are provided by UNESCO at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

² Study conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy on education during the status of emergency - https://cdn.edupedu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ires_accesul-elevilor-din-romania-la-educatie-online_studiu-national_aprilie-2020.pdf.

³ School closures, government responses and learning inequality around the world during Covid-19', Brookings Institution, 14 April 2020 - <https://www.brookings.edu/research/school-closures-government-responses-and-learning-inequality-around-the-world-during-covid-19/>.

⁴ 'Covid-19 and Social Mobility: Impact Brief - School Shutdown', 20 April 2020 - <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>.

the shortage of effective teacher training in digital learning has been laid bare. Parents too have struggled, some because they lack the language, literacy, numeracy or digital skills required to help their children. Special actions, financially supported by European and national programmes, are needed to support parents and tutors in developing the skills required to help their children. Many adults and children alike have themselves been grappling for the first time with basic digital literacy, cyber hygiene, privacy and media literacy, data protection, cyberbullying and dangerous online games. Disinformation has also become a particular challenge during the health crisis. Again, the statistics are stark: there is a direct correlation between income and level of education on the one hand and a propensity to use the internet for information and education on the other⁵.

On the one hand, therefore, the Covid-19 crisis has provided a compelling test bed for digital education policy and, on the other, has exposed myriad failings. In a working document published in early September 2020, your Rapporteur called for an update to the 2018 Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP)⁶ that would develop a coherent and integrated approach to digital education, with clear objectives, financial support and a timetable, leading to a common approach at European level involving all relevant stakeholders.

Shaping a common European digital education policy.

In order to build a coherent digital education policy, we have to understand the importance of education in shaping the future of our societies and in driving a successful digital and green transition. Recently, the OECD stated that the lockdown has had a huge impact on education leading to severe training and skilling gaps that will generate a loss of productivity for individuals across the world, a significant drop in income and a reduction of GDP in the medium and long term that can only be overcome by more investment in education. Clear investment targets are therefore needed at EU, national, regional and local level. At least 10 % of the Recovery and Resilience Facility is needed to provide solutions to the current education and skills needs, while Member States should continue increasing their funding for education.

Despite the undisputed success of the flagship Union education and training programme, Erasmus+, Member States have hesitated to engage in further more intensive forms of cooperation and the lack of a true European Education Area has prompted mixed responses to education and training in the current COVID-19 crisis. The transition towards digital education has not been accompanied by further Member State cooperation on the solutions and tools used and funding for education has remained limited despite the growing needs of the educational systems. The new reality has pointed to the need for common quality standards at EU level that could enable us to build education systems across Europe that are inclusive and that provide practical, fit-for-purpose solutions to the digitalisation of education. It is clear that digital technologies harbour substantial potential for teachers and learners across education sectors and settings, enabling access to a range of materials and formats, and that these new tools are useful not only for distance learning but could also be adapted to enhance in-person learning. We need to learn the lessons from the pandemic to deliver full-scale quality digital education for all in the event of a potential second wave.

⁵ 'Adult learners in a digital world', EPRS, October 2019 - [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2019\)640141](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2019)640141) - and 'The 2018 International Computer and Information Literacy Study', European Commission.

⁶ <https://cultnet.in.ep.europa.eu/home/welcome/work-in-progress/draft-reports.html>.

Digital inclusion goes hand-in-hand with social inclusion and this is widely reflected in EU statistics. Forty-three per cent of Europeans lack basic digital skills with significant disparities within and between Member States and based on socioeconomic status, age, income, gender, level of education and employment. These structural deficiencies can only begin to be resolved through a coherent, integrated and targeted European Digital Education Policy that has to be implemented at a faster pace. Therefore, your Rapporteur urges the Commission to bring forward the date of publication of the various Council Recommendations on digital education to 2021.

Our assessment of the 2020 Digital Education Action Plan.

In December 2018, the European Parliament called on the European Commission to be more ambitious and develop a comprehensive digital skills and education strategy⁷. The new Plan provides us with a new, more strategic approach, but, in order for it to be successful, we need to ensure that, at the end of its implementation, digital education is a significant part of education policy with clear, consistent and positive results in terms of access and quality across the EU.

It is clear for the European Parliament that for any strategy to be effective, it needs proper funding. In this regard, we welcome that the Plan is aligned with the 7-year multi-annual financial framework (MFF) but would also call for better coordination and effective synergies across the broad range of programmes that support it, including Erasmus+, the European Social Fund Plus and the Connecting Europe Facility. At the same time, we underline the value of pilot projects and preparatory actions initiated by the European Parliament to ensure more Union-wide coordination to tackle education gaps between Member States. In particular, a recently adopted pilot project focused on improving connectivity in rural, mountain and remote areas could be a key starting point for a pan-European initiative to reduce the gaps between and within Member States.

A high-performing European digital education ecosystem.

Despite the lack of a European response, the current pandemic has shown the existence and development of a European digital education ecosystem with successful initiatives across Europe initiated by local authorities, entrepreneurs and innovators, NGOs and universities, trade unions and private companies, professors, learners, researchers and even parents. European society has shown resilience in the face of the current challenges and managed to generate innovation that has made us proud of what we can achieve together. The ICS Capozzi-Galilei School in Italy, for instance, developed a ‘Science Escape Room’, a virtual tool to provide students with an immersive learning experience and enhance science literacy. The Polytechnic University of Catalonia in Barcelona devised a mobile platform – ‘Student4Students’ – to connect high school pupils interested in IT careers with university IT students. The Institute for Global Digital Policies, at SNSPA, and E-Civis Association, in Bucharest, designed the first Romanian educational tablet, an adapted low-cost digital device with personalised educational content and secure digital learning apps.

But such positive examples need support to exist and scale up at European level. Too often, such initiatives have been ignored and the potential they foster at European level has

⁷ 2018/2090(INI): Education in the digital era: challenges, opportunities and lessons for EU policy design’ - https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0485_EN.html.

remained untapped. The first step is to consider broadband internet a public good and ensure it is universally accessible. The same thing must apply to emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, robotics, gamification, new educational devices or blockchain. We call, therefore, for the creation of an AI and robotics initiative in the field of digital education. We also need to identify solutions for fast and reliable internet and quality digital education in educational establishments, in non-formal settings and at home. This means tackling all the difficulties faced for instance by VET institutions, which rely on hands-on training, but also to make sure people from disadvantaged groups, people with disabilities, lower-skilled learners, seniors and people from rural and remote areas benefit from special attention in order to increase their digital proficiency and get access to digital education. Women, too, need support to continue with computing and STEM studies and the enduring gender gap in the high-tech sector must be closed. We need to put our know-how and resources together and initiatives, like the creation of an Online European University, the development of a pan-European educational platform, the proposal to create Teacher Academies or the implementation of the European Digital Skills Certificate (EDCS), supported by European institutions and stakeholders, could be examples that enable the creation of a European framework for digital education.

Nelson Mandela said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. Now, the world is changing at a faster pace due to the pandemic and new technologies. We are on the cusp of a new era for education. It is time for Europe to shape its own digital education policy offering all learners access to quality digital education across the continent and beyond.