**EU action plan for digital skills for all broadly welcomed**

[**Nic Mitchell**](https://www.universityworldnews.com/fullsearch.php?mode=search&writer=Nic+Mitchell)  02 October 2020

The European Commission this week announced a revised Digital Education Action Plan with an emphasis on Europe-wide enhancement of connectivity, infrastructure and cooperation and providing access to digital skills for all.

The plan is part of a package that includes two initiatives designed to strengthen the contribution of education and training to the European Union’s recovery from the coronavirus crisis and help build a ‘green and digital Europe’.

Unveiling the *Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027: Resetting education for the digital age* alongside two dedicated communications on the European Education Area and the European Research Area, the commission said they would encourage stronger cooperation between EU member states and stakeholders “to make education and training systems truly fit for the digital age”.

The [digital action plan](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/deap-communication-sept2020_en.pdf) says: “The quality and inclusiveness of education and training systems and providing digital skills for all during the digital and green transitions is of strategic importance for the EU.”

It points out that many employers face difficulties in recruiting highly skilled workers across a number of economic sectors and too few adults are upskilling or reskilling to fill these vacancies, “often because training is not available at the right time and in the right place”.

It sees digital technologies as “powerful enablers for the green economic transition” but adds that the process of digital transformation risks widening the “urban-rural digital divide” as has been highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis.

Among the goals shared with the Skills Agenda and other EU initiatives is ensuring that “70% of 16- to 74-year-olds should have at least basic digital skills by 2025.”

The plan suggests funding should be sought from the Erasmus programme, the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and smart specialisation policies, the Connecting Europe Facility, the Digital Europe Programme, and Horizon Europe.

**Aligning with future demands**
Higher education and training leaders have broadly welcomed the plan but stressed the need to focus on future skills requirements rather than just the important but shorter-term demands of recovery from the impact of the pandemic.

Professor Mark Brown, director of the National Institute for Digital Learning based at Dublin City University in Ireland, said: “Credit to the commission for having such a comprehensive conversation. It is not easy implementing a plan like this across so many countries at a national level and moving towards a common European framework.”

He told *University World News*: “The priority now is ensuring alignment at a European level with other initiatives, such as the skills agenda, and making sure digital education meets the needs of society and not just changes in employment practice that might take place due to the pandemic over the next couple of years.”

He welcomed the proposed ecosystem and efforts to close the gap “between what the commission says in documents like this and what happens at the national level” as well as “moving away from just seeing digital education as a magic bullet to solve all our problems”.

But he was disappointed there was not more about “the potential of micro-credentials” and making sure they are fit for purpose in the digital age” in the digital plan and other new European Commission initiatives.

He told *University World News*: “Lifelong learning should be about more than just-enough learning in small chunks.

“We need to be thinking about what skills we will need in 10 to 15 years’ time – not just tomorrow – and move away from thinking about narrow skills for work. Digital education for citizenship is what I am really talking about and online learning for life skills.”

**Critical time**

Amanda Crowfoot, secretary general of the European University Association (EUA), described the action plan as “very timely to address challenges and underpin forward-looking practices in digitally enhanced education” and said it had come “at a critical time”.

She welcomed the “emphasis on Europe-wide enhancement of connectivity and infrastructure, and cooperation” and said: “The ongoing COVID-19 crisis requires immediate measures to better equip institutions, teachers and learners”.

But she warned that the European initiatives “must ensure that digitally enhanced education does not get branded as an emergency mode, but instead foster forward-looking strategies and actions beyond the crisis which are paramount for resilience and innovation”.

Michael Gaebel, head of the EUA’s Higher Education Policy Unit, said many of the digital plan proposals could apply across education and that higher education institutions would have to “carve-out” what was applicable to the university sector.

He welcomed the strong emphasis on international collaboration and told *University World News* that the higher education sector was still in “the phase of forced digital take-up due to the COVID-19 pandemic”, but that teachers and universities had “pivoted quite well” to digital learning.

“It wasn’t perfect everywhere and it worked better for some teachers than others, but things were achieved in four or five weeks that you would have thought would have taken four or five years.

“The task now is to build on what has been achieved and make sure staff and students are supported as well off-campus in remote learning as they are on campus.

**Contribute to better learning**

“What is important now is that we ensure that digitally-enhanced learning is not rendered as a kind of emergency mode, but is something that should be developed to contribute to better learning in the future.”

*University World News* reported on 9 June 2020 that data collection by U-Multirank, the comparison university website originally set by the European Commission, showed that universities around the world were largely unprepared for a sudden switch to online learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – with only a third providing full online courses in some form.

Gaebel told *University World News* that a [survey](https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index/) carried out by Ireland’s National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as the coronavirus crisis started to hit Europe showed that, while everyone knew online delivery was possible in higher education, 70% of academics responding to the questionnaire had never taught online. “They have now,” he said.

Executive Vice President for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age, Margrethe Vestager, was among those in the sector welcoming the revised Digital Education Action Plan, which was first published in 2018.

She said: “Education and training have faced huge disruption due to COVID-19 and a quick shift to distance and online learning. The mass use of technology has revealed gaps and exposed weaknesses. This is also an opportunity to reset education and training for the digital age.”

European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, described the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan as both “essential for European recovery and future growth”.

She said: “They set out a common vision of the future of education linked to our commitments towards the digital and green transitions. We now need to focus on implementation and on creating synergies between them.”

But, looking in from the outside, Malaysian-based Louise Nicol, founder of Asia Careers Group SDN BHD, which helps Higher Education Institutions gather data, map and track their international graduate outcomes, said she was surprised at the lack of references to employability and asked: “Would national governments have much interest in any education initiative that is not directly linked to jobs?”

**Strategic priorities**

Two interrelated aspects to digital education are cited as “strategic priorities” in the action plan. Firstly, the deployment of the vast and growing array of digital technologies (apps, platforms, software) to improve and extend education and training and, secondly, the need to equip all learners with digital competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) to live, work, learn and thrive in a world increasingly mediated by digital technologies.

“While member states are responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education and training systems, action at EU level can contribute to the development of quality and inclusive education and training by supporting cooperation, the exchange of good practice, frameworks, research, recommendations and other tools,” it says.

Recent data shows a diverse situation of digital education across EU member states, with the OECD’s PISA exercise in 2018 reporting that many low-income homes had no access to computers. Eurostat figures from 2019 indicated that access to broadband internet varies significantly across the EU, ranging from 74% of households for the lowest-income quartile to 97% in the highest-income quartile.

On teacher preparedness, the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2018 showed that only 39% of educators in the EU felt well or very well prepared for using digital technologies, with significant differences between member states.

The COVID-19 crisis meant there was little choice but to use digital technologies to provide education and training, but “teachers, students and parents faced a steep learning curve” and the pandemic exposed the shortcomings, says the action plan.

In some member states the vast majority of educators and learners had little if any experience of teaching and learning online and the commission wants to “move beyond the unplanned and emergency phase imposed on education providers, teachers, students, families and the education system as a whole” through a strategic and longer-term approach to digital education and training.

**Response to COVID-19 crisis**

The action plan forms part of the EU’s response to the COVID-19 crisis and its guiding principles should help to make education and training systems fit for the digital age through high-quality and inclusive digital education, appropriate investment in connectivity, equipment and organisational capacity and increasing equality and inclusiveness.

Basic digital skills should become part of the core transferable skills for all so that they can engage in society as an active citizen, it says.

Priority areas and actions include:

• Engaging governments, education and training institutions, the private sector and the public to develop a high-performing digital education ecosystem;

• Better equipped and trained teachers and trainers; and

• High-capacity internet connectivity for bandwidth-heavy applications.

The plan is seen as launching a strategic dialogue with member states in order to prepare a possible proposal for a Council Recommendation by 2022 on the enabling factors for successful digital education and using EU funding as well as member state and private funding to tackle the connectivity and equipment gaps.

It wants member states to develop guidelines for digital pedagogy, drawn from best practice and experience, and to make the most of EU support with regard to internet access, purchase of digital equipment and e-learning applications and platforms for schools and, in particular, for students from disadvantaged groups and for students and educators with disabilities.

The plan says “equipping Europe’s workers and job seekers with digital skills will be critical for economic recovery in the coming years. In addition to digital skills, the digital economy requires also complementary skills such as adaptability, communication and collaboration skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship and readiness to learn.

“Education should more actively help learners to develop the ability to critically approach, filter and assess information, notably to identify disinformation and to manage overload of information as well as develop financial literacy.”

**Practical steps**

Among the practical steps suggested in the action plan is a European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC) which could be recognised and accepted by governments, employers and other stakeholders across Europe.

To improve cooperation on digital education at the EU level, the commission intends to establish a European Digital Education Hub to support member states through a network of national advisory services on digital education exchange experience and good practice.

For higher education, the European Universities initiative will develop virtual and face-to-face EU inter-university campuses and implement innovative models of digital higher education, says the action plan.

The European Student Card Initiative will play a key role in secure electronic exchange and verification of student data and academic records simplify the management of student mobility.

To foster closer cooperation and help to overcome policy fragmentation, outreach events in the form of a stakeholder forum would bring together member states, EU institutions, and education stakeholders. These would include teacher and parent organisations, local authorities, civil society groups and businesses, especially companies committed to the digital education agenda.

**International cooperation**

International cooperation on digital education is seen as integral to the action plan to promote “global cooperation, while simultaneously addressing its strategic goals in priority regions, notably the western Balkans, Africa, and the Neighbourhood regions of the Eastern Partnership and the South Mediterranean.”

Similarly, the commission will support the efforts of the Eastern Partnership countries through the EU4Digital Initiative and “foster sustainable development and deliver concrete benefits to African partners while exchanging best practices within the framework of the Africa Europe Alliance.”

The plan will now go to the European Parliament and the European Council to endorse.