

# EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF DIGITALISATION

12 October 2020



## 1. Introduction

For the EPP Group, **education** is an investment in our common future and a principal instrument for the development and self-realisation of each individual, a tool for unlocking everyone's potential: quality education boosts creativity and innovation and fosters forward-looking capacities. It positively impacts social cohesion as a precondition for economic growth, job creation and **employment**. Educated citizens are a fundamental pillar of our democratic societies. Education strengthens our European identity and helps to preserve commonly **shared values**. Thanks to education, people can orient themselves better in the world. Education allows citizens to develop opinions, rationalise, practice free and critical thinking, and to exploit their abilities and competences; it enables European citizens to shape our common future.

The EPP Groups stands for **subsidiarity** in education. The content of teaching and the organisation of education systems<sup>1</sup> is a national competence and it has to remain so. However, new challenges require the mobilisation of European tools and supporting policies within the **European Education Area**. Therefore, the EU must fulfil its priorities, monitor achievements (European Semester) and assist Member States. Moreover, the EU should cherish and develop its appraised method which consists of monitoring progress and exchanging best practices and using programmes that have to remain major tools for promoting the EU's goals. **Investments** both at national and EU level must create an **educational inclusive environment** in which every child is able to achieve maximal potential and be included within society.

## 2. Challenges

**The digital transformation** of our societies, the rapid development of new technologies and scientific advances in the fields of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics, all provide countless opportunities in almost every aspect of our lives. The digital transformation affects the field of education which is about to undergo the most substantial change since the introduction of compulsory education. According to some estimates, 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in new job types that do not yet exist<sup>2</sup>. The potential of digital technologies in education has not yet been fully utilised in order to provide quality education that is accessible to all. **The ethical dimension of digitalisation and AI must be at the forefront of our efforts**. Therefore, an ethical and human-centric AI approach should be ensured by EU programmes and schemes. Digital technologies should be perceived as a tool to provide quality education and training. In the future, there will be an increased need for digital skills (coding, logistics and robotics) which will concern not only IT education courses but it will touch upon the curriculum as a whole. Increased effort should be made to avoid any forms of bias or discrimination in digital algorithms and IT tools used for education purposes.

While digital tools can help the process of learning, they must remain complementary to the physical presence of educators as well as their expertise and judgement. Digital technology certainly cannot substitute the role of the teacher, as

<sup>1</sup> Art. 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

<sup>2</sup> <https://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/chapter-1-the-future-of-jobs-and-skills/>

human interaction and skills of educators are vital for sharpening critical thinking of pupils and students as well as their analytic and evidence-based reasoning; these skills are of paramount importance for a quality education. Likewise, the physical presence of students and pupils provides an interaction and cooperation amongst them that is essential to stimulate the learning process.

The European Union and Member States need to closely observe future **developments on the labour market**. The impact of new technologies, robotics and AI on employment needs to be fully explored. According to some estimates, millions of EU jobs are at high risk of disappearing, while at the same time, the labour market would increasingly prioritise focus on the **STEM** fields. We need to consider how individuals will adapt to and navigate an ever-changing world over the coming decades. In the education and training sectors, it is necessary to develop practical solutions on career guidance, deterrence of student dropouts, online adult learning and requalification. Adult education cannot be limited to teaching new skills only to adapt to labour market changes. **Adult education** also provides social networks and prevents social isolation. Digital technologies can offer new methods and opportunities for adult and elderly people's education too, not being a substitute but complementing physical ones.

More attention should be paid to **vocational education and training** (VET) and forms of dual education in order to take into account labour market requirements. We need highly-skilled specialists to be trained and equipped with digital skills and innovative and entrepreneur thinking.

The EPP Group recognises the importance of **lifelong learning**. Future oriented education and vocational training will help the European Union and its Member States cope better with unemployment resulting from the practical use of robotics and AI, as well as helping in career changes.

Further challenges require additional adaptations of educational content and systems. **Security** and migration, **environmental** issues (climate change), **radicalisation**, the rise of extreme political movements and **disinformation** campaigns are amongst the most important areas to which education has to respond as a key component of long-term solutions. A special role in this respect belongs to teaching in the areas of social

sciences and humanities, which should be based on evidence and data and academic independence. The EU should help Member States to develop environmental education, media and financial literacy to empower all citizens to make good decisions.

We note that **demographic challenges** represent one of the crucial issues the European Union will have to deal with in the decades to come. An important role in this respect belongs to national education systems. The European Union should help and encourage the Member States in promoting family-oriented educational policies striving to achieve a balance between family life and work.

### 3. Lessons from the COVID-19 crisis

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The health crisis we have been experiencing has dramatically shaken up the education sector. It has created many challenges for teachers, students, parents and institutions' leadership at all levels of education and training. More than ever, the EU must act quickly and with conviction. The European Commission published the updated Digital Education Plan. We need to learn the lessons from the crisis and utilise the updated Plan and we also need to make clear to citizens that the EU is able to respond quickly to emerging challenges.

The existing **deficiencies and the insufficient transformation** of digital education were fully exposed during the Coronavirus lockdown which forced millions of children, pupils and students to stay at home. Families with school-attending/school-age children were forced to adapt to the new reality of home education. It had a major impact on education systems, students, families, teachers and school institutions. We acknowledge the enormous efforts made by families all over the EU in order to keep pace with the school curricula and help their children to learn at home. Schools and teachers – on many occasions without any proper preparation – were obliged to adapt to distance learning, using emails, online video-chats, and other means to connect to the children in order to provide adequate teaching opportunities during the confinement. It was also a significant challenge for children with disabilities, who are at a greater disadvantage when interacting through digital media. Governments, public televisions, social partners, education and

training providers, NGOs and individuals were able to set up virtual classrooms and collaboration platforms incredibly quickly. The Coronavirus lockdown thus led to an acceleration of the setting-up of distance learning and an ad-hoc digitalisation of education. In this process, many shortcomings turned up. Ad hoc digitalisation should be considered as a temporary measure for remote education. In order to be prepared for the future, we need to draw lessons from it and develop a solid methodology and support for systematic distance learning, while starting with the preparation of teachers and designing measures that guarantee accessibility for all children, including those with disabilities. The Coronavirus lockdown further highlighted the problems of the not-yet achieved digitalisation of education and access to digital technologies and resources both by schools and by families. It showed differences among and within the Member States and highlighted those countries that have already invested in digitally-available teaching materials, **teacher training and digital literacy**. Furthermore, the Coronavirus experience also resurfaced the problem of inequalities within societies, showing that children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or socially-excluded communities, such as marginalised Roma communities from rural, remote, as well as highly urbanised areas, had reduced or no access to online education during the crisis. Therefore, we must ensure that connectivity reaches every corner in the EU, especially in remote and rural areas.

We have to provide schools (teachers and students) not only with technical support and an Internet connection, but also with the necessary support on safe and reliable software, e-learning materials and platforms for best practice-sharing to be able to continue with distance learning. When the pandemic is over, we have to learn from this experience and adjust schooling to the 21st century everywhere in the EU and use the tools we set up for distance learning, also in regular schooling.

For the EPP Group, it is an important goal to provide high quality and inclusive education for all children in Europe. Digital literacy has become an essential factor in it. This includes ensuring equal access to digital education, i.e. all children should be able to obtain digital knowledge, skills and competences that will be crucial for their welfare and self-realisation in future life. **No child should be left behind**. Everyone needs to get the chance of personal development and

quality education to pursue their goals in life and professionally. It is unacceptable that some children are not able to participate in digital education to the same extent as others, simply because their parents cannot afford the necessary tools. Preventing social exclusion contributing to digital exclusion starts with the full recognition of the fact the many socially-disadvantaged children, including children with disabilities, do not have the same learning possibilities at home as their peers do. Digital education should not be, however, limited to ensuring access to Internet and digital devices. Additional active measures and supportive and accessible tutoring should be available to these children in order to break out of this self-perpetuating cycle. Greater involvement of children themselves and their parents is needed in this process, also in relation with digital protection, especially in cases where parents have little or no knowledge of the Internet. Special attention should also be paid to children with special educational needs who have a learning problem or disability that make it more difficult for them to learn than most children of their age. This inclusion principle should be always present, especially in crisis situations such as COVID-19.

**Teachers** are crucial to the success of any educational reform. They must be supported and trained in developing their digital skills and competences. In this context, the Digital Europe Programme can be instrumental. For that purpose, we need to get inspiration from good examples in some countries<sup>3</sup>. The European Commission, together with the Member States, should financially support such training courses designed for teachers in order to prepare them to carry out teaching activities using the new platforms. The next generation of teachers needs to be equipped with digital skills and competences to prepare children for the future, while exploiting the potential of digital teaching methods. Focus on education of next generations should start with the teachers.

Providing access to digital education from an early age and getting children familiar with technology will increase their capabilities and increase their knowledge of safe Internet use. Children must learn how to avoid content that is not suitable

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<sup>3</sup> In Denmark and France, the use of information technology in education is a compulsory part of teacher training. And also countries such as Denmark, Estonia and Finland can now build on their existing development of digital education.

for their age and to react properly in case they face it. Parents, educators and tutors play a key role in this mission. It is also important to note that any development in the field of digital education must go hand-in-hand with a robust framework of data protection. We are aware of the fact that the school environment is especially sensitive to personal **data protection**. We need to pay special attention to sensitive and confidential data. Member States and schools should guarantee that everyone, including children and their parents, understand why and how it is collected and what risks may arise from its use. Therefore, schools need to be provided not only with technical support and a high-speed Internet connection, but also with safe and reliable software, quality e-learning materials and platforms for best practice-sharing.

## 4. European tools

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The European Union has a set of instruments supporting the development of formal and non-formal education as well as investment in educational infrastructure. A synergy between the various tools is needed in order to deliver with impact. The **European Structural and Investment Funds** (ESIF) and other instruments can provide resources for investments in educational infrastructure and contribute to up-skilling and re-skilling (ESF).

**Horizon Europe** is a crucial component for enhancing research capacities of universities with the aim of transforming into high-quality tertiary education. Horizon Europe needs to build upon spreading excellence but also widening participation, which will, in turn, strengthen the entire European research area. This can be achieved, especially through facilitating synergies between Horizon Europe and the ESIF.

The **Connecting Europe Facility** can be used to finance **digital equipment in EU schools** needed for online learning (laptops, tablets) and to provide high connectivity for schools, especially in excluded, remote or rural areas. Digital equipment for schools and teachers is a crucial element in terms of providing education to pupils and students in a digital form. The European Union should provide financial support - also through its cohesion funds - the development of online libraries, which would store filmed lessons, and further materials that would further enhance digital and distance education.

Furthermore, the EPP Group is proposing to mobilise recovery funds, tailor-made for convergence and cohesion, to boost school digital infrastructure in the EU and according to the schools and pupils' needs. In doing so, the EU would be helping the Member States and regions efficiently and in a visible way based on their demands. Providing modern equipment to teachers would, in turn, reduce their administrative workload and free up space for engagement with students.

**Erasmus+** is one of the most popular EU programmes as it reinforces the sense of European identity, increases employability and supports the personal and professional development of young and older Europeans. Young people who have grown up in a united Europe should be as enthusiastic as possible about Europe. Almost all Erasmus participants agree that their experience has encouraged them to be more open-minded and confident in their newly-acquired skills.

The EPP Group stands behind the Erasmus+ Programme as a well-known flagship programme and important EU tool for influencing education policies and our investment in future generations. Digitalisation has to be its essential part, especially at a time of reduced mobility, resulting, for example, from necessary measures to fight the Coronavirus epidemic. The EPP Groups supports the further development of a **blended learning** concept where physical mobility is complemented by virtual meetings and learning. The EPP Group reiterates its call to increase the **Erasmus+ budget** in order to extend the target group of beneficiaries and participants, and especially those with a disadvantaged background. The EPP Groups wants Erasmus+ to be as efficient and inclusive as possible. In light of complicated budgetary decisions, the EPP Group gives priority to the core Erasmus+ activities.

**The European Solidarity Corps (ESC)** is a new programme and a successful successor to the European Voluntary Service. The EPP Group supports the value of **volunteering** and its importance for society and the development of individuals. Volunteering is an important source of non-formal learning and should be recognised as such. The EPP Group supports the volunteering part of the ESC as the most valuable one. It has to be given preference in cases of difficult budgetary choices.

Similar to the Digital Competence Framework, the EU should develop a

**common framework for teaching and learning about the EU** at (lower and upper) secondary education level. The recently-launched *Jan Amos Comenius Prize for high quality teaching about the European Union* (an EPP Group initiative) is a pilot project that paves the way for the above-mentioned goals. In negotiations on the next 7-year Erasmus+ Programme, the EPP Group is striving to extend the Jean Monnet actions from the field of higher education to all levels of education and training.

The European Union as a whole and the Member States need to increase their ambition to fulfil education priorities. With the new **Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP)**, the European Commission is working on improving digital education systems and structures in Europe. The new Action Plan, as part of the future European Education Area, is now extending the scope of action and sets specific targets to address persistent gaps, for example in digital skills; the promotion of quality computer and information technology education; support for better connectivity in schools; online learning content and tools; and digital literacy of schools and higher education institutions. The new DEAP not only deals with formal learning structures, but informal education is included in the scope of the plan. It is precisely in the field of digital education that the aspect of further training in the context of lifelong learning is so important.

The process of reaching digital education should be accelerated by the further enhancement of existing online education platforms. They should focus on online education and provide teachers with best practices. Such platforms need to become a useful tool for educators in the formal education systems and bring both teachers and pupils closer to a more digitalised education, able to keep up with the ever-changing demands of the labour market, social market economy, life-long learning and needs of the new generations.

The EPP Group supports the **Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE)**, a multilingual and open membership community of adult learning professionals, including adult educators and trainers, guidance and support staff which is funded by the Erasmus+ Programme. Its role is to keep the adult learning community connected. Its strategy is to help professional adult educators share experiences and expertise. Programmes such as EPALÉ, however, should be better promoted in order to achieve their audience, which in many cases has limited digital knowledge and tools.

## 5. Summary - the EPP Group proposes to:

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1. **Keep supporting education as an investment in our future. Strive for quality and equality in education and training and consider it as a condition of social inclusion, high employment and economic growth;**
2. **Respect subsidiarity in education but look for new tools at EU level supporting Member States in strengthening their education systems;**
3. **Make use of the Recovery Package to invest in digital equipment for schools and for pupils in the EU, notably in excluded areas - no child should be left behind!**
4. **Support the ERASMUS+ Programme and its budget in order to make it more efficient and inclusive - opportunity for every student and teacher!**
5. **Support volunteering as the key activity of the ESC;**
6. **Encourage the European Commission to design the digital education action plan as a system tool at both EU and national level for further development and training;**
7. **Promote the development of common standards for digital education across the EU;**
8. **Support the development of the EPALÉ and the School Education Gateway;**
9. **Support dual education in VET, life-long learning and adult learning with a view to a better adaptation to labour market evolution and preventing social isolation;**
10. **Create a reference framework for learning about the EU (secondary level) at EU level;**
11. **Learn from the COVID-19 crisis by applying the good practices of some countries in terms of using digital tools for education.**