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From emergency remote learning to a new digital education action plan: an EU attempt to mainstream equality into education.

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the hastiness of the digital shift in teaching and learning exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic disparities in national education systems. The gaps in digital accessibility left those already behind even further behind. Taking stock of the unforeseen consequences of the crisis, the Commission updated its Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP). On 17 November, the Egmont Institute and the European Policy Centre invited Commissioner Gabriel, who is in charge of the EU's education portfolio, to outline her proposal for an education better equipped for the digital age. Although the new strategy acknowledges the need for more inclusiveness and social justice in digital accessibility, it falls short of providing a clear funding plan and a comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic inequalities at stake. The coming months will be crucial – the first milestone is the third EU Educational Summit on 10 December – in turning this patchwork of disparate initiatives into a concrete framework for action.

INTRODUCTION

As an emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak, EU Member States prohibited (partially or totally) access to schools, universities and other education institutions to 100 million pupils and learners. At a time when online learning and teaching have become the norm, the quality of education depends on access to internet and connected devices, well-designed technology and the digital skills required to use it.¹ Given these new shifts in educational approaches, the health crisis revealed alarming gaps in digital skills and technology accessibility that now combine with pre-existing social inequalities experienced by teachers, learners and parents.

One of the six major political strands that the Von der Leyen Commission outlined in its 2019-2024 work programme was the push to build a 'Europe fit for the digital age'. To that end, the DEAP is the cornerstone initiative in the field of education because it encompasses the different angles of its digital strategy: connectivity, up- and re-skilling, AI and digital investments. The call for a renewed action plan provides a framework that takes stock of the unforeseen consequences of the COVID-19 mitigation measures.

The present policy brief assesses the new action plan on digital education through the lens of the EU's commitments to promote social inclusion and equality in teaching and learning.²

THE RISK OF A MULTI-FACETED DIGITAL DIVIDE

The shift from on-site teaching to online classes and remote learning was primarily a health response and not an educational one. Therefore, the hastiness and unpreparedness of the transition left national education systems unable to take advantage of digital tools despite years of local, national and European strategies. While tertiary education institutions were largely accustomed to the use of digital solutions and online courses, primary and secondary education appeared to be ill-prepared and were thus more severely hit. As a result, health crisis mitigation measures widened the digital divide, which left even further behind those who were already behind.

The digital divide refers to existing gaps in accessing Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This term, conceptualized in the mid-1990s, was originally used to define those with access to the internet and those without.³ More recently, qualitative differences in the use of digital technologies have led education policy researchers to refer to a second-order digital divide with, for instance, the gaps between a recreative – or passive – use of connected devices and individuals taking advantage of the technology to create content or read the news online.⁴

The spectrum of social inequalities reinforced by the digital transition is vast. First, there is the socioeconomic divide in accessibility to new technology. Empirical evidence shows that children who live in poorer socioeconomic areas are less likely to have access to connected devices and the internet. In 2019, around 9% of students in the EU reported that they did not have a

computer to use at home, and 10% lacked an adequate quiet place to study.⁵ These severe disparities are further accentuated within and between the Member States. Apart from connected devices and the internet, inequalities in access also encompass the psychological and practical requirements of teaching and learning. Recent studies have underlined how the most deprived areas were also the ones lacking the most tailor-made tools and intensive educational approaches during the COVID-19 outbreak. Children with non-academic family backgrounds were, for instance, more likely to set work with physical worksheets or workbooks rather than live videoconference or online chats, thus not taking advantage of the technology.⁶

A second aspect concerns digital illiteracy, with 42% of Europeans lacking basic digital skills.⁷ Teachers' and parents' digital skills were recently identified as the most important component of a successful shift towards digital education.⁸ Digital skills are closely linked with the digital gender gap as well. Stereotypes in the education of girls and women discourage them from pursuing studies in male-dominated fields and ultimately lead to gender segregation in the labour market. In the EU, only 32% of employees in the ICT sector are women.⁹ Better digital skills also tackle issues of cybersecurity, information literacy or fake news and disinformation.

The third dimension is not as closely related to the lack of a tool or some knowledge, but it encompasses secondary repercussions to school closures beyond education. Schools play a vital societal role – for instance, by providing regular meals – and their closure has too rarely led to countervailing measures like food vouchers for the families eligible to free school meals. There is a long list of underlying consequences associated with school closures, like the inability of many parents to work under good conditions or an increase in violence against girls and women. The OECD has also predicted an

increase in school drop-out rates, which further affects children from households in the poorest quintiles.¹¹ In the absence of inclusive technology solutions, physical learning will remain vital for the most disadvantaged students if we are to prevent a learning crisis from becoming a generational one.

A TWO-PILLAR ACTION PLAN

In recent years, digital education has been repeatedly identified in EU communications, Council conclusions and staff working documents as a way to increase flexibility, skills and inclusiveness in education systems. Also known as the ‘optimistic rhetoric’ on technology-enhanced learning, this narrative has underpinned governmental policies around digital education and generated vast amounts of money for allocation to ICT solutions at all stages of education.¹²

The COVID-19 crisis should, however, not be assessed as evidence that national and European online learning strategies have failed. Scholars have pointed out that emergency remote teaching in response to a crisis is meaningfully different from thoughtful and well-planned online learning.¹³ Similarly to face-to-face teaching, online learning gathers a whole ecosystem of tools and resources that require planning, preparation and funding. It is therefore not a surprise that an unplanned shift led to a suboptimal implementation. The 2018 DEAP remains relevant, but new developments, such as the acceleration of the digital transition, new skills and training needs, and the accessibility of digital education for all, must be addressed.

Traditionally, education policy was the sole responsibility of Member States, but pandemic mitigation measures highlighted the fact that there is room for EU actions through benchmarking, policy evidence, investments and coordination of national education strategies. An action plan constitutes an appropriate instrument since it aims to coordinate a policy approach to have a greater impact than isolated actions at Member States level. On 30

September 2020, the European Commission released an outline for its Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027. This new initiative combines a twofold approach.

Its first pillar aims to reduce gaps stemming from an absence of digital equipment, connectivity and infrastructure across the EU. This will be developed by boosting internet access in schools with, for instance, partially EU-funded projects such as the network of Broadband Competences Offices, which supports connectivity in rural and disadvantaged areas. Another central part of this consists in supporting teachers looking for courses and materials by setting up specialised training programmes such as the Teacher Academy. The Commission also intends to expand its SELFIE tool (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational technologies), one of the greatest achievements of its 2018-2020 Action Plan. This self-reflection platform has been voluntarily used by more than a million students and teachers eager to discuss how best to use new technologies in teaching and learning. Further actions are planned in the identification of financing opportunities regarding internet access, e-learning platforms or the purchase of digital equipment (e.g. Connectivity4Schools awareness project) but these remain largely undefined yet.

The Action Plan is setting out more explicit objectives in its second pillar, which enhances the uptake of digital skills for all age groups. Part of this priority means creating a common European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC) recognised by governments and employers in all Member States. The Commission will also update the European Digital Competence Framework to include the learning of AI and data skills. In the longer term, the overarching objective behind this pillar is to support the Skills Agenda, which ensures that 70% of 16-74 year-olds have at least basic digital skills by 2025.

A key dimension in delivering the new DEAP is its alignment with the EU multiannual financial framework, since both will run over the same seven-

year period. Digital education could benefit from a wide spectrum of EU programmes: education and social programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and the renewed European Social Fund, digital-oriented programmes like the Connecting Europe Facility or the Digital Europe Programme, and more generally the European Regional Development Fund. The new DEAP offers more funding opportunities than its predecessor, but its effectiveness will depend on the coordination between these different programmes. In its current form, the identification of clear synergies for educational purposes between financial resources is a missing piece to the puzzle.

This patchwork of disparate action must now turn into a bold policy framework with a concrete work programme. The coming months will be crucial in the run up to the third European Education Summit on 10 December. This event will steer a dialogue between national authorities, Members of the European Parliament and representatives of the education systems on the enabling factors behind a successful digital education. The launch of this strategic dialogue will ultimately form the backbone for a Council recommendation on online and distance learning, therefore setting a first milestone to build resilient education systems fit for the digital age.

IN SEARCH OF EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Seizing the opportunities offered by the Recovery and Resilience Facility

An ambitious action plan needs funding to match at European, national, regional and school level. Direct funding and national investment cooperation are truly the two aspects in which the EU could bring added value. However, until now, there has been limited guidance on how these new financial resources would contribute to the goals of the DEAP. The Commission must seize synergy opportunities between the different funding programmes. These could be achieved by explicitly

intertwining the EU policy framework with its financial resources.

More importantly, a fair digital transition could be mainstreamed through Next Generation EU, as the unprecedented levels of spending involved would help to mitigate the cuts in the EU long-term budget on education (i.e., Erasmus+, Horizon Europe or the ESF+). Under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), Member States must allocate 20% of their expenditures to foster the digital transition. ‘Connectivity’ and ‘re-skilling and up-skilling’ are part of the flagship priorities recommended by the Commission for national investments and reforms. The Commission could make sure a fixed amount of the ‘connectivity’ and ‘re-skilling and up-skilling’ priorities are dedicated to education policy.¹⁴ Education has been continuously subjected to massive budget cuts in many Member States over recent decades; the RRF has the potential of incentivising the most needed structural reforms and investments.

A more comprehensive and systemic approach to socioeconomic disparities

The measures put in place by the DEAP provide a fairly narrow understanding of the socioeconomic inequalities at play in education systems. The lockdowns and school closures revealed many blind spots that policymakers must address to ensure a fair digital transition. The EU strategy emphasises the role of up-skilling teachers, but there are no mentions of parents who have struggled due to lack of literacy, language or digital skills. The Union, just like Member States, is also lagging behind in addressing material-access inequalities. The current framework mainly tackles connectivity in rural areas and internet deserts. It is important to point out that digital inequalities not only reflect discrepancies between regions and countries but also socioeconomic status, age, gender, immigration status and level of education. Policymakers shaping a more inclusive digital education system must embrace a comprehensive and multi-setting approach to the serious social and territorial

inequalities at stake, given that pupils' socioeconomic backgrounds are the most significant determinant of educational outcome.

At the EU level, there is no need to start from scratch as the European semester, through its Social Scoreboard, already provides an elaborate basis for a more holistic approach to these inequalities. Links between the DEAP and the social scoreboard must be mapped as the latter includes indicators on early leavers from education and training, underachievement in education, gender employment gap, variations in performance explained by students' socioeconomic status, government expenditure in education or proxies on digital access – all of which can be used to direct investments and

structural reforms while embracing a broad conception of social inequalities.

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Endnotes

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