

COMECE response to European Commission Call for evidence on the provision of digital skills

Provision and learning of digital skills are gaining ground in the educational ecosystem, especially after the immediate shift to distance learning generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid changes of digitalisation in the labour market. While improving the level of digital skills of EU citizens remains an important objective of the EU, specific challenges ought to be analysed in advance.

Teachers' digital skills should be considered as important as learners' ones. A 2018 study conducted in the EU showed that resistance of teachers and their lack of interest in ICT use are the main obstacles to digital teaching and learning. Since pupils cannot learn through unskilled teachers, they will struggle to pick up these competences during their studies, i.e. lack of pedagogical ability in ICT use negatively affects digitalisation of schools and institutes. Ensuring teachers' learning of basic digital skills and promoting balanced programmes of digital and in-presence education will allow learners to progress in their digital skills and social competences, granting quality education.

The pandemic worsened the digital gap caused by families' different socio-economic conditions: since not all families can afford the expense of electronic devices and/or have internet access, this leads to disparity in learning opportunities. For this reason, educational institutions need to make use of available funds to invest in connectivity, network infrastructure and suitable equipment, starting from the most disadvantaged and families living in rural areas. Two decades after the Lisbon Strategy, although internet access has generally improved in the EU, the pandemic shed light on the steps needed to reduce the digital divide. Creating solidarity funds or rental programmes for learners without computer equipment are just two of the many ways to address shortage of digital skills and the impossibility of disadvantaged learners to access education.

With the advent of digital communication platforms, digital skills came to be considered as a never-seen-before opportunity for dialogue between individuals and communities. Despite such developments, however, what was missed the most during the pandemic were human, face to face relationships. Promoting digital education, while failing to encourage encounter with others, could risk damaging interpersonal exchanges, such as dialogue between students and teachers. This is indispensable for the educational process, from the first steps of formation to higher education and in view of lifelong learning. Introducing digital skills in schools allows to learn how to grow up in a digital society and how to behave in it. However, it is also necessary that young people are taught critical thinking and interpersonal skills, in order to become active and responsible citizens working for the Common Good. For instance, teachers and trainers could make them aware of unreliable sources, so that learners can identify sources of disinformation and be protected against harmful digital content. It is equally valuable to involve parents and families in identifying learners' needs and making the digital skills offer more co-created, in a context of joint educational responsibility.

Digital skills are today demanded in all curricula and quality digital education allows to improve job expectations. Digital skills development in education can enhance cooperation between educational providers, academia, businesses, etc. Nowadays in Europe over 70% of businesses mention that the lack of staff with adequate digital skills is an obstacle to investment. Therefore, digital abilities allow citizens to contribute to innovative and sustainable solutions to EU challenges. Although employability should not be considered the ultimate aim of education, since the full development of the person should be at the centre of

education, digital skills can help ensure that learners find their purpose and fulfilment in today's society.