



# Overview of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

This **Forum Insight** provides an overview of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27: Resetting education and training for the digital age (DEAP)<sup>1</sup>, published by the European Commission on 30 September 2020. The DEAP acknowledges the key enabling factors for effective digital education and presents a vision for enhancing digital teaching and learning and for improving digital literacy and skills at all levels of education. This Forum Insight summarises the key points of the action plan and references related work in the Irish higher education sector.

## Background

*Raising the quality and inclusiveness of education and training systems and the provision of digital skills for all during the digital and green transitions is of strategic importance for the EU. (DEAP, p. 2)*

Many of the key enabling factors for effective digital education were illuminated by the COVID-19 crisis: reliable connectivity; suitable digital equipment; digital skills and confidence; digital pedagogy and assessment; leadership; sharing, communication and collaboration. While the first European Digital Education Action Plan, adopted in 2018, addressed digitalisation in education, the new Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 focuses on longer-term digital change in education and training, providing a coherent and integrated framework for addressing the current crisis and the ongoing challenges of digital transformation in education and wider society.

## Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Guiding principles

Key stakeholder and open public consultations were held throughout 2020 to invite input to the action plan. Among key stakeholders there was wide agreement regarding the importance of a strategic and consistent EU approach to digital education (including funding), enhancing the digital skills of educators, and the overall promotion of digital literacy. In the open public consultation, 95% of respondents considered the COVID-19 crisis to be a turning point for how technology is used in education and training, and nearly two-thirds felt they had improved their digital skills during the crisis. The main areas of concern were ensuring access, equity and inclusion, teachers' digital skills and competences, leadership and vision, access to suitable digital content, and infrastructure.

The Digital Education Action Plan identifies a number of guiding principles to ensure further improvement of the quality and inclusiveness of education in Europe over the coming years.

These guiding principles fall into four areas:

- i **Ethos:** Transforming education for the digital age is a 'whole society' task; digital education plays a pivotal role in increasing equality and inclusiveness.
- ii **Leadership and investment:** Education leaders play a key role in digital education. Appropriate investment is required for the necessary enhancements e.g., connectivity, equipment, organisational capacity and skills.
- iii **Digital skills, literacy and competences:** Many people require advanced digital skills for employment, however, basic digital competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) are considered essential for life for all citizens. Digital competence should be a core skill for all educators.
- iv **Digital education content:** High-quality education content is necessary to boost the relevance, quality and inclusiveness of European education at all levels; such content should be readily available.

## Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Strategic priorities and actions

*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. (DEAP, p. 2)*

The guiding principles summarised in the previous section underpin the two strategic priorities of the Digital Education Action Plan: (1) fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem, and (2) enhancing the digital skills and competences of learners and teachers. For each of these priorities, the European Commission commits to specific actions. These are summarised below.

### Strategic Priority 1: Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem

**Action 1.** Launch a strategic dialogue with Member States to prepare a possible proposal for a Council Recommendation by 2022 on the **enabling factors for successful digital education** (e.g., tackling connectivity/equipment gaps; digitising inclusively; addressing accessibility; fostering dialogue; developing guidelines for digital pedagogy).

**Action 2.** Propose a Council Recommendation on **online and distance learning for primary and secondary education** by the end of 2021, drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 crisis.

1\_European Commission (2020). Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age. [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en)



**Action 3.** Develop a **European Digital Education Content Framework** that builds on European cultural and creative diversity, includes guiding principles for specific sectors of education, and reflects the need for interoperability, certification, verification and transferability of content. Launch a feasibility study on the creation of a European exchange platform.

**Action 4.** Support connectivity of and in schools and encourage Member States to **include broadband in investment and reform projects in national recovery and resilience plans. Make the most of EU support** with regard to internet access, digital equipment and e-learning applications/platforms for schools, particularly for students from disadvantaged groups and students and educators with disabilities.

**Action 5.** Use Erasmus cooperation projects to support **digital transformation plans** of education institutions at all levels. **Support digital pedagogy and expertise in the use of digital tools for teachers**, including accessible and assistive technologies and digital content, and launch an online **self-assessment tool for teachers** (SELFIE for Teachers) based on the Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu)<sup>2</sup>.

**Action 6.** Develop **ethical guidelines on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data usage in teaching and learning** for educators and support related research activities through Horizon Europe, building on the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI<sup>3</sup>. The guidelines will be accompanied by a **training programme for researchers and students** and include a target of **45% female participation**.

## Strategic Priority 2: Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation

**Action 7.** Develop common guidelines for teachers and educational staff to foster digital literacy and tackle **disinformation** through education and training; to be done in close cooperation with stakeholders through multi-stakeholder groups.

**Action 8.** Update the **European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)**<sup>4</sup> with a view to including AI and data-related skills. Support the development of AI learning resources and raise awareness on opportunities and challenges of AI for education.

**Action 9.** Develop a **European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC)**, mapped to the Digital Competence Framework, to be recognised and accepted by governments, employers and other stakeholders across Europe.

**Action 10.** Propose a **Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training**.

**Action 11.** Improve monitoring and support the **cross-national collection of data on student digital skills** through participation in ICILS<sup>5</sup> to better understand and address gaps and strengthen the evidence base for actions.

**Action 12.** Incentivise advanced digital skills development through targeted measures including scaling up Digital Opportunity traineeships and offering professional development for those who teach at all levels of education.

**Action 13.** Encourage women's participation in STEM; support the EU STEM Coalition to develop higher education curricula for engineering and ICT with the aim of increasing women's participation and career development in STEM subjects, including IT.

In addition to the two strategic priorities and related actions identified above, a further action was recommended in order to strengthen cooperation and exchange at EU level:

**Action 14.** Establish a **European Digital Education Hub** to support Member States, monitor implementation of the Action Plan, support cross-sector collaboration and support the agile development of policy and practice.

### Establishing a European Digital Education Hub

A European Digital Education Hub is currently being established to facilitate cross-sectoral exchange in the field of digital education and to enable strategic collaboration and co-creation amongst experts and stakeholders of digital education across regions, member states and the EU. The European Digital Education Hub (initially conceived as EDEL, a European Digital Education Lab) seeks to address four identified needs of national initiatives<sup>6</sup>:

- European expert network – empowering initiatives through networking and peer-to-peer exchange opportunities
- European community of practice – enabling collaboration and co-creation amongst European and national initiatives
- European digital skills ecosystem – boosting data and digital literacy and AI skills across Europe
- European digital data ecosystem – networked IT infrastructures and seamless data mobility

Initial partners of the Hub include Hochschulforum Digitalisierung (HFD) (Germany), SURF (Netherlands) and the National Forum (Ireland), among others. With the breadth and depth of digital education expertise across Irish higher education, the opportunity is open for additional national partners to participate, further enhancing collaboration within the sector and with our European partners.

2 Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu): <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcompedu>

3 Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (AI): <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/ethics-guidelines-trustworthy-ai>

4 Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp): <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/digcomp-21-digital-competence-framework-citizens-eight-proficiency-levels-and-examples-use>

5 International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS): <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/icils/>

6 Rampelt, F. (2020). Towards a European Digital Education Lab: Supporting collaboration and co-creation amongst national and European digital education initiatives. Hochschulforum Digitalisierung (HFD).



## Relevance for Irish higher education

Numerous national-level developments demonstrate the strategic focus of the Irish higher education sector on digital transformation and digital education. In addition to the upcoming Digital Transformation Framework by the Higher Education Authority<sup>7</sup>, the focus on digital transformation, connectivity, teaching and learning is evident in key documents and cross-sectoral projects. These include the Irish Universities Association 'Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning' project (EDTL)<sup>8</sup> and the Connaught Ulster Alliance 'Innovative Opportunities Transforming Education' project (iNOTE)<sup>9</sup>, funded by the Higher Education Authority's Innovation and Transformation Fund 2018. In addition, several initiatives focused on digital teaching, learning and assessment were funded through the national Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) Fund<sup>10</sup>.

Teaching and Learning in a Digital World is a central pillar of the work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education – one of its four strategic priorities. In 2020, the National Forum published findings from the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey, describing the digital expectations, experiences and engagement of nearly 30,000 students and staff who teach<sup>11</sup>. Throughout 2021, the National Forum will continue to consult with those who learn, teach and lead across the sector, build on past and current work, and reflect on the extraordinary experiences of 2020 in order to re-articulate a national vision for digital teaching and learning which is collaborative, responsive and adaptable to institutional contexts<sup>12</sup>.

Reflecting on the significance of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 for Irish higher education, important observations can be made. Firstly, the experience in Irish higher education following COVID-19, at institutional and sectoral levels, aligns with this observation in the Action Plan:

*Experiences from this period show that education and training systems and institutions that had previously invested in their digital capacity were better prepared to adapt teaching approaches, keep learners engaged, and continue the education and training process. (DEAP, p. 4)*

Under Strategic Priority 1, 'Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem', much work has been done by the projects and initiatives referred to above, as well as in individual institutions, identifying enabling factors for successful digital education (Action 1), developing and sharing

OER, MOOCs and Open Courses (Action 3), and supporting digital pedagogy and expertise (Action 5). In addition, INDEX findings highlighted key areas for enhancement with regard to the use of data (Action 6)<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, under Strategic Priority 2, 'Enhancing digital skills and competences', much work has been done by the projects and initiatives referred to above, as well as in individual institutions, identifying guidelines to foster digital literacy (Action 7) and supporting the development of digital competences for those who teach using the DigCompEdu framework (Action 8). In addition, national student data collected in the INDEX Survey can be benchmarked with European data on student digital skills (Action 11).

Finally, regarding Action 14, 'Establish a European Digital Education Hub', the National Forum and other national networks and advisory services on digital education are well placed and ready to exchange experience and good practice with regard to digital education with European colleagues in order to support cross-sector collaboration and the development of relevant policy and practice<sup>14</sup>.

## Summary

The conclusion of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 summarises our current challenges and opportunities:

*We are now faced with both challenges and opportunities. This means we need to use the lessons of recent months to step up our efforts and gradually evolve from temporary, emergency-focused remote education to more effective, sustainable and equitable digital education, as part of creative, flexible, modern and inclusive education and training. This process should be informed by contemporary teaching practices and research . . . Transforming education and training systems is a key part of the vision for a Europe fit for the digital age. However, such transformation will not happen from one day to the next. It requires strategic and concerted action, as well as the pooling of resources, investment and political will to move ahead at EU and national level. Making the digital leap in education and training will be vital for people to achieve their potential without leaving anyone behind. It will also be vital for proving the effectiveness, relevance and legitimacy of education and training systems in preparing for – and shaping – the future. (DEAP, p. 19)*

7 Digital Transformation Framework: [https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/190621\\_Digital-transformation\\_Proceedings.pdf](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/190621_Digital-transformation_Proceedings.pdf)

8 EDTL project: <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/digital-learning/>

9 iNOTE project: <https://digitaled.ie>

10 See, for example, the SATLE 2019 initiatives here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2020/01/21/107-teaching-and-learning-enhancement-initiatives-now-active-across-22-irish-higher-education-institutions/>

11 Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey Findings: [www.teachingandlearning.ie/index](http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index)

12 National Forum Strategy 2019-21: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/strategy-2019-2021-leading-enhancement-and-innovation-in-teaching-and-learning/>

13 See National Forum webinar 'Data Literacy, Privacy and Protection': <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2020/09/16/upcoming-webinar-on-data-literacy-privacy-and-protection/>

14 See National Forum webinar 'Implementing the INDEX Survey: National and International Collaboration and Looking to the Future': <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/resource/webinar-the-index-survey-a-challenging-and-rewarding-journey/>