



RESPONSE TO THE COMMISSION'S CONSULTATION ON THE DIGITAL EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

EAEA Response
August 2020

EAEA welcomes the initiative by the European Commission to draw on experiences during the COVID-19 crisis to update the Digital Education Action Plan. EAEA believes that it is essential to include adult learning and education within the framework of the new policy. Non-formal adult education is an imperative channel to promote lifelong learning skills, social cohesion and resilience, indispensable to cope with any crisis.

The Adult Learning and Education (ALE) sector provides lifelong learning opportunities for millions of adult learners across the European region and has witnessed the lack of digital skills first-hand. COVID-19 has had dramatic effects beyond formal education institutions, as it forced the majority of European ALE providers to close their doors. Compared to many formal providers, a large part of ALE courses and training programmes had to be cancelled as they could not be moved online. The transformation to digital teaching and learning in ALE has been hampered by a historically insufficient structural and financial support. Hence, the disruption that COVID-19 provoked on the provision of ALE is massive and unprecedented, leaving the most marginalised behind.

EAEA demands a stronger focus on non-formal and informal adult learning within the Digital Education Action Plan. A focus on ALE is indispensable because it provides education that equips learners with the life skills, knowledges and competences that are crucial to social and economic participation. ALE also serves for the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups, likely to be the ones hardest hit by crisis. COVID-19 has not only demonstrated that life skills, resilience and social cohesion are crucial to cope with the crisis, but also reminded the world that people are the drivers of social change, not digital technology.

EAEA recognises that “the skills and competences required to thrive and positively engage in society in the digital age”, as proposed in the Digital Education Action Plan, transcend formal education and training for employability. A sole and focus on digital skills for the labour market will fail to address the challenges of digitalisation in the private and social sphere. **Hence, EAEA believes that it is essential to include lifelong learning, including non-formal adult learning, as an aim in the Digital Education Action Plan.** Member States should be encouraged to base their digital learning strategies on a lifelong learning approach and to ensure adequate funding for all measures in support of these strategies. A holistic vision of digital transformation is, in EAEA’s point of view, necessary to provide an empowering critical digital education that “adequately prepares citizens for an increasingly interconnected and globalised future.”

EAEA agrees with the Commission that there is a need to “harvest the new interest in digital skills that was reinforced during the pandemic” (Commissioner Margaritis Schinas). However, it needs to be acknowledged that a large number of learners have no access to digital technologies in the first place. Digital poverty is a



reality in Europe. The cost barriers for adult learners remain significant even after equipment has been provided. These barriers further alienate the rural population and citizens with low income. **EAEA urges the Commission to address digital poverty, including structural barriers, such as connectivity to the Internet, the costs of subscriptions and access to ICT equipment – both from the learner and the educational provider side.** Administrative procedures that complicate digital engagement must be changed, so that digital learning can be more easily recognised and subsidised. This requires learning, instead of certification and a culture of flexibility to be at the core of education provision.

Evidence collected by EAEA shows that many adults in Europe struggle with access to digital public services and with understanding digital voting systems. Responsible, critical and conscious engagement with digital technologies is a necessity across generations and sensible handling should be exemplified by role models among the adult population. Only with the collective effort of all can phenomena like misinformation be mitigated. **Acquiring skills to manage mass information and perform conscious digital behaviour necessitates additional attention in the Action Plan** to prevent abuse that threatens European democratic values.

A Europe fit for the digital age is not limited to the younger and able population but includes all sectors of society. In dialogue with its members, EAEA has observed the startling gaps in digital skills and competences across Europe in genders, ages, abilities and geographical locations. EAEA agrees with the emphasis on supporting girls in developing digital competences. However, the Action Plan should acknowledge that older female and non-binary Europeans are also structurally under-represented in STEM. Furthermore, the inclusivity and accessibility needs of millions of European adults with disabilities demand to be addressed in the Action Plan. **EAEA proposes that all adult learners – regardless of gender, age, ability and geographical region – receive additional attention and appropriate content to be able to participate purposefully in tomorrow's digital reality,** and that particularly disadvantaged groups receive appropriate further support in a spirit of equity.

EAEA believes that a truly inclusive and equitable Digital Education Action Plan needs to include a more comprehensive account of actions for the most digitally and socially excluded. These do not only include women and older learners but also people in long term care facilities, single mothers, prisoners, persons with disability, accessibility issues; among many others. **EAEA calls on the Commission to acknowledge that these groups need accessible, social and personalised technologies to ensure inclusive learning pathways between formal, non-formal and informal learning.**

Digital learning that is suitable to all is based on a competent ALE workforce. ALE practitioners, often in short-time contracts or volunteers, need support in upskilling and professionalisation, especially in regard to facilitating learning online. If barriers are removed, digital learning can be an excellent gateway for cross-cultural and intergenerational learning. **EAEA urges the Commission to provide more structural support to non-formal learning providers.** There is a general lack of experienced trainers and train-the-trainer programmes in ALE and thousands of the freelance educators are left in precarious situations after the



pandemic. EAEA asks the Commission to consider that **the ALE sector requires an adequate technological infrastructure and additional support to develop appropriate learning methods that enable social-civic learning in digital environments for all.**

The digital future requires methodological, pedagogical and technological innovation and educational changes that require strong integration mechanisms. This transformation needs processes that aid all learners. Investment in digital learning and teaching tools which allow for participatory and reflective learning, is central to ensuring that digital learning corresponds to the learners' needs. **EAEA recommends complementing online learning opportunities with offline guidance services.** These services enhance accessibility, raise awareness about existing programmes and can encourage a wider range of learners to enrol.

The digital transformation carries a great potential for ALE, enhancing accessibility, flexibility, creativity and efficiency of learning and education. Yet EAEA is aware that the leap into Europe's new digital era also bears the fundamental risks of further exacerbating inequalities, alienating those at the margins and further widening the access gap that denies adults their human right to learning. Digital education and learning that is empowering will not only prepare learners for new challenges, but also contribute to digital transformation and innovation across Europe.

EAEA is thankful for this consultation and urges the Commission in their renewal of the Digital Education Action Plan

- to include non-formal and informal adult learning, and especially the promotion of basic digital skills, through these learning opportunities
- to include lifelong learning as an aim beyond employability
- to heighten the emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity and include actions for the most socially and digitally excluded, particularly considering
 - vulnerable populations, older learners, persons with disabilities, migrants, persons living alone, prisoners among others.
- to complement online learning opportunities with offline guidance
- to provide more structural and financial support for non-formal ALE, investing in adequate technological infrastructure, capacity building, upskilling and professionalization for trainers and appropriate socio-civic methods to meet the needs of Europe's digital transformation.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 130 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.