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Digital education according to the EU: useful tools

What is and what does the Digital Education Action Plan, the European initiative that aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of EU Member States, provide?

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way of life for people everywhere. In Europe, in particular, no aspect of everyday life has remained the same - from work, to travel, to leisure. And education. During the lockdown, in fact, schools and universities were closed, in an attempt to reduce the spread of the new coronavirus; so teachers and students had to use **distance learning**, which for a certain period of time represented the only possibility of education and training they could resort to without risking contagion. But the difficulties and limitations experienced during this period, in which digital training has been the learning mode par excellence, have demonstrated the urgency and essentiality of making available to students and teachers a system of digital education and training adapted to the needs of the moment, capable of making distance learning effective in the digital era. In this perspective, the online platforms provided by the **European Union** as learning resources offered to students and teachers to find useful e-learning material, learn by playing, participate in free online courses, create connection networks for an effective, safe and engaging distance education.

The EU plan for digital education

Digital education has been at the center of European Union action for years. It is part of this design the Digital Education Action Plan, an initiative that aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of the EU Member States, adapting them to the digital era, also with a view to sustainable development.

The first Action Plan for a Digital Education had been developed in 2018 and included the development of two priority areas: the use of digital technology for teaching and the growth of digital skills. In 2019, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, had expressed in her policy guidelines for 2019-2027 the need for a new Plan, based on the one outlined in 2018-2020.

The **Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)** set the European Commission's goals for achieving effective, inclusive, and accessible digital education throughout the European Union. The document takes into account the particular training needs that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in unprecedented use of e-learning, highlighting the limitations and needs of the learning and education systems of various European countries.

The European Union Plan for Digital Education (2021-2027) starts from the online distance learning experiences lived during the pandemic crisis, which showed the strong impact of digital also on education and training, giving the possibility to understand the needs of pupils and teachers. Building on this, the Plan highlighted two strategic priorities:

1. The development of a **high-performance digital educational ecosystem**: this objective focuses on the need to achieve an environment useful for human and technological growth in the digital era. To achieve it, the Plan identifies several actions, from cooperation between the various member states, to the use of Artificial Intelligence in education and ensuring the provision of reliable and user-friendly content and resources.
2. Improving **digital competencies and skills**, with a view to digital transformation: this second objective focuses on the transition to online learning. To achieve this, it is necessary to accompany citizens in acquiring digital skills and competencies.

The Plan offers "a long-term strategic vision" to enable the achievement of a European education and training system based on quality, inclusion and accessibility. To achieve this goal, the EU intends to seek greater cooperation at European level and provide the necessary support to enable the digitization of education.

Critical issues emerged during the pandemic

In order to define the guidelines of the new Digital Education Plan, the European Commission launched a public consultation, with the aim of collecting the **experiences of online and distance learning**, lived by teachers, educators, students, businesses and workers who have used them, in particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic. This survey found that:

- Nearly 60% of respondents had never had to use e-learning before the pandemic;
- 95% of respondents thought the crisis could be a turning point for the application of technology to education and training;
- There is a need to improve the resources and content available, which must be more appropriate and easy to use;
- More than 60 percent of survey respondents say they have improved their digital skills, and 50 percent of those respondents said they plan to leverage them.

Beyond that, the pandemic has highlighted some **limitations and knots that need to be worked out** to ensure an education system that is increasingly in step with the digital age. In particular, during the lockdown and the periods when schools and universities were closed, there was a lack of unified planning for digital education, which was approached differently in each European country.

In addition, distance learning made the digital divide still strongly present in the European population more evident, and people with disabilities emphasized difficulties. Finally, the pandemic brought to the fore problems related to connectivity and the quality and effectiveness of digital media.

During the pandemic, European citizens were measured by their digital skills, which were stimulated and challenged as never before. As a result of this situation, there was a need to increase training offerings that were closely linked to e-learning. The experiences lived by teachers, parents, students, workers and companies during the emergency caused by Covid-19 have allowed to emerge the current limits related to digital learning, from the difficulty of connection, to the digital divide, up to the lack of skills.

It is precisely from these limits that the European Commission intends to start again, in order to build a system of education and training suitable for the digital era, capable of accompanying the technological change that involves the entire world. Thanks to the consultation, which gathered more than 2,700 responses from citizens of 60 countries, the Commission has been able to develop a new action plan, adopted on September 30, 2020.

Available EU tools

In order to provide students and teachers with concrete support for the development of digital competencies and to make the digital and distance learning system smooth, appropriate tools that are easy to understand and available and that are secure and reliable are needed. In this regard, the European Union has provided a list of useful resources for digital education and training to ensure easier access to resources and greater availability of e-learning platforms and materials during the new coronavirus pandemic. Some of the tools available are as outlined below:

- **School Education Gateway**. It is an "online catalog", where you can consult educational materials, participate in online courses and access training resources for teachers and, more generally, for people interested in school education in Europe. The platform is available in 23 European languages. The School Education Gateway includes publications, tutorials, teaching materials created by EU institutions, EU-funded projects, free online courses, webinars and the latest news related to European school policy and education.
- **eTwinning**. The platform is aimed at school staff in European countries, to allow teachers and principals to communicate with each other, to create a network that allows the development of collaborations, sharing and useful projects for the European school system. eTwinning aims to promote school collaboration in Europe through the use of information and communication technologies: through the platform, in fact, school staff can communicate, exchange resources and create projects in 30 languages. Once registered, you can access project-ready kits, project examples and testimonials from other teachers.
- **Learning Corner**. This is a platform aimed at both students and teachers. Depending on the age group, students are provided with different materials, including games, contests and activity books, which allow them to learn about different aspects of the European Union, from laws to the environment and history. For teachers, the platform is a good

source to find educational materials dedicated to primary or secondary school students.

- **Skip-Youth**. The name stands for Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for youth. It is a network of seven centers each working on a priority area within the youth field. Specifically, the platform provides youth learning resources, training courses, and networking opportunities. On the portal you can find seminars, useful tools for educational activities, youth projects.
- **Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe** (EPALE). It is a European online community, multilingual and open, to which adult education professionals from all over Europe can join. In this way, they can connect with each other to improve the quality and variety of adult learning opportunities. The platform provides the opportunity to implement digital skills through free online courses, access to examples of good practice in adult learning and e-learning resources. In addition, a simple video editor is available on the site, which can be used to customize online distance learning lessons.

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