

# EDF’s response to the European Commission’s Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

The European Commission has just released its proposal for a [Digital Education Action Plan](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en) with a [detailed communication](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/deap-communication-sept2020_en.pdf).

EDF took part in the open consultation on the Action Plan which took place over the summer of 2020. We welcome the fact that our concerns have been heard and that a number of specific needs of learners with disabilities are directly referenced in the communication and the list of actions to be taken by the Commission.

In this document you can see a brief overview of what the Action Plan proposed, what it could mean for persons with disabilities, and what our reaction is to this latest development.

## **What does the Digital Education Action Plan say about persons with disabilities?**

The Commission’s detailed communication around the Action Plan makes the following direct references to the needs of persons with disabilities regarding digital education and distance learning:

* Learners with disabilities need tools that are fully accessible if they are to benefit from digital transformation.
* During the COVID-19 pandemic, not all distance-learning tools or content were accessible, and learners with disabilities faced particular challenges.
* Persons with disabilities reported particular difficulties regarding the accessibility of technology and digital educational material, the availability of assistive technology; technical support provided to learners with disabilities and the teacher competence on disability and accessibility matters.

And in its proposed actions, they mention that:

* They will encourage Member States to make the most of EU support with regard to internet access, purchase of digital equipment and e-learning applications and platforms for schools and in particular for students from disadvantaged groups and for students and educators with disabilities.
* They will work to ensure everyone acquires a basic understanding of new and emerging technologies including Artificial Intelligence. This will help them to engage positively, critically and safely with this technology, and be aware of potential issues related to ethics, environmental sustainability, data protection and privacy, children rights, discrimination and bias, including gender bias and disability and ethnic and racial discrimination.

## **What steps is the Commission proposing to take and what could they mean for persons with disabilities?**

## **Action 1**

Launch a strategic dialogue with Member States in order to prepare a possible proposal for a Council Recommendation by 2022 on the enabling factors for successful digital education, including:

• tackling connectivity gaps (using EU funding as well as Member State and private funding);

• tackling equipment gaps (using EU funding as well as Member State and private funding and setting up schemes to reuse suitable hardware from public administration and enterprises in schools);

• supporting education and training institutions with know-how on how to adapt and digitise in an inclusive manner (using relevant EU tools and instruments);

• addressing accessibility and availability of assistive technologies;

• encouraging Member States to foster closer dialogue on digital education between stakeholders in the economy and education institutions;

• encouraging Member States to develop guidelines for digital pedagogy, drawn from best practice and experience, and upskilling their teachers;

## **Action 2**

Drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 crisis, propose a Council Recommendation on online and distance learning for primary and secondary education by the end of 2021. This would help develop a shared understanding at EU level of the approaches needed for distance, online and blended learning that is effective, inclusive and engaging.

## **How this could be useful for persons with disabilities**

The Council Recommendations have the potential to underline to Member States just how much lack of accessibility for learners with disabilities impacts their learning. It is reassuring that the Commission directly refer to the issue of accessibility and assistive technologies, a clear acknowledgment of the challenges learners with disabilities faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The point on training also has the potential to positively impact persons with disabilities, with conclusions will hopefully point out the need to teachers and classroom assistants to have a better knowledge of fully including learners with disabilities when using distance learning.

## **Action 3**

Develop a European Digital Education Content Framework that will build on European cultural and creative diversity and include guiding principles for specific sectors of education and their needs (such as high-quality instructional design, accessibility, recognition and multilingualism) while reflecting the need for the interoperability, certification, verification and transferability of content.

Launch a feasibility study on the creation of a European exchange platform to share certified online resources (such as massive, open online courses) and link existing education platforms.

## **How this could be useful for persons with disabilities**

In the hope that this action indeed leads to the actual creation of a platform to share online sources, the potential for educational establishments trying to better include learners with disabilities is high. In order for this to be of benefit to learners with disabilities, however, the accessibility of the tools shared for persons with disabilities needs to be ensured and monitored. A platform of ready-to-use, accessible materials will assist educators in including all learners, and understanding more clearly how to ensure that their distance-learning lessons need to be adapted to meet the needs of learners with different abilities.

## **Action 4**

Support, where necessary, Gigabit connectivity of schools, as well as connectivity in schools under the Connecting Europe Facility Programme. Carry out Connectivity4Schools awareness raising actions on funding opportunities. Encourage Member States to include broadband in investment and reform projects in national recovery and resilience plans under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, in line with the European Connect flagship.

Make the most of EU support with regard to internet access, purchase of digital equipment and e-learning applications and platforms for schools and in particular for students from disadvantaged groups and for students and educators with disabilities.

## **How this could be useful for persons with disabilities**

This action is of paramount importance, and we are happy to see it mentioned in the action plan with a specific reference to learners and educators with disabilities. For many learners to have access to an education remotely, the issue is not only that of having good and reliable internet connectivity, but also having access to any e-learning applications or assistive technology that might be needed to make it useable by the individual. It is a crucial initiative to push the Member States to make these investments in the educational and personal development of their young people, as well as adult learners.

## **Our initial reaction to the Digital Education Action Plan**

We are happy to see our concerns reflected clearly in this communication released by the European Commission. It is a sign that the needs of learners have been understood and that there is an intention to mainstream the needs of learners with disabilities in the planned actions.

It is also to be commended that within the four actions proposed by the commissions, one specifically targets learners with disabilities and the accessibility and connectivity issues faced when using digital learning (action number 4).

The other three actions certainly have the potential to address the issues of accessibility, teacher training and lack of adapted resources that were raised by EDF during the consultation. However, attention will have to be paid by disability organisations when the Commission and the other EU institutions start acting on these proposals. We will have to ensure that they do indeed address the needs of learners with disabilities, and that the recommendations and solutions proposed are clear, with a correct understanding of the issues we have been seeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The document is promising, but our work must continue if we are to see useful outputs.

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