

Call for Position papers on the mid-term review of the Digital Education Action Plan

Written contribution from EuroHealthNet

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EuroHealthNet represents a partnership of over 70 public health bodies active in health equity, health promotion and disease prevention, focused on building a healthier future for all by addressing the determinants of health and reducing inequalities. From this perspective, EuroHealthNet is providing written input on the impact of the Digital Education Action Plan.

In your experience and expertise with the Digital Education Action Plan, what actions/policy areas have been effective in achieving their objective and which actions/policy areas should be strengthened in the next phase of its implementation?’

Following up on the previous Digital Education Action Plan (2018-2020), the renewed plan better reflects the digital needs that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This, coupled with the greater attention to skills in recent years (as seen, for instance, during the EU Year of Skills), has helped put digital education on the political agenda, and fortify the objectives underpinned by the Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP).

The DEAP was an important steppingstone in enhancing cooperation with Member States on digital education and skills, as well as put into focus the need for whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches and investments in digital education and training. It was equally an important tool in mobilising funding tools such as Erasmus+ to support the digital transformation plans of education and training institutions. It recognised that classrooms are a key entry point to enhancing digital literacy, as exemplified by the guidelines produced to support teachers and educators in addressing the pressing topics of disinformation and digital literacy in the classroom. Moreover, the action plan shed a spotlight on the need to expand cross-national efforts around the collection and cooperation of data on student digital skills - monitoring the trends around digital education and producing supportive evidence-based policies.

In the next phase of implementation, EuroHealthNet proposes that the following areas are further strengthened:

- Ensure that digital education policies and interventions adopt an **equity-focused proportionate universalism approach**, underpinned by robust **co-creation** mechanisms that directly engage children and youth. The lack of an adapted digital environment for children and youth can lead to poorer educational outcomes,

psychosocial problems, and other outcomes along the life-course. The DEAP can further enhance the need for comprehensive digital education frameworks that take these considerations into account, as a lever to contribute to online safety against prevailing issues such as cyberbullying, harassment, privacy infringements, among others - which all bear negative impacts on mental health.

- Ensure a stronger focus to **assess and address the digital skills gaps**, which exacerbate inequalities particularly among vulnerable and marginalised groups. Digital skills are enablers to access the labour market as well as essential services that are increasingly becoming digitalised (e.g. healthcare, social security, banking). A notable development contributing to this is the European Health Data Space, which will imply more widespread use of health data and management. In line with Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights on access to essential services (including digital services), EuroHealthNet recommends that the mid-term review assesses the levels of digital skills exclusion to develop tailored policy interventions. The data collected should **adopt a strong socioeconomic dimension**, measuring digital skills across the socioeconomic gradient and for specific groups, including elderly and people at risks of social exclusion. Moreover, the measurement of digital skills should be supported by an additional dimension of literacy and health literacy.
- More attention needs to be given to **improve the digital skills of adults** – both within and outside the labour market. When it comes to upskilling and reskilling efforts across different sectors of the workforce, EuroHealthNet is currently a partner in an Erasmus+ funded blueprint alliance, BeWell – a project working towards shaping the health workforce of tomorrow by creating a health workforce strategy on digital and green skills. As such, the DEAP can connect to such initiatives, providing support in ongoing efforts to address skills gaps and stimulate the development of training and capacity building programmes for professionals. It is crucial that the right investments in education infrastructures are made to equip workers with the digital skills, as well as core competences (such as critical thinking, problem solving and leadership) needed.
- Digital transformation plans need to ensure that **digital infrastructures are available, accessible and affordable** for education institutions in rural areas and deprived urban areas, which typically suffer from ICT under-investment. This is an essential aspect to providing digital education and training that is accessible to all, irrelevant of geographical or socioeconomic status.