Education in the digital era: challenges, opportunities and lessons for EU policy design

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted the own-initiative report by Yana TOOM (ALDE, EE) on education in the digital era: challenges, opportunities and lessons for EU policy design.

The report noted that with technology developing at an accelerating rate, the digital society and economy are now a fact of life, meaning that digital skills are essential for the successful professional realisation and personal development of all citizens.

Members regretted that **no overarching digital skills strategy has been developed** at EU level, while the implications of the digital transformation for the EU's internal market are clear. They stated that disparities among Member States illustrate the need for such a strategy. They believed that the Digital Education Action Plan should be viewed as the first step towards a fully-fledged EU strategy on digital education and skills based on a lifelong learning approach, which can provide both a more coordinated policy framework and simultaneously be adaptable to changing realities.

Members considered it essential that educational institutions prepare pupils and students to confront the social and economic challenges brought about by rapid technological and social developments, by equipping them with the appropriate skills to adapt to the challenges of the digital world.

They underlined that digital skills acquisition requires a **coherent, lifelong-learning approach** anchored in formal, non-formal and informal education settings, with a policy response and targeted interventions appropriate to the needs of different age groups and learners.

Educational institutions cannot afford to neglect the all-round education of their students, involving the cultivation and development of a critical and holistic outlook that enables them to assert themselves as active citizens.

While recognising the need for more digital skills, Members stressed that it is vital to take into account **neurological research** into the effects of digital technology on brain development. They called, therefore, for investment in unbiased and interdisciplinary research into the various impacts of digital technologies on education, linking education sciences, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, neuroscience and computer science so as to achieve as deep an understanding as possible of how the minds of children and adults are responding to the digital environment, with a view to maximising the benefits of the use of digital technology in education and minimising its risks.

Members called on the Member States, the Commission and educational institutions to improve **children' s safety online** and address the issues of **cyberbullying**, exposure to harmful and disturbing content, and other cybersecurity threats by developing and implementing prevention programmes and awareness-raising campaigns; encourages the Member States to further promote the #SafeInternet4EU campaign.

The report also noted the growing gap between men and women's participation in the digital sector with respect to education, career pathways and entrepreneurship. A **gender-balanced approach** to the promotion of ICT and digital careers should be promoted, and that more female students and women should be supported in pursuing a career in the digital field.

As regards increased **connectivity** in schools, Member States are called on to make substantial public investments to provide all schools with high-capacity broadband and to make use of existing EU programmes for this purpose, notably the Connecting Europe Facility, which can support the physical infrastructure of high-capacity broadband networks, and the WiFi4EU voucher scheme.

Teachers and trainers should be at the core of the digital transformation and therefore require adequate initial preparation and continuous training, which must include modules on age- and development-oriented teaching practices. The report stressed that this training requires time and should not come as an extra task on top of their daily activities.

Members called on the Member States to make responsible and effective use of Union **financial support** and to promote funding opportunities among the wider public and educational institutions, with a view to making access to digital learning content, tools and solutions a reality for all. They welcomed, in this context, the new pilot project introducing Digital Opportunity Traineeships under Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 and called for a renewed impetus in this direction under the new multiannual financial framework (MFF) programmes.

The report also stressed the need to set aside funding under these programmes and the European Structural and Investment Funds for the digitalisation of libraries, archives and museums to increase and improve their use in education and culture.