

ETUC Position on Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

Adopted at the Executive Committee Meeting of 28-29 October 2020

On 30 September 2020 the European Commission published its new Communication entitled [Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 - Resetting education and training for the digital age](#). The following position is a response of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to the European Commission's initiative.

Digital transitions towards a low carbon economy will change jobs and create new ones. **Quality jobs, fair salary and working conditions** are prerequisites for a just transition towards fair digitalisation for long-term and sustainable growth, productivity, and innovation. **Digital skills training and lifelong learning are only tools** to achieve these goals. Vocational education and training of learners of all ages play an essential role in contributing to a fair digital and green transition and career and wages progression. Therefore, support for training provisions to adults – online and offline – is an important gain to the individual, the employer, the whole economy and society at large. Trainings should ensure jobs and the European Commission should take measures to ensure these jobs are **quality and fair jobs**, and be **adequately remunerated**, and that workers receive effective support in a just transition and their share of the digital dividend.

The Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 needs to provide **realistic solutions** to the millions of learners, workers and the unemployed who faced a sudden digital transition of VET schools, apprenticeships, and workplaces. In relation to the digitalisation and decarbonization of the industries, trade unions demand that EU member states as well as companies define **effective upskilling and reskilling strategies** to support workers and the unemployed with quality and inclusive skills provision, which is available for workers of any contractual situation in all industry sectors and different sizes of companies, and which ensures quality jobs. This is why we regret that the Digital Education Action Plan does not provide any solution and effective actions for supporting digitalisation in the VET sector, for adults and employees. We remind that the overall difficulty for adults with lack or low level of basic skills, including digital skills, is the lack of confidence to invest their resources in training and to return to formal schooling. Therefore, trainings on digital skills need to be tailored to the needs of the adults and ensure work-life balance.

Upskilling and reskilling for a just transition of the labour market due to digitalisation, and obtaining digital skills and competences for the job is not solely an individual responsibility of the learners, job seekers and workers but it is also a **social and economic responsibility**. Effective **national and company-level skills and digitalisation strategies** should support workers with the provision of relevant and high-quality training. **Employers need to take their responsibility to upskill and reskill workers, in particular** within jobs undergoing digitalisation. This is supported by the recently signed [European Social Partners Framework Agreement on Digitalisation](#) between ETUC, BusinessEurope, CEEP and SMEUnited to back the successful digital transformation of Europe's economy and to

manage its effects on the labour market, the world of work and society at large. This agreement clearly says: “Where an employer requests a worker to participate in a job-related training that is directly linked to the digital transformation of the enterprise, the training is paid by the employer or in line with the collective agreement or national practice. This training can be in-house or off-site and takes place at an appropriate and agreed time for both the employer and the worker, and where possible during working hours. If the training takes place outside of working time, appropriate compensation should be arranged”. This agreement needs to be taken into consideration in defining the **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27**. Training to workers on digital skills and competences should be **recognised and certified, leading to full qualification** to ensure they have quality jobs and better career perspective.

We underline that **digital skills and competences** are important for learners of all ages, apprentices, and employees within upskilling and reskilling provisions as these are both social and labour market relevant skills and competencies. The Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 should ensure that everyone has access to improve their basic digital skills related to manage everyday life and understand cyber security, digital communication, data safety, the dangers of disinformation, and from the other side to be upskilled and reskilled for the digital transformation of the labour market according to technological developments and the necessary soft, medium and hard IT skills.

We welcome that the European Commission also acknowledges that during the COVID-19 pandemic member states were not ready for the online transition in providing trainings, tools, and internet access to VET learners of all age, as well as teachers and trainers, while policy discussions had been focusing on digitalisation of VET and adult education for decades. The drop-out rates from VET schools, which are considered still in many countries as second-chance institutions, have been considered the highest. We ask the European Commission to start conducting a European-level research on the real impact of the COVID-19 crisis on VET and adult learning sectors, with special attention to digital skills provision in employee training, and develop effective policy strategies to tackle its impact.

As digital skills are basic skills, the Digital Education Action Plan should contribute to implement essential Council conclusions¹ in order to ensure that **“low-skilled”, low-qualified and unemployed people receive effective support on digital skills and competences** to improve their life and to increase their chances in the labour market. Public employment services and other VET and adult learning **providers** should enhance the provision of digital skills and competences from the social and professional perspective and ensure that their trainings are of high quality. Therefore, we welcome that the initiative suggests steps to ensure that 70% of 16 to 74 years old adults have, at least, basic digital skills by 2025. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to map out which groups of adults are in urgent need of digital skills and to forecast which industries and groups of adults and workers will need reskilling and upskilling in relation to digital skills. We request that attention is made to ensure **guidance and counselling** in the education and training available for learners of all ages, so as to be informed on how to access digital skills trainings for career development.

¹ [Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults \(2016\)](#), and the [Council recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market \(2016\)](#)

European-level and national digital skills strategies reform VET and adult learning systems and have a great impact on the unemployed and workers. Therefore, **effective social dialogue** with the trade unions; respect and enforcement of labour rights, and information for and consultation with workers on digital skills development within VET, adult learning, employee training and apprenticeship are fundamental. We regret that the Commission's Communication does not mention the involvement of social partners in policy developments and implementation of digital skills strategies. We request that the European social partners and relevant sectoral social partners be involved in actions the European Commission plans, for example in the strategic dialogue with the member states to develop a **Council Recommendation on digital education (2022)**, in setting up the **European Digital Education Content Framework**, and in establishing the **European Digital Education Hub**.

The Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 should impose ensuring the **right** of all Europeans to **quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning on digital skills and competences** on EU member states in line with the first principle of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. We welcome that the European Commission considers to further develop **equal access to digital tools, internet and digital competence and skills development, in particular for women in STEM skills and for IT professions**. We support that the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 puts an emphasis on equal access of digital learning to all, including **disadvantaged learners**. Training centres can also reduce the digital inequality by facilitating access to equipment and digital resources. The Digital Education Plan 2021-2027 needs to ensure that effective actions are taken to reduce increasing socio-economic inequalities in accessing digital training, digital tools and internet. Learning from the previous economic and financial crisis, we emphasise that ensuring **equality and inclusion within VET and in the whole society** is more important now than ever as a social gap, which is caused by unemployment and unequal access to digital tools in training resulting in high drop-out rates from initial VET, apprenticeship and adult learning, is getting worse.

We ask the European Commission to strongly consider copyright and ownership of the materials, but also quality and relevance of the short online courses in its forthcoming feasibility study on the creation of a **European exchange platform of digital materials and courses**. As outlined in our position paper [on micro-credentials](#), we are concerned that short courses may replace courses that lead to full qualifications. Therefore, the EU platform for online courses should clearly identify who has validated and quality assured the online courses and if such courses can be recognised. Furthermore, users should be able to identify whether such courses could be added to or be a part of full qualifications. It is also important for the users to know what the value of the trainings providing micro-credentials for the labour market is and how the trainings are assessed.

It is essential to ensure a **sustainable public budget** to obtain and maintain digital tools for VET and apprenticeship and to protect the autonomy of VET schools from the dependence on digital companies. VET schools and their staff need to have support and access to training on digital skills. We welcome that the European Commission plans to use the **European Semester** as a tool to monitor the implementation of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27. We ask that within this process and by using the Recovery Plan fund the European Commission should motivate the member states to invest to fair digitalisation of

VET while keeping in mind that learning in person in VET schools and apprenticeship has an essential role in obtaining **social skills and teamwork**.

We welcome that more EU funds will be allocated to support skills provision within the **Recovery Plan**, and we ask that more EU funds, especially ESF+ and the **European structural and investment funds** support digital skills trainings within CVET and adult learning. Governance at national level on EU funds should be enhanced with the involvement of the social partners in order to ensure that the best allocation of funds reach those in needs.

We ask the European Commission not to limit the scope of the development of the **European Digital Competence Framework** and **European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC)** to high level IT skills. We remind that the Key Competence Framework (2018)² applies also for training of adults and its definition of digital competence should be taken into consideration within comprehensive national digital strategies to support individuals in improving their digital skills and competences not only for the **labour market** but also to help them in **everyday life**. In order to ensure that digital education link to citizenship education, more cooperation is needed between **education and digitalisation strategies**.

We welcome the increased focus of the Commission on **apprenticeship in digital sectors** in relation to digital skills provision. To achieve broader digital skills and competences provision in apprenticeship in any industry sectors and not only in the digital sector, we request the full implementation of the [European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeship](#) within effective national VET policies and within company policies developed by effective social dialogue to ensure that **apprentices are not exploited as cheap labour**. Most importantly apprentices need to be seen having the double status as learners and workers within companies. Thus, collective agreements and labour rights must be respected in relation to apprenticeship provisions at sectoral and company levels.

Since the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 is linked to the **Green Deal**, we remind the European Commission that enhancing digitalisation in education and training should go hand in hand with encouraging governments to make effective measures to reduce digital waste. Recalling [ETUC resolution on digitalisation: "towards fair digital work"](#) we remind that "ICT technologies generate astronomic amounts of waste that are harmful for the environment and for public health. This is particularly worrying when this waste is exported through informal means to poor countries where the local population is directly exposed to toxic materials. The ETUC therefore demands that the deployment of digital technologies should be accompanied by a set of regulations and standards, which will help to ensure the – social, economic and environmental – sustainability of ICT value chains. The EU must also ensure that its action on digitalisation fits with the targets of its climate, energy and environment policies. Ensuring the sustainability of the digital economy should not be seen as an obstacle to its deployment but as a prerequisite for its economic viability in the long term."

² COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604%2801%29>