

REPORT

EARLALL online workshop:

EU funds to build resilient skills ecosystems

(28 September 2020)



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EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF REGIONAL & LOCAL
AUTHORITIES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING



Resilient skills ecosystems
for a crisis-proof future





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Introduction

This workshop was part of a broader initiative launched by EARLALL in May 2020 to gather the experiences from EARLALL Member Regions during the COVID-19 pandemic and their plans for the future, under the title **Building Resilient Skills Ecosystems for a Crisis-proof Future**. A joint initiative by three EARLALL working groups – Mobility, Skills & Labour Market, and Guidance & Ageing Societies –, this workshop allowed participants to get an overview of the funding opportunities that will be made available by the EU to develop skills-related initiatives and support lifelong learning.

As negotiations developed towards a multiannual financial framework (MFF) for the 2021-2027, the workshop helped to identify what opportunities lie within the new budget for the funding of skills at regional and local level. The programme was made up of interventions by European Commission representatives, who outlined the prospective programmes for the new funding period: an overall introduction to EU education policies from DG EMPL's perspective was followed by specifications on the upcoming programmes by representatives from DG EAC (Erasmus+), EACEA (Centres of Vocational Excellence), DG EMPL (ESF+ and REACT EU) and DG CONNECT (Horizon Europe and Digital Europe).

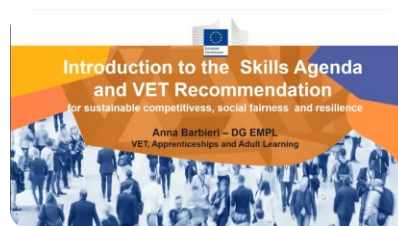
The event was hosted by Noelia Cantero, EARLALL Director, and moderated by Camilla Winter, International Coordinator at the City of Borås - Adult Education, on behalf of Region Västra Götaland. Participants, representing regional and local authorities, as well as VET and adult education centres in EARLALL Member Regions, were encouraged to take actively part in EU programmes and develop projects that help tackle regional and local challenges from a European perspective.



Policy introduction

Anna Barbieri,
Policy Officer,
European Commission's Directorate-General for
Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion

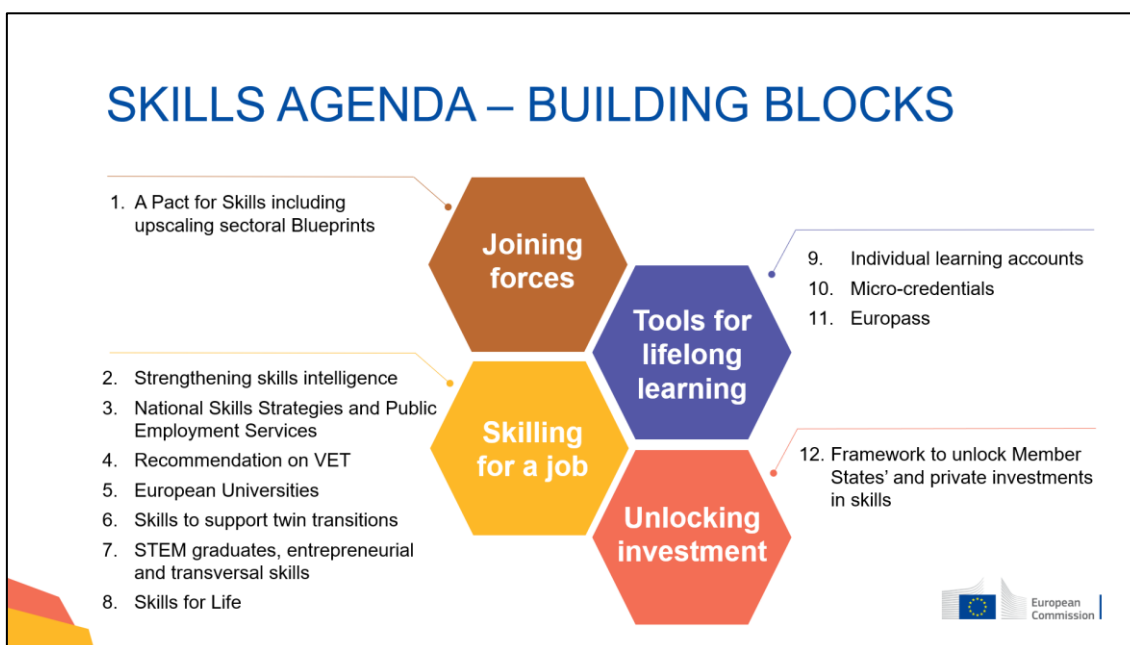
[Presentation available here](#)



We live in times of green and digital transitions. We are fully still in a COVID-19 emergency, which has accelerated the changes in society and has shown that we were not ready for it. However, this time is different: the European Commission has encouraged Member States to fight the temptation to work towards going back to the previous status quo, and instead bring societies and economies forward by means of a green and digital transition. For a recovery that creates new jobs and brings back those that were lost during the crisis, we need a strong skills strategy that can strengthen social fairness, sustainability, and resilience.

Skills Agenda

On 1 July 2020, the European Commission adopted a new Skills Agenda, building on the one from 2016. The Skills Agenda aims at unlocking the funding for skills. It is composed of 12 initiatives that define a clear skills strategy that empowers people to pursue lifelong learning, sets some facilitating framework conditions and fixes ambitious targets and results that it wants to reach in the coming 5 years.



Source: European Commission



The first strand of work concerns joining forces: collective responsibility in VET is called for. The European Pact for Skills will be launched on 10 November 2020 during the European Skills Week, gathering all stakeholders working on the reskilling and upskilling of workers. They are asked to sign a quality charter to commit to concrete objectives within the field. The pact is open to all organisations both from the public and the private domains.

The second block refers to skilling for a job, fostering comprehensive skills strategies, from skills intelligence (data usability and dissemination, also at regional local level) to national skills strategies depending on the role of the government, and also strategies that include skills for a green and digital transition (STEM, entrepreneurial and transversal skills). Two key particular initiatives are highlighted below: (8) Skills for Life and the (4) Council Recommendation on VET.

The third strand refers to the empowerment of individuals, focusing on individual responsibility for own learning and one's own career. The Commission is exploring the concept of *individual learning accounts*, which will provide people with funding for training, guidance, or other services. Furthermore, European-level standards for micro-credentials will also be developed, and a renewed Europass portal was launched on 1 July 2020, with several new features, available at <https://europa.eu/europass/en>. These initiatives will tackle barriers that prevent people from participating in lifelong learning (lack of time and financial resources).

The last building block of the Skills Agenda concerns unlocking investment. There is considerable funding available at European level, but the aim is to make this funds work as a catalyst to attract national and private investment in skills.

Skills for Life

The action 8 of the Skills Agenda's second building block refers to Skills for Life. All skills that one possesses are interlinked, and the boundaries between skills for a job and skills for life are blurring. Particularly, the COVID-19 outbreak has shown that everyone needs to adapt, to be resilient and to seize opportunity also in adverse times – most of all, we need to help one another. There are good examples of VET providers, teachers and trainers that helped their communities during the COVID-19 emergency, e.g., by providing meals for people in a situation of vulnerability or crafting masks and plastic shields. Perseverance and civic competences are indeed fundamental, and to ensure that every citizen has these skills quality and inclusive adult learning systems are needed.

Vision for an inclusive excellent and lifelong vet

The Council is currently discussing a [Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#). Member States are committing to a VET that is fit for the future, ready to:

- Ensure inclusiveness and equal opportunities and contributes to achieving resilience, social fairness, and prosperity.



- ▢ Equip young people and adults with the skills to manage the recovery and the just transitions to the green and digital economy, and to thrive in the evolving labour market cycles.
- ▢ Establish European vocational education and training as a global reference for excellence and attractiveness.

At national and regional level, there are some principles that are also being adopted by the Council:

- ▢ VET is agile in adapting to dynamic labour market changes (for example, through work-based learning).
- ▢ Flexibility and progression opportunities.
- ▢ Equal opportunities.
- ▢ VET is a driver for innovation and growth.
- ▢ VET is attractive.
- ▢ Effective governance.

In order to achieve the outlined objectives, there are six main actions that will be put forward next years:

- ▢ Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence.
- ▢ European professional core values.
- ▢ SELFIE self-assessment tool.
- ▢ Peer reviews on quality assurance.
- ▢ Cooperation with VET providers.
- ▢ Global reference point for skills development.

As a concluding remark, the commitment of the grassroots level, along with regional and local entities, will be essential to disseminate the initiatives launched by the European institutions and contribute to the implementation of the skills agenda.



Erasmus+ from a policy perspective

José Manuel Fernández,
Head of Sector (Erasmus+ implementation),
European Commission, Directorate-General for
Education and Culture



[Presentation available here](#)

Erasmus was adopted in 1987 as the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, and after more than thirty years its future is being rethought for the next programming period (2021-2027). A key change for it arrived in 2014 with the adding of the “+” sign, meaning the incursion of all education sectors under its umbrella. Currently, preparation for an evolution (not revolution) of the programme is being undertaken, since the way it works has proven to function, even if there is room for improvement.

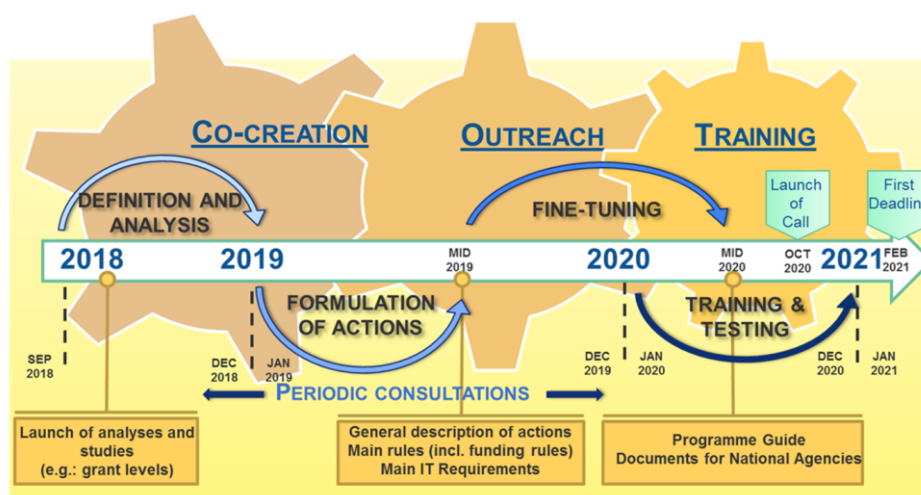
The general objective for the next programme will be supporting “the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, jobs and social cohesion and to strengthening European identity.” Key evolutions will aim at making the programme:

- ▀ more inclusive and accessible
- ▀ broader and forward-looking
- ▀ more participatory and focussed on developing EU awareness
- ▀ greener
- ▀ more international
- ▀ more digital
- ▀ in synergy with other EU instruments
- ▀ simpler

Horizontal priorities will aim at achieving:

- ▀ A more inclusive Erasmus+, in line with the Future Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, so more people join the programme, especially those who think that the programme is not for them.
- ▀ A greener Erasmus+, trying to lower the carbon footprint of the programme, even if does not cover just mobility. Direct actions will be selected, and priority will be given for environmentally conscious projects.

Synergies with other EU instruments, such as ESF+, European Regional Development Fund, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, European Solidarity Corps and InvestEU, for example by facilitating the scaling-up successful projects and topping up funds (additional support).

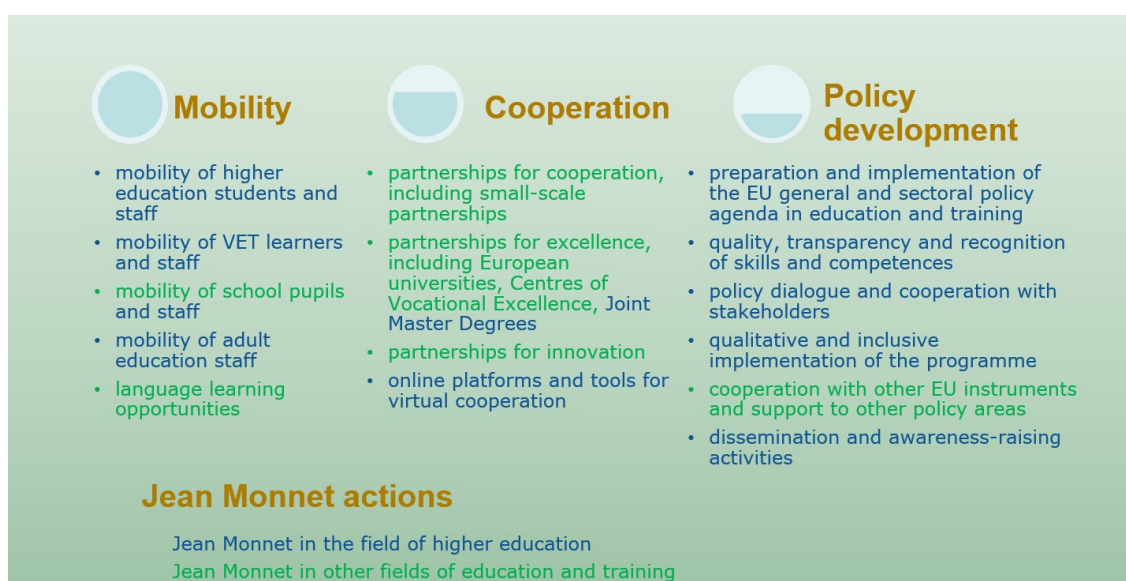


Source: European Commission

The design of the upcoming programme has been done by means of a co-creation project that began in 2018, taking also into consideration the inputs from the programme's mid-term report. Working groups with National Agencies (NAs) and stakeholders were established to assess the programme and identify potential improvements. A stakeholder event was also organised in Brussels, with more than 700 participants. Even if the progresses made need to be handled with care, a new programme guide for 2021 is almost finished and is expected to be launched by the end of 2020.

The main actions envisioned for the programme are depicted in the infographics below (novelties highlighted in green):

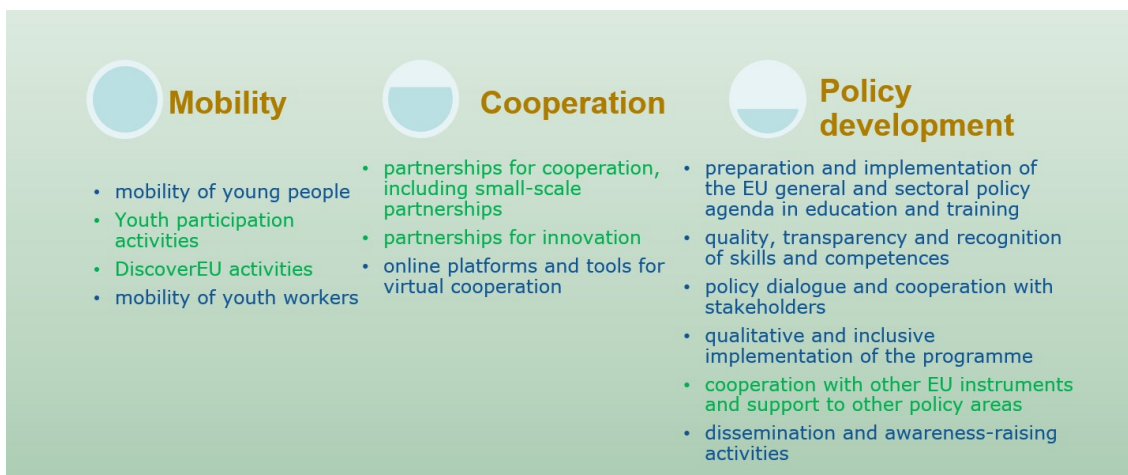
Actions in the field of Education & Training



Source: European Commission



Actions in the field of Youth



Source: European Commission

Measures implemented to attract newcomers, especially adult education and VET centres, include prospective accreditation systems in Key Action 1 (KA1) to facilitate access to more sustainable funding and reduce administrative burden, supporting the strategic development of organisations; small-scale partnerships under KA2 that allow simplified cooperation between organisations and facilitate the access to the programme for grassroots organisations.



Centres of Vocational Excellence

Michele Grombeer,
Head of Sector (VET),
European Commission's Education, Audio-visual
and Culture Executive Agency

Presentation available here



The Executive Agency works closely with DG EAC and DG EMPL to transform policy into action, contributing also with knowledge and expertise by implementing Eurydice studies. For the upcoming programme, support to selected projects is expected for the whole project life cycle; moreover, since the COVID-19 outbreak, a reinforced helpdesk and guidance services is providing support for the also (self)reinforced commitment of beneficiaries.

Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020

The Centres of Vocational Excellence initiative is a very promising long-term looking project that was first implemented with a call of proposals in 2019 under “Sector Skills Alliances” (Erasmus+ KA2), from which 5 pilot projects were selected¹. A new, more specific call for large-scale projects (4 years) was launched in 2020, with 7 projects selected (90% from the proposals submitted) amounting to a total investment of 27.3 million euros and are expected to start on 1 November 2020. These projects will all participate of the strategic approach for the development of regional skills ecosystems and smart specialisation strategies. An online event will be organised soon to promote their activities. The list of selected projects under this call is available here: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/funding/ka3-centers-of-vocational-excellence_en.

Selected projects had at least 8 full partners (in at least 2 Member States), with at least 1 company and 1 VET provider per country. Interest from Erasmus+ partner countries in respect to associate partners will also be taken into account for further calls. Furthermore, a large diversity of applicant organisations was observed, with a mixing of VET providers and Higher Education (HE) organisations.

Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027

The initiative of Centres of Vocational Excellence will continue to exist for the new programming period, as it is a key pillar in the VET strategy. The regional component will remain relevant, with a focus on regional development, innovation, inclusion, smart specialisation strategies, the dual “x” triangle. The partner countries will also be more involved than at present. Simplification of the application procedure and financial aspects

¹ [Among which, EXAM 4.0 (Excellent Advanced Manufacturing 4.0), coordinated by TKNKA – Basque VET Applied Research Centre, and with the participation of EARLALL. More information available at <http://www.examhub.eu>.]



is also expected to facilitate access to funds. As soon as the programme guide is published (end 2020), the Executive Agency will organise virtual info days.

Sector Skills Alliances

The needs covered by this strand of Erasmus+ will remain relevant, and it will be very a promising call also in the years to come. Through this action, the objective is to tackle skills gaps with regard to one or more occupational profiles in a specific sector, by identifying sector-specific labour market needs (demand side) and enhance the responsiveness of VET systems at all levels to the labour market needs (supply side).

In 2020, [projects](#) were selected under two lots:

- 🚩 Lot 1: Design and delivery of VET
- 🚩 Lot 2: Implementation of a new strategic approach (Blueprint) to sectoral cooperation on skills. This lot selected 6 sectors (one project by sector) experiencing severe skills shortages for the piloting of initiatives:
 - Blockchain
 - Cultural heritage
 - Cybersecurity
 - Rail supply and transport industries
 - Software services
 - Work integration - Social Enterprises

Main features from the 2020 call can be useful for prospective calls:

- 🚩 Applications submitted by 53 consortia, including almost 800 partners.
- 🚩 12 (6 Lot 1 - 6 Lot 2) selected projects (2020-2024) for 29.54 million euros.
- 🚩 98% absorption of the budget available for this call for proposals (30 million euros).
- 🚩 The selected projects cover 10 economic sectors in total, including education, human health and social work activities, accommodation, and food services.
- 🚩 All 6 pilot sectors proposed under Lot 2 are covered.
- 🚩 236 organisations are involved in the selected projects.
- 🚩 All EU Member States represented except DK (and UK) + Serbia and Turkey.
- 🚩 Beneficiaries include much more participating organisations and countries than the minimum requirements.
- 🚩 High representation from educational centres for vocational training (secondary level), higher education institutions, social partners, SMEs, NGOs, large enterprises, adult education centres and accreditation, certification, or qualification bodies, etc.

The goal for the upcoming period is to improve the vision on Knowledge and Sector Skills Alliances, having all actors working closely together in the benefit of the target public. This will be achieved by boosting innovation through cooperation and flow of knowledge among both HE and VET (initial and continuous), involving the broader social economic environment, including research. Access to the programme will be similar to the current one, but a simplification of funding mechanisms (e.g., inclusion of lumpsums) will be carried out.



EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in VET)

EQAVET is a highly active network for quality assurance in VET, with a peer-review approach to support designated bodies, also in third countries. The work of this network will continue in the upcoming years.



ESF+ and REACT EU

Lyubomira Derelieva,
Policy Assistant,
European Commission's Directorate General for
Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion

Presentation available here



ESF+ (European Social Fund [Plus])

The European Social Fund (ESF) was the first structural fund that was established with the [Treaty of Rome](#) in 1957. Since then, it's the key EU instrument for investing in people, with a total budget of 84 billion euros for the 2014-2020 funding period, and an expected funding of 97.3 billion euros proposed (under negotiation by the European Parliament and Council) for the upcoming one (ESF+), with a complementary 58.3 billion from the REACT-EU programme (2021-2023), to be divided between the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).

The goal of ESF is to improve employment opportunities for workers in the Union and contribute to raising the standard of living (Art. 162 [TFEU](#)) and contribute to economic, social and territorial cohesion (Arts. 174 and 175 TFEU), belonging to the same cohesion funding family as the ERDF and the Cohesion Funds. This means that resources are concentrated in less developed regions.

The fund works under three key pillars:

- Shared management: the implementation, programming and monitoring is shared between the European Commission and Member States (or regions, depending on the country). Priorities are jointly agreed, which are subsequently introduced in the programme. It is in the hands of Member States and regions to launch calls for proposals and select the projects.
- Partnership: all actors need to be involved in the whole funding cycle, so the process is inclusive and transparent.
- Co-financing: EU resources are complemented with national co-financing.

Under the shared management principle, local and regional authorities are encouraged to reach out to their national/regional ESF contact point ([full list available here](#)).

ESF+ support for skills

ESF+ will cover 11 objectives in 3 policy areas: a) employment, b) education and training (E&T), c) social inclusion and fighting poverty. Under the “education and training” area, three specific objectives are considered, covering the entire E&T cycle:



- Improving E&T systems.
- Ensuring equal access to and completion of quality and inclusive E&T.
- Lifelong learning (flexible upskilling and reskilling) and skills anticipation, career transitions and mobility.

The fund can support both individuals directly and reforms. All these priorities will have a focus on digital and green skills, in line with the main political priorities. Furthermore, ESF+ is aligned with EU policies and Member States' priorities:

- Needs identified by the European Semester through [country reports](#) and [country-specific recommendations](#).
- When a Member State or region chooses a priority where to invest, they need to fulfil what is known as *enabling conditions*: ensuring that there is an adequate legal and policy framework that guarantees the success of the investment.

REACT EU

REACT EU consists of a series of additional resources proposed by the European Commission for 2021-2023 (short/medium-term) in order to overcome the challenges raised by the COVID-19 crisis. As stated before, additional funds for 58.3 billion euros have been proposed to be split the ESF, ERDF and FEAD. Amounts will be distributed according to level of prosperity and the socio-economic effects of the crisis, with a co-financing rate that can reach up to 100% for the additional amounts.

These additional resources need to be programmed under a new objective: "Fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy." The programme will be based on the 2020 country-specific recommendations, which focus on COVID-19 recovery and, more specifically, on equal access to education and training, as well as digital learning.

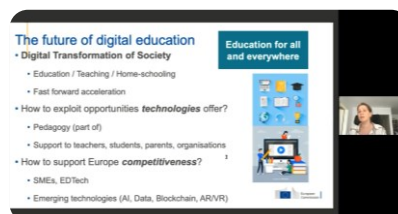
The programming priorities of these additional resources under REACT and ESF+ are still under negotiation, including consultations with stakeholders and partners. Regional and local authorities are invited to participate in these discussions.



Horizon Europe and Digital Europe

Anne Bajart,
Deputy Head of Unit,
European Commission's Directorate General for
Communications Networks, Content & Technology

[Presentation available here](#)



Interactive technologies and digital for culture and education

DG CONNECT (Unit G.2) deals with the use of technologies for education and culture, under three key strands of work:

- ✚ Bringing European heritage into the digital age.
- ✚ Education systems fit for the digital era, including digital student mobility, student e-card and connectivity of schools.
- ✚ Transforming digital experiences with virtual reality (VR) / augmented reality (AR).

All current actions are taking into account the COVID-19 challenges. When it comes to digital technologies, the European Commission has an ambitious digital plan to support the society in these hard times. The Commission has developed different activities dealing with digital technologies to tackle the crisis:

- ✚ Data, artificial intelligence, and supercomputers: contact tracing, lifting containment, AI-Robotics vs COVID-19, treatment, forecasting.
- ✚ Telecommunications, networks, and connectivity: monitoring Internet capacity.
- ✚ Online platforms and disinformation: reducing streaming strain, debunking fake videos, fighting fake news.
- ✚ Skills, collaborative working, and creativity: remote learning, digital skills & best practices, Europeana Collections, Cultural Heritage @home, 3D for resilience, recovery, and creativity.

More specifically, some actions have been especially relevant:

- ✚ Coordination and Support Action [DEL4ALL](#) (funded by Horizon 2020)
- ✚ [Impact EdTech](#) (funded by Horizon 2020), helping EdTech start-ups/SMEs turn ideas into market-ready products.
 - A first call was launched in 2020 (closed in June 2020) to support a wide range of educational solutions, including those that facilitate remote and mobile learning.
 - A second specific call was launched in the context of COVID-19 (closed in September 2020) on remote schooling in order to solve challenges encountered by teachers and students.
 - A third call is expected for Spring 2021.



A series of European projects and initiatives, as well as online EU-supported platforms for teachers and educators during the outbreak of COVID-19, were available during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/content/digital-technologies-actions-response-coronavirus-pandemic-skills-collaborative-working-and>
- <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-funded-projects-provide-innovative-learning-tools-revolutionising-digital-education>
- https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/coronavirus-online-learning-resources/online-platforms_en

Digital Education Action Plan

DG CONNECT has supported the work of DG EAC in developing a new [Digital Education Action Plan](#), which was launched on 30 September 2020 (at the moment of the celebration of the workshop, it was not yet available). The goal was to update the digital education action plan launched in 2018, establishing political guidelines for the European Commission 2019-2024 and ensuring that young people and adults in the EU:

- Acquire the necessary digital skills.
- Use internet's potential in making learning materials available to all.
- Make digital literacy widespread.

Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe

The Horizon 2020 programme has funded numerous research and innovation projects using technologies for education, focussing on a variety of specific topics (emerging technologies, VR, students with special needs, etc.). All funded projects are available through this link: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/policies/digital-learning-ict-education>.

Horizon Europe will be the programme supporting research and innovation for the 2021-2027 programming period. However, an [agreement](#) on its technicalities had not been reached by the time of the workshop. The proposal from the European Commission includes three main pillars, with a total proposed budget of 100 million euros (expected to be cut): 1) Excellent science, 2) Global challenges and European industrial competitiveness, and 3) Innovative Europe. For the moment, digital education is contained under pillar 2 (cluster 4).

Digital Europe

Complementary to Horizon Europe, a novelty will be the Digital Europe programme, focusing on the digital transformation of society and the economy, dealing with strategic autonomy and enhancement of digital capacities. For the moment, the role of education in it is unclear, especially for the first work programme. [However, funding for advanced digital skills is expected at some point].



The complementarity of EU programmes was highlighted, as shown in the following infographic:

EU-wide collective effort				National regional and local		Financial instrument
Horizon Europe	Digital Europe	Connecting Europe Facilities	Health	Cohesion	Agriculture funds	InvestEU
Research Innovation	Strategic capacities: computing, data, testbeds, etc. Advanced digital skills EU-Wide deployment	Broadband and 5G roll out Connecting Communities	Data Spaces for Health Telemedicine eHDSI	Digital connectivity in white and grey areas Support to enterprises in line with <u>Smart specialisation</u> Digital skills for all citizens	Making use of Big Data for CAP monitoring Broadband rollout in rural areas	Leverage private capital for investments in SMEs, research, digital infrastructure, skills...

Source: European Commission.

The future of digital education will imply an interaction between education, teaching and home-schooling, and the COVID-19 outbreak boosted a fast-forward acceleration. The question now is how the opportunities that technologies offer can be approached: a pedagogical perspective is essential (multidisciplinary), bringing on board teachers as well as local authorities. Support for teachers, parents, and organisations will be essential in this sense. Furthermore, an ethical use of technologies must be ensured (e.g. in AI use for grading systems), and the development of European tools and technologies will be fundamental to guarantee it.



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Edited by EARLALL Secretariat on 14 October 2020.
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 Resilient skills ecosystems
for a crisis-proof future

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