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AGE input to the consultation: Digital Education Action Plan

AGE welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to update the Digital Education Action plan in light of the experiences with digital education during the COVID-19 crisis. The experiences of the lock-downs have indeed demonstrated the potential but also the risks linked to increasing digital education.

Digital tools and digital education have an important potential for learners, and among them older learners. Demographics show that many older persons live in rural areas, without a sizeable tissue of opportunities for social interaction. Mobility problems and chronic health conditions can mean that older people even in more densely populated areas may have more difficulties going out and interact with others. In addition, the COVID-19 related lock-down measures, particularly those targeting older persons, have meant that they stayed in their homes or long-term care facilities, without social interaction for months. In this context, maintaining contact and interactions with family and friends, but also learning opportunities that exist online, have a great potential for maintaining and supporting their social inclusion, preventing isolation and loneliness and maintain mental and physical health. Learning, as a fundamental human right, need and aspiration, has a particular role to play in this process. However, accessing digital education by digital means cannot be taken for granted, as the problem of digital exclusion adds to barriers to access learning opportunities generally. Presence learning will always be a more intense, immersive and engaging learning experience.

The consultation of the European Commission seems to overlook the potential of learning and digital education for older persons in improving their skills and life projects, staying socially included, mentally and physically active and exercising their human right, thereby also omitting principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, because a number of issues:

- It seems the consultation focusses only on formal education, leaving the immense potential of non-formal and informal learning out of the picture
- Little attention is given to lifting the barriers to access formal, informal and non-formal learning for older persons generally
- The challenges for digitally excluded groups, including many older persons, to access digital education specifically are not highlighted
- Given these points, it seems that older persons are not regarded as potential learners in the concept of the Action Plan, ; a rights-based approach aiming the realisation of the right to education for all seems absent.





Therefore, AGE wishes to make outline the abovementioned shortcomings, recommend possible avenues for making the Digital Education Action Plan more inclusive for all ages and underline a couple of good practices that could inspire measures inside a revised digital education action plan

Barriers to the full enjoyment to the right to education for older persons

The European Union has enshrined the **right to education in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the right to life-long learning constitutes the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights**. A lot of political calls exist on member states to upscale life-long learning, including through the European Semester, the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways and the New Skills Agenda. Unfortunately, life-long learning is often only understood as learning of skills relevant for the labour market, although the same (digital, among other) skills are necessary for full social participation also for persons who have left the labour market – but life-long learning opportunities are not tailored to them.

AGE Platform Europe has summarised the issues of older persons relative to learning in [its 2019 contribution to the discussion on the right to education, training, life-long learning and capacity-building](#) by the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG). The main points unfortunately remain relevant with the experience of the pandemic, and **many issues have actually been reinforced by physical distancing measures, shift to exclusive online service provision and reduction of activities during the pandemic**. In specific situations, such as in case of older persons living alone at home or in long-term care facilities, these shortcomings have even attained dramatic dimensions as many older persons have been excluded entirely from social interaction for months.

AGE highlighted in its contribution to the UN OEWG:

- Education and training policies often **target only younger learners**, or at least learners who are active in the labour market and in need for employment-related skills. There is a lack of educational opportunities relevant for persons who have left the labour market
- While the EU's employment directive should ensure equal access to employment-related training for workers of all ages, this is often not the case as **older workers are the least likely to access life-long learning**¹
- **Vocational education and training policies are explicitly exempt from the scope of the Employment Directive**; age barriers still exist for example in the access to scholarships or student loans

¹ Eurostat shows that in 2019, 5.6 % of adults between 50 and 74 have participated in adult learning. This is the lowest share of all age groups and far behind the ET2020 target of 15% of participation in life-long learning. The figure is 10.8 % for 25-64 year-olds.





- **Employers** are less interested in training older employees than younger ones, under the false assumption that investment is less worth it, as they might stay in the organisation for a shorter period
- The **adult education sector is left to civil society organisations** and volunteering. Quality standards not exist and often **funding is cut in this sector first** in case of fiscal adjustments, because it is considered non-essential. There is very little monitoring of access to and quality of adult education
- There is a strong territorial difference in the access to learning opportunities, with sparsely populated areas experiencing a lack of opportunities.
- Where educational opportunities exist, there are **important barriers to actually access them**: these can be geographical (mobility to go to courses), procedural (need to enrol for an educational opportunity by non-accessible means, such digitally only) or indeed linked to accessibility for persons with disabilities

Underpinning these points is **the pervasive – ageist – idea that older persons would be less interested, worthy or able to engage in learning**. It is exemplified by the reference to the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) in the 2018 version of the Digital Education Action Plan (Priority 3, Action 9): currently, PIAAC only covers adults between 16 and 65, leaving out the prospect of persons over 65 to actually be adult learners.

These points are just as relevant for digital education, especially those relating to funding and organisation of adult learning, access to existing opportunities and the additional need for off-line guidance to find and enrol in digital learning opportunities.

Digital exclusion and its consequences on digital education for older persons

While many older persons who are well educated and experience financial security can be quite savvy regarding digital technologies, many others are facing digital exclusion. According to Eurostat, in 2019, only 33% of the population had more than basic digital skills. **This figure is 18% for persons 55-64 and 8% for persons 65-74**. The gender gap is at the disadvantage for women and constitutes 7 percentage points for people between 55 and 74. However, digital skills are not the only barrier faced by older persons in accessing digital education.

More older persons live in rural or sparsely populated areas, where **high-speed internet connectivity is not a given** in large parts of the EU. Furthermore, the cost of internet subscriptions and the necessary equipment (including of regularly needed hardware upgrades) is prohibitive for many older persons – especially those with the lowest incomes.





Many older persons are **unfamiliar with the digital world, and also suspicious** of its risks. Confidence and trust can only be built by regular, positive use of digital technology. Recent research work² has shown that interventions targeting older learners' media literacy tend to focus only on their use of devices, rather than on the understanding of online information and content creation. Similar conclusions have been drawn from the DIGITOL study³ which showed that the development of older people's digital skills is mainly hindered by the lack of accessible trainings, the absence of adequate training offers, and the fact that older persons are not targeted as potential trainees.

Encouragement and guidance to engage with digital education adapted to the needs of older persons is necessary for many of them to access digital education.

Where older people have digital skills, the DIGITOL project has shown that older people are willing to improve skills in similar domains as younger people, namely: how to use digitalised services such as tax paying, banking, online shopping, online public consultations; how to trust online information; and identifying and reacting to fake news. The project also clarified motivators for older people to increase their digital participation. Remarks like "*if you're not on Facebook, you're gone*" or "*if you're not on the internet, you're offboard*" collected during focus groups with older people confirm the hypothesis of a feeling of exclusion among adults without sufficient digital skills.

While the European Directive on the **accessibility** of public sector websites should ensure that websites of the public sector are accessible for persons with disabilities, online accessibility remains a challenge as its principles are widely unknown and web developers often do not bother adapting projects to accessibility standards. Many online educational offers are not formally hosted by the public sector, but by the third sector, limiting the scope of the directive in access to digital education.

Older persons living in residential care facilities also are often digitally excluded, as these facilities might not provide connectivity, equipment and activities to use them.⁴ This means that even digitally included older persons moving into residential facilities become digitally excluded. The often very high cost of long-term care, in many cases exceeding the revenues from pensions, inhibits many older persons to mitigate this with their own private means. There are however some notable

2 ProArbeit and AGE Platform Europe, *Context Analysis Report. A cross-cutting comparison of digital literacy training for generations to combat fake news together*. [Digitol project](#) deliverable Forthcoming in Autumn 2020. Ch. 3.

3 Cf. ProArbeit and AGE Platform Europe, *op. cit.*, chapter 4.2.

4 For instance, in Germany, most of the 12,000 residential care facilities do not offer wireless access points to residents – cf. BAGSO, *Digitale Grundversorgung in Alten- und Pflegeheimen sicherstellen*, Position Paper, June 2020.

https://www.bagso.de/fileadmin/user_upload/bagso/06_Veroeffentlichungen/2020/Stellungnahme_Digitale_Grundversorgung_in_Pflegeheimen.pdf





exceptions to this and especially during COVID-19-related lockdowns, some long-term care residences have acquired or received donations of digital equipment.

As innovative ways of providing digital education might aim to follow the internet use of younger generations – primarily mobile – this might create an additional barrier to older learners, given older persons are **more likely to access the internet via a computer.**⁵

This high level of digital exclusion of older persons in the EU prevent them from fully participating in digital learning opportunities. More than in digital learning, it prevents many older persons to fully seize the opportunities of digital communications. In a context where older persons are particularly encouraged to stay home because of the risks related to COVID-19, this constitutes a huge loss in opportunity for social interaction, learning and quality of life, but also civic and cultural participation..

Where learning opportunities for the digital skills of older persons exist, they are often only based on project funding and do not last in time, therefore only reaching a single generation.

Role of formal and non-formal learning for older learners

In education and learning in general, but in digital education especially, formal and non-formal learning play an important role for older persons' engagement in learning. There are **multiple barriers to access formal learning**, such as the targeting of younger people and labour market-relevant skills. **Non-formal and informal learning creates more space for bringing in their own experiences, better addresses specific skills gaps and provides a more accessible learning environment** than formal learning. Formal validation of skills acquired through experience, non-formal and informal learning is much more adequate when a formal certificate is needed for labour market purposes.

However, it seems from the consultation that **the Digital Education Action Plan does not take account of the importance of informal and non-formal learning.** The questions seem to target educational institutions and formal curricula, which are only features of formal learning. Research however suggests that the most efficient way to acquire digital skills for older learners is to use a need-based approach (how can I use digital technology to overcome my everyday needs?) and promoting self-efficacy as users of digital technologies and media,⁶ while providing support for learning. Research⁷ clearly points towards informal and non-formal learning (peer-to-

5 BAGSO, *Older persons in a digital world*, Position paper, updated version 2020.

<https://www.bagso.de/publikationen/positionspapier/older-persons-in-a-digital-world/>

6 Rasi, P. et al, 'Promoting Media Literacy Among Older People: A Systematic Review'. In: Adult Education Quarterly, 2020, forthcoming. p.12.

7 Rasi, P. et al, op. cit.





peer teaching and intergenerational approaches) as the main avenue for digital skills promotion.

In the 2018 version of the Digital Education Action Plan, Priority 2 already mostly focussed on schools and higher education, leaving adult learning to the actions taken in the framework of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. While this Recommendation importantly puts life-long learning and digital skills for adults on the EU policy-making agenda, it focusses mainly on the labour market and does not provide additional financial support to non-formal and informal digital education initiatives.

AGE recommendations for a Digital Education Action Plan inclusive for all ages

Given the points raised above about the barriers to education and training for older persons, the generational digital gap and issues of digital access as well as the role of formal and non-formal learning, AGE would like to suggest the following points for inclusion into the updated Digital Education Action Plan:

- Include a **strand about digital access**, covering innovative ways of making older persons, but also other groups who face barriers in accessing digital technology⁸, to engage with the digital world, such as:
 - **Public digital access points** in institutions such as town hall, libraries etc., accessible to persons with disabilities
 - **Digital access in residential care facilities**, e.g. access to tablets for residents
 - Promoting **digital access for older persons with mobility issues** who receive care at home

These programmes should be linked to activities that promote the use of existing digital access opportunities.

- Support for **formal and non-formal digital education**, inclusion of digital education in learning opportunities on other matters, including through **funding**. This should embrace not only the provision of technology to adult learning providers, but also capacity-building and skills of adult education staff. Upscaling of formal and non-formal digital education initiatives on national levels.

8 For instance, people with low educational attainment, people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, persons living with a disability, people with a migrant background or isolated because of their family setting or discriminations.





- Provision of **offline guidance to familiarise digitally excluded persons** with online learning opportunities and support for the integration of digital education into face-to-face education, which promotes social inclusion and interaction
- Sometimes more than digital skills, **building of trust into digital technologies** and their use is important to allow for the active and frequent use of digital communications by older persons. Therefore, the aspects of cybersecurity as a basic digital skill, actions against disinformation and online harassment should be included to a larger extent than into the 2018 Digital Education Action Plan.
- **Tailoring of formal learning opportunities to the needs of older learners**, including regarding content, accessibility for persons living in rural areas and accessibility for persons with disabilities and coupling of digital learning opportunities with the provision of equipment.
- Ensuring that publicly funded learning opportunities carried out by other actors are **fully accessible for persons with disabilities**, including online content and physical environments. This can be realised through clauses in public procurement tenders and calls.

The Commission should **establish guidance, collections of good practices and opportunities for the exchange of innovative practices to implement these principles**. They should be streamlined in the relevant funds and programmes of the EU, such as Erasmus+, ESF+, the Regional Development and Cohesion Funds etc.

Good practices

The practices below have been compiled via a call to AGE members and a collection of good practices as part of the DIGITOL project, a project addressing media literacy and fighting disinformation in older persons' use of online media. The practices have been collected to show that numerous examples exist that implement the principles pointed out above: providing physical access, promoting digital skills in a needs-based approach and in informal and non-formal learning. While a wealth of such initiatives exist, little research is devoted on the impact and effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches. Also, the scattering of initiatives is part of the problem that could be addressed by the Digital Education Action plan: a national or EU-wide framework with good practices or quality criteria, as well as systematic (i.e. not project-based) funding for such initiatives is lacking.

For an additional overview of existing media literacy initiative, the “Check It Out” database of the **“Open Your Eyes” Erasmus+ project**⁹ provides an excellent entry point. The database compiles about more than 80 tools and initiatives to learn

9 <https://openyoureyes.info/en/database>





about online disinformation. The initiatives take various forms, from games to education programme and workshop.

In **Poland**, the Academy „**Activus**” is the University of the Third Age (UTA) located at the University of Lodz in Poland. This UTA has been operating since 2015. It offers a lot of typical activities for seniors and of course they put great emphasis on digital competencies. Workshops in small groups have been organized for those who were interested in communication thanks to the digital technology (rather minority of the seniors). In 2017 UTA thanks to the TechSoup (nonprofit international network of non-governmental organizations that provides technical support and technological tools to other nonprofits) support obtained the right to use Office 365 services free of charge. From that time they started to use apps, seniors have been learning how to use them and learn one of each other. In March this year, when lockdown has started it was easier to convince seniors to use MS Teams to continue classes in that form. Till the end of June the Academy organized 11 meetings on-line. Unfortunately only 10%-20% of the members of UTA joined the classes and actively participated. The participants of the Academy had opportunity to meet via MS Teams and answered the quizzes, hear and see the spokeswoman for the National Health Fund and get from her the actual information on Covid-19. The courses on line on sports bridge will be organized in August. Thanks to the digital competencies of seniors – members of the Academy “Activus” the organization could continue its activity in the pandemic time.

In **Germany**, AGE member organization BAGSO invests in digital education for older people through two major projects: 1) the Service Centre "Digitalisation and Education for Older People" offers senior citizens and multipliers information on learning and (digital) education in older age. The online portal wissensdurstig.de bundles educational offers for older people, provides material and disseminates good practice examples (www.wissensdurstig.de). 2) the “**digital compass**” supports older people with materials, digital round tables and on-site consultation at around 70 locations throughout Germany. Aim is to facilitate older people their way through the Internet (www.digital-kompass.de).

In **Germany**, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many private organisations donated digital equipment to long-term care facilities, and the State of Hesse provided 10,000 tablets for use in long-term care settings.

The **Finnish** project “**Digi-Guides**” engages the older generation into digital technologies¹⁰. Through the adult learning organisation of the city of Turku, 10 digital guides organise weekly support pop-ups and provide digital support and guidance to seniors of their city. During the COVID-19 period, the support group digitalised its activities by engaging with the older people of Turku via Skype. The organisers invited officials from their organisation or a member of Parliament to discuss the

10 <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/juhani-portfors-and-matti-sarviranta-community-story-finland>





pandemic and decisions made by the Finnish government. Participants – who were often isolated older people – were then in a position to receive wider and up-to-date information.

Similarly, the **German** volunteer project “**Senioren-Lernen-Online**”¹¹ is also organized by senior citizens to give older adults the opportunity to learn using the Internet. The group offers workshops, round tables and individual help as well as online courses. The programme, adapted to the interests of participants and moderators, show older people how they can use new opportunities for internet communication and share their experiences in international projects.

The **Danish** older persons’ organisation **Ældre Sagen** was sharing tips and tricks with its community of peers on how to spot fake news on Facebook¹² during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **German** initiative of the Forum Seniorenarbeit NRW developed a handbook and online workshop on information literacy (“**Zugänge für ältere Menschen**” in German)¹³: both the handbook and the online seminar organised in June 2020 were intended to staff and volunteers from community-oriented organizations, initiatives and associations working with older adults. The two resources provide a first introduction to the topic of enabling digital access for older people. The handout is taking account of the local situations of the senior political actors and different learning and educational formats are mapped for the heterogeneous group of older people.

In **Slovenia**, the initiative “**Simbioza**”¹⁴ takes an intergenerational approach. It has run several national campaigns recruiting and training volunteers, often pupils or students, to teach older people the use of computers as well as smartphones and tablets, using also schools’ computer classrooms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Simbioza turned online with the campaign #Learn1ThingDigital¹⁵ where the social enterprise invited its community to learn at least one digital skill online.

A similar initiative is conducted in **Italy** under the name **Nonni su Internet**¹⁶. Carried out by the Fondazione Mondo Digitale, the digital literacy project foresees to increase the social and digital inclusion of young people, older people and migrants. Coordinated by a teacher experienced in computer technologies, each pupil acts as a

11 <https://senioren-lernen-online.de/>

12 <https://www.aeldresagen.dk/viden-og-raadgivning/hverdagsliv/godt-i-gang-med-it/gode-raad/spot-falske-nyheder-paa-facebook>

13 <https://forum-seniorenarbeit.de/2020/05/digitale-zugaenge-fuer-aeltere-menschen-ermoeglichen-handreichung-veroeffentlicht/> and <https://forum-seniorenarbeit.de/events/digitaltag-2020-webinar-zugaenge-zur-digitalisierung-fuer-aeltere-menschen/>

14 <https://www.simbioza.eu/sl/2019/sodeluj>

15 <https://www.simbioza.eu/sl/2019/novice/all-digital-week-2020-ostanite-doma-in-se-ucite-online>

16 <https://www.mondodigitale.org/it/cosa-facciamo/aree-intervento/invecchiamento-attivo/nonni-su-internet>





trainer for every two seniors. The courses take place in schools of every grade and the participants are older people from the areas (grandparents of the students or enrolled in the Social Centres for older people or similar associations). The scope of the initiative focuses on basic skills to power on a digital device to browsing the Internet, use e-mails and social networks.

In **Greece**, the “**Knowledge Volunteers**” project¹⁷ had a similar spirit to the above initiatives with the older people’s organisation 50plus Hellas organising the training of older adults thanks to the recruitment of young volunteers.

In **France**, there is no national programme relative to older persons and digital education. Initiatives are very local and are provided by municipalities or organisations of the third age: in the ‘Geekzie’ programme, students train older persons in their homes. Numerous volunteer initiatives exist, also outside the framework of formal organisations. Still, many persons above 75 years of age remain digitally excluded.

In **Bulgaria**, the “**Grand Experts**” project¹⁸ aims to enable older people with specific knowledge and experience to develop digital learning content themselves. In order to prepare as well as possible for their work as digital authors, they will be trained and supported by multimedia experts and trainers. The project is still ongoing; all final learning materials will be published on a freely accessible platform to be accessible online for free.

In **Estonia**, the ESF project “E-Citizen”¹⁹ promotes the initial digital skills training, but also media literacy. Its primary objective is to increase the number of digital users in, especially older people. The programme pays special attention to the State portal Eesti.ee and the services that the state offers its citizens for paperless administration with a view to increase the access of older people to digitalised public services. Furthermore, e-safety is also a core part as the training equips trainees to critically review the information found on the Internet and review what they post online.

17 <https://youtu.be/Aj9P0NwSb4U>

18 <http://grandexperts-project.odl.org>

19 <https://www.bcskoolitus.ee/projekt/ekodanik/>

