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European Social Partners in Education Embracing Digitalisation

Final research report

on challenges and opportunities
for the education sector
in the digital era

Executive Summary

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This report presents the final research results undertaken in the framework of the joint project by European social partners in education - European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) - on challenges and opportunities for the education sector in the digital era, carried out in 2020-2021. The main aim of the project was to enable a joint social partner ETUCE/EFEE reflection on the potential of the digital era to improve the education sector, with particular view to raising the attractiveness of the teaching profession.

At the start the project, in November-December 2020, an online survey on digitalisation in the education sector was undertaken to gather experiences, views and good practices among the ETUCE and EFEE member organisations. In total, 70 responses were received, across the education sectors and countries members of ETUCE and EFEE. Following the survey, two online format case study visits took place in Denmark (February 2021) and Romania (April 2021) with the interviews conducted with a range of education system stakeholders in both countries.

The findings from the research activities are strongly coloured by the experiences of education systems in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

Without a doubt, the **COVID-19 pandemic has supported a large shift** in the use of "digital" technologies in education, with the key question on whether this shift is temporary or whether it will be sustained and built upon by education personnel. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on digitalisation in education has been significant. All education systems across Europe resorted to some form or element of online education during the initial phases of the pandemic. **The response to the pandemic was largely positive in most areas of education systems**, although some cohorts of learners did not benefit equally. Educational institutions and educational staff and leaders have done well to cope with this shift and illustrated a positive response to embrace change and allow education to continue.

While there are many positive outcomes from the pandemic, several challenges were also reported, and these include different levels of maturity of institutions to move to online education, the lack of digital infrastructure, the lack of digital skills as well as working overload and pedagogical concerns. There is therefore a danger that the experience of digitalisation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a missed opportunity. Furthermore, its questionable which digital education practices will be retained by educational institutions and which ones will be discontinued.

Looking outside the immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis, an agreement has been made amongst the ETUCE and EFEE national members on the **key challenges** for digitalisation in education. Such were mainly regarded as relating to the negative social impacts and costs of digitalisation, the intensification of workload and a range of health and safety challenges. Conversely, there was **less agreement on the main opportunities** for digital education, which included:

- Good opportunities for individual learning and empowering learners to engage in self-directed learning,

- Increasing access to and inclusion in education,

- Making learning experiences more attractive to learners at risk of leaving school early,

- Few saw saving administrative costs as a main benefit from using digital tools.

The use of digital technologies across education systems is widespread but it differs across the education settings. There appears to be limited use of digital tools in face-to-face education, as they are only partially used in such teaching and learning as well as in the assessment practices. Overall, it appears that education personnel are more ready to use the digital tools. However, **a significant gap appears in relation to professional training**, as education personnel have not received effective and quality professional training on digital pedagogy. Particularly, there appears to be a significant gap existing in relation to the provision of quality professional training on using internet and communication tools for online and/or blended teaching.

Another important aspect pertains to who develops and provides digital tools and devices for online / blended teaching and learning to the education sector. **Private companies play a pivotal role**, with limited involvement of education system stakeholders, in developing and offering such technologies. Looking to the future, the private sector will continue to have a major role in developing digital tools for the educational sector. This is raising questions around how to curb their influence over the digitalisation of education, through a critical and reflective use of digital tools, which is a very important issue across Europe.

There was widespread agreement amongst the stakeholders consulted in relation to **the types of investments required** to ensure the optimal development of digital education. This includes investment in the skills and competences of educational personnel, digital infrastructure, tools for students and education personnel. In relation to the **digital skills of educational personnel**, the self-reported level of understanding of the concept of digital skills appears to be very high. However, this does appear to translate into practice: not all education personnel are in practice well equipped with digital skills, and this is an issue to be further explored. This should not be seen as surprising when triangulated with the findings of **uneven support structures** and processes available to support the development of digital skills. There is clearly a need to ensure educators, during all stages of their career, have access to quality digital educational programmes that equip them with the confidence and competence to use them effectively with their learners. This appears to link to the issue of quality and digitally aware professional development and the need for quality support to the educators in developing and updating their digital skills.

Also, the extent to which training needs are met shows **a significant socio-economic divide**, where educators living and working in rural and poorer areas appear to be at a disadvantage. This finding is particularly alarming and suggests the need for further investigation and action on this issue, as they relate to the core educator digital competences.

Ultimately, educational systems have successfully mastered the move to emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in reality the education personnel need much greater support to adequately embed digital technologies and associated pedagogies into their classroom practices. This will become a key priority for EFEE and ETUCE national members in the immediate and longer term, as digitalisation in education is likely to become an integral part of all aspects of educational activities; including teaching and learning, supporting the education process to a greater extent than before.

EFEE and ETUCE members have taken **a range of successful measures** to address digitalisation in education. However, from the perspective of social dialogue, the full potential of digital education has not yet been exploited. Trade unions and employer organisations tend to work on digital education issues alone or with other organisations / confederations - rather than in collaboration with other social partners. Indeed, the level of collaborative activity is less, compared to the initiatives taken by the organisations on their own.

A range of suggestions for concrete actions were put forward in the survey for EFEE and ETUCE, and these included the provision of information and observation, sharing of good practices, exchange and discussion platforms, as well as drafting guidelines, recommendations and action plans, to help national members to deal with digital education issues.