eua **EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION**

POLICY INPUT

Digital skills – improving their provision

EUA's feedback to the European Commission call for evidence

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European University Association asbl

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The European University Association (EUA) recalls the critical importance of digital skills for a successful digital transformation, as has also been addressed in the European Commission's Digital Europe Programme. EUA welcomes the initiative of a Council recommendation on this important topic as an opportunity to raise awareness, share evidence and information and facilitate cross border exchange and collaboration. Furthermore, this could contribute to enhancing a more widely shared understanding at policy and practice levels of what skills are needed for the digital transformation, as well as the tangible role and contribution of the higher education sector.

The contribution of higher education institutions

Skills for the digital transformation are part and parcel of higher education institutions' research and education mission.

DEDICATED STUDY PROGRAMMES

This includes study programmes dedicated to digital innovation and the development and use of digital technologies, at all levels (Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral, as well as short courses) and in all disciplines. These programmes, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, address technological, but also economic, sociological, political, legal, and ethical aspects in this area.

DIGITAL SKILLS AS PART OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The learning experience of all students is also a key concern, as digital skills are required in all professions and for active citizenship. According to an EUA survey on digitally enhanced learning and teaching in European higher education institutions[1], prior to the Covid-19 pandemic 90% of higher education institutions were already cognisant of the importance of equipping students with digital skills for their future careers, i.e. by providing general digital literacy and study-specific digital skills in their educational offer. However, the survey also found that this is often not integrated into study programmes and provided on a voluntary basis. Similar results were reported for ethics and behaviour in digital environments and data literacy and safety, which was offered in just under 70% of institutions, and not to all students.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Digital skills play a growing role in lifelong learning. This applies to continued professional development and educational opportunities offered to communities and citizens, with implications for blended and online provision as well as learning content. Half of respondents to EUA's 2020 survey stated that their institutions provided short courses and reported a growing demand for these to operate in blended mode (65%) targeting lifelong learners (55%). Compared internationally, Europe's higher education institutions provide a high number of short courses to train IT specialists in various fields, as reported in the Joint Research Centre's technical report "Academic Offer of Advanced Digital Skills in 2021-22: International Comparison". Moreover, this aligns well with the current European Commission initiative on a European approach to micro-credentials.

ENHANCEMENT OF STAFF SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

For staff in higher education institutions, including teachers and administrators, digital skills are of critical importance in exercising their professional tasks. Higher education institutions rely on a generic offer from other education providers, but also on their own schemes. The latter are more tailored to the

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1   Carried out within the framework of the DIGI-HE project.

specific requirements of the academic profession in research and education, and linked to the specific mission, values and tasks of the institution. European higher education institutions perceive professional development and training as the second biggest enabler of digitally enhanced learning and teaching (selected by 59% of respondents to a survey on digitally enhanced learning and teaching in European higher education institutions), a trend also confirmed by higher education leadership participating in thematic peer groups[2] on the issue. Indeed, while the Covid-19 pandemic has enforced digitally enhanced learning and teaching practice, it also unearthed the potential for blended, hybrid and fully online teaching, as well as the need to enhance related technical and pedagogical skills.

Per EUA's 2020 survey, most higher education institutions (87%) do offer digital skills training opportunities for staff. That said, its uptake and integration into institutional and academic cultures is hampered by a lack of recognition for learning and teaching engagement in academic career development.

Recommendations

1. Recognise and support the role of higher education institutions in the digital transformation, including for skills development

Higher education plays an important role in the digital transformation, notably with regard to education, research and innovation. The sector is therefore in a prime position for related skills development, across programmes and disciplines and in collaboration with industry and society.

Better recognition of and support to higher education institutions' role in lifelong learning is of strategic importance. The current policy focus on micro-credentials offers an opportunity to revive this discussion and to push for proper application, including where needed, the enhancement of protocols and instruments developed for recognition and quality assurance in the framework of the European Higher Education Area.

Peer exchange and institutional and inter-institutional staff development provision have proven their usefulness for advancing digitally enhanced learning and teaching. As staff share similar problems and goals in similar institutional environments, it enables peer learning, but also the advancement of institutional policies and strategies. Such measures are cost-effective and relatively easy to implement and help to improve the institutional culture. This requires better recognition and support for teaching as a professional academic activity, which must be considered in the ongoing reform initiatives on academic and research careers.

2. A more comprehensive and shared understanding of digital skills

EUA supports the present call's emphasis on digital skills as problem-solving skills. In reference to the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (2017), and the digital literacy definition proposed by UNESCO[3], the Association stresses the critical importance of not reducing digital skills to technical skills. Digital skills require social, communicative skills and awareness of values such as inclusion, solidarity, freedom of expression and academic freedom. In higher education, digital skills are to be seen as part of general learning and teaching provision, with the goal of enhancing students' self-learning autonomy and capacity. This approach would also foster the integration and mainstreaming of digitally enhanced learning and teaching.

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2   Each year, EUA runs Learning and Teaching Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs). In 2020-2021, the groups focused on digitally enhanced learning and teaching. The groups' summary reports are available on EUA's website.

3   The definition is: "the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship". A global framework of reference on digital literacy skills for indicator 4.4.2, 2018.

3. Improve the knowledge and evidence base

As on previous occasions, EUA wishes to emphasise the need to improve evidence and information on skills needs and other issues related to the digital transformation as a basis for policy dialogue and national and institutional reform efforts. This concerns skills intelligence, including establishing clear and transparent definitions of skills shortages and skills gaps in a way that is intelligible for all engaged stakeholders and can become a basis for taking action.

On the concrete case of higher education programmes, the JRC's findings provide useful information but should be enhanced both in terms of methodology and scope. For example, not only numbers of programmes, but also study places and graduates, should be counted. Furthermore, any analysis based only on programmes provided in English gives a grossly distorted picture and ignores the cultural, social, and economic realities of European language diversity, which the report qualifies as "fragmentation". The better use of data and evidence is another key consideration here. For example, the finding regarding the high number of short courses provided in Europe, compared to the US and the UK, requires more attention, also with regard to the ongoing policy and practice discussions on micro-credentials.

Beyond study programmes dedicated to digitalisation and IT, there is also a clear need to more comprehensively explore diverse digital skills needs in the context of different academic disciplines and professions. This should consider the ongoing work of professional bodies and organisations on curriculum change and continued professional development.

The need for an improved knowledge and evidence base concerns not only digital skills, but generally the digital transformation in higher education. Whereas there have been several EU surveys on the school sector, the evidence base for higher education consists mainly of reports from university associations and networks, such as EUA, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education and the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities.

All these measures could help to frame discussions and debate on digital developments at European and national levels, beyond the currently still dominating focus on technological feasibility and economic affordability.

Note: These recommendations should be read in the context of EUA's response to the parallel consultation on the Enabling Factors for Success.

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The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.