

Dear friends,

Over the last couple of years, European societies have been faced with an unprecedented amount of sudden change and turmoil. It has been impossible to miss how immensely important **resiliency** is for our societies. Our **ability to adapt** to new circumstances has been greatly tested, underlining the need to invest in **skills** – that is to say, to invest in **people**. Europe's future wellbeing and success depends on how well we take care of our growth factors, and the pandemic, if nothing else, has helped us realise the profound and fundamental value of **human capital**. Everything else rests on that foundation.

Around the world, schools have experienced **enormous disruption, worsening learning gaps and inequalities at an unprecedented scale**. All too often, those who were already in a vulnerable position, have been hit the hardest. In many less advanced countries, there is a real danger of serious setbacks in girl's education. Another problem, one facing all societies, are hampered **educational paths**, resulting in difficulties with completing studies, and in entering the labour market. **This may risk a future rise in youth unemployment**, with the lack of prospects leading onto a path toward **exclusion**.

In short, there is an urgent need to make use of **education, skills and innovation** to lead the way for renewal and recovery. **It is critical to invest in them** as key drivers of a more sustainable future. And make no mistake, education spending is not a mandatory cost or an expenditure, it is an **investment**.

If I may, I'll use Finland's experiences during Covid as a concrete example.

In the Spring of 2020, we had a **short nationwide closure of schools** – but this did not mean that teaching and learning ceased. Instead, our **educators moved their classrooms online** on a very short notice. The successful transition to distance learning was made possible by the teachers' high level of professional and digital competence, and the society's other previous investments into education and digitalisation.

Finnish teachers have long had plenty of **autonomy** in their work, and know how to put the **individual learner in focus**. Both traits have been highly beneficial in this transition. Peer support and networks, and support from the national authorities, is of course vital as well, and the government has provided guidance and support materials throughout the duration of the pandemic.

At the same time, we have seen that distance learning cannot fully replace classroom teaching. Without direct contact, problems associated with inequality inevitably worsen, and the importance of the parents' ability to help their children grows exponentially. It became clear just **how crucial schools are for ensuring an equal right to learn** for everyone. They are **much more than just places for learning; schools provide social networks of safety and well-being** for children and youth.

In May 2020, for the two final weeks before summer holidays, we made an important decision to resume classroom teaching. This time gave our teachers an opportunity to assess the learning gaps and to devise plans for the autumn semester to overcome these gaps. **We cannot accept any gaps**

in learning to persist, and have therefore appointed extra funding to overcome them. Over the summer of 2020, we also introduced **temporary legislative amendments** to allow local authorities to use exceptional learning arrangements flexibly, based on the actual circumstances on the ground.

As the pandemic struck, Finnish schools already had **tutor teachers and mentors**, as well as other **peer support mechanisms for facilitating the use of digital tools**. This proved to be extremely valuable. While only 10 per cent of our teachers had poor digital skills before the pandemic, the increased use of ICT in teaching has also **highlighted areas that need our attention** – these include the pedagogical application of technology, and multiliteracy skills.

We have launched the **New Literacies Programme** to strengthen the students' ICT competences, media literacy and programming skills right from early childhood education onward. The Finnish National Agency for Education and the National Audiovisual Institute also provide teachers and schools with support material and in-service training for teaching digital skills, and to support their pedagogical application.

The importance of teachers' digital skills is two-fold. **First**, it is vital that their competences are up-to-date and future-oriented, to support the teachers' professional development, and the development of the education sector in general. **Secondly**, having digital skills evenly distributed among the education professionals is necessary to enable the **teaching and adoption** of those skills by their students. Digital competences are crucial for the students' future participation, educational paths and employment, but some of them do not have guardians or other adults who can support the development of digital abilities. Especially in these cases, the teachers' ability to pass on their skills can have a very far-reaching impact.

Of course, teachers are not robots. The **pandemic has proved stressful** for the majority of the teaching and guidance staff. The workload of teachers and principals has increased, and they have needed to constantly adapt to new conditions. It is important to put a strong focus on supporting the wellbeing and strength of school communities and educational institutions. Practices that support a sense of community need to be developed systematically.

This will also help us support the wellbeing of pupils and students, who have faced very similar issues. Finnish studies show that while **four in five upper secondary school students** felt that **distance learning** had had **no impact** on **learning outcomes**, almost half said that their **motivation** to study **had weakened** during the remote learning period. This is a good reminder that we cannot ignore the **social aspects** of school and education.

To put it briefly, all over Europe and the World, the pandemic has accelerated the call to **reimagine teaching and learning**. In Finland, the key lessons and takeaways we've taken from the past couple of years can be summarised as follows:

- First, we believe that **flexible education systems tend to be more resilient**. Flexibility enables inventive and more agile solutions, which can be adjusted to better suit the local and individual needs.

- Secondly, the **creativity and leadership of teachers** is a major resilience factor. In Finland, teachers are highly educated and possess significant professional autonomy. We have also invested heavily in their **digital competences** in recent years.
- Thirdly, the pandemic pushes us to continue **investing in equality**, on all levels of education. To help strengthen **continuous learning**, and to **raise the educational level of the entire society**, we have recently **extended the minimum school-leaving age to 18 years**. (This reform makes upper secondary education completely free of cost, including learning materials, and will aid us with preventing exclusion. Since the risk of unemployment is greatly reduced upon gaining an upper secondary degree, this will have a very real positive impact for the whole society.)

The developments regarding **learning gaps** must be monitored closely over the next few years. Based on studies, the necessary support measures should be targeted at reducing the learning gaps in the future at all levels of education. The researchers have expressed their concern about the profound impacts of a prolonged crisis on the wellbeing of children, young people and families. It is important that the full consequences of Covid-19 are monitored on a long-term basis.

Dear participants,

I would next like to say a few words about how we advance **inclusion** in Finnish education. The efforts to combat exclusion in society start in the early years, after all, and it is far better to **pre-empt** problems, than to try to fix them later on.

How and where we should teach pupils requiring special-needs support is an issue that prompts wide-ranging discussion. It has been addressed in the media, in the day-to-day work of schools, and in the everyday life of the parents. The crux of the debate is whether such education should be provided **together** with the other pupils, or in a **special group** - or even in a special school. The concerns often voiced by parents are quite understandable, as the practices in schools and municipalities tend to vary greatly.

It is important to note that the challenges in ensuring an adequate support cannot be attributed to the advancement of inclusion as such. It is worthwhile to consider whether we should actually focus more on the **enhancement of inclusive teaching arrangements**, such as the implementation of co-teaching, even in schools still in the early phases of this approach.

When it comes to the **principle of neighbourhood schools and inclusion**, Finnish legislation and core curricula provide a **framework** for the organisation of education and support, but they **do not** require support to be provided in a **specific** way and place. As early as 2007, a strategy paper on special-needs education, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, stated that “inclusive education means organising education in a way that each pupil receives sufficient and timely support for their learning and other growth”.

To us, inclusion means not only equal educational **opportunities**, but also the strategies and structures that **guarantee successful learning** for everyone. Enhancing inclusion means fostering the social interaction and collaborative spirit in the classroom, group and school, as well as introducing pedagogical practices that benefit all pupils and students.

Inclusiveness is a principle that implies an improvement of both the system and the operating structures. At the same time, we should advocate for a culture and pedagogic methods that promote the success of each and every pupil in their studies, while fostering good growth and development. The guiding principle should be that ‘support follows the child’, with said support being **primarily** directed to a regular teaching group and an ordinary school. The teachers must have our trust and support to find good, effective solutions in the circumstances at hand.

The first thing to examine is whether the neighbourhood school has the capacity to teach the pupil requiring special support. If their need for support is so great that the neighbourhood school cannot provide it, teaching and learning will be arranged in a smaller group. The instruction of pupils with the most severe developmental disabilities can be arranged by activity areas, rather than by subjects – specified in individual learning plans.

We must depart from the principle that ‘enhancing inclusion’ is synonymous with ‘enhancing regular education’. It also means fostering a community spirit in the classroom, study group and in the school, as well as introducing everyday activities that benefit everyone. In Finland, inclusion does not mean that flexible small groups are altogether abandoned. The aim is to achieve a schooling system where all pupils – including those in need of special support – are accepted, with their individual characteristics.

The advancement of inclusion must not be too rapid, either. In Finland, teachers and principals have to possess sufficient skills to successfully promote inclusiveness. In some countries where full inclusion has been swiftly implemented through a regulatory process, the result has often been a “physical integration” of pupils in need of special support.

The competence of teachers and principals is a vital cornerstone in the advancement of inclusion, and it must be an integral part of the basic training of future teachers. We need to provide them with updated skills and capabilities to encounter different kinds of children. A new mindset is also crucial, for the attitudes of parents, guardians and teachers play a key role here. We also need to develop new teaching practices, and new ways of doing things, such as cooperative teaching, co-teachership and multiprofessional cooperation - without forgetting cooperative learning, flexible grouping of learners and well-functioning counselling services.

The **Right to Learn** program currently being implemented aims to secure an equal start for learning, by improving quality and equality in early childhood and basic education. The goal is to reduce and prevent learning differences, and to strengthen support for learning. Right to Learn incorporates legislative and financial changes, and promotes practices and methods that strengthen equality.

As part of the recent expansion of compulsory schooling, we have also implemented a **student counselling development programme** in basic and secondary education. The goal is to strengthen student guidance, practices, cooperation and continuity, especially from primary school to secondary school, but also toward further studies or working life.

It is important that we pay attention to those students who have learning difficulties, and provide the needed support for their studies as early as possible. To this end, we identified some general points to which attention should be paid in the future:

- **Identification** of the learners' **needs**, and the **delivery of individual support**, must be improved on all levels of education. We must pay more attention to the needs of different learners and special groups in their pedagogical development.
- The digital and pedagogical competences of students – as well as of the teaching and guidance staff – are crucially important. Equal access to devices and software is vital, too.
- The national steering of education has to be systematic, concrete and timely. On the local-level, efforts to improve the coping and wellbeing of the students, and to support the work of the teaching and guidance staff, need to be ramped up.

Dear friends,

The pandemic has provided us an opportunity to **rethink** how to balance inequalities and to ensure quality education for everyone, all the while developing better infrastructure for education for the future. We must learn the lessons of the present and prepare for future scenarios. There is no way back to what was considered “the normal” yesterday. There will not be a “new normal”, since societies and the world of work continue to be **transformed through new technologies**.

Online learning and teaching have **revealed both inequality and innovation**. Inequality in terms of access to devices and internet, but also in terms of skills and competences needed to teach, study and learn at distance and level of support available. Innovation took place in online learning and teaching, supported by diverse learning environments, open educational resources and emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

The crisis has also increased **our awareness** on the importance of **inclusion** and **access** to flexible learning opportunities, open educational resources, latest research, and to virtual learning environments and platforms that enable learning, sharing and innovation. In the future, **blended learning models** – combinations of online and traditional classroom instruction – may become more normal.

Learners of all ages must be included. **Continuous learning** – life-long and life-wide – has never been as urgent as it is today. Digitalisation has an important role to play, especially when **opening up new learning paths, regardless of the learners' life situation**. In Finland, we are currently preparing a parliamentary reform on continuous learning, since the changing demands of working life will continue to increase the need for **upskilling and reskilling**.

It is vitally important that all our data and experiences are **jointly coordinated and exchanged at the European level**. The European Schoolnet is an excellent platform for this. Common projects such as **Assess@Learning**, focusing on digital formative evaluation, and **Future Classroom Lab** with its contribution towards embracing different learning styles and more personalised, active learning, as well as better learning environments for improved engagement and classroom interaction, serve as great examples of the benefit of close, forward-looking cooperation.

Dear friends, dear fellow Europeans,

There is a clear link between a nation's **prosperity**, and the education system's capacity to equip all citizens with the necessary competences for employment, innovation and general wellbeing. Good

education also leads to longer working lives, better health and longer lives. In addition, as we've recently witnessed, it is incredibly important to provide the entire population with good **critical thinking skills**, enabling them to better resist the mis- and disinformation that they will come across both on- and offline. Education is the key component in all of this.

Education, training and research are central in our recovery from Covid, and far beyond. The question we will need to ask ourselves is not whether we can afford the cost of education, but rather – “Can we afford the cost of **lack** of education”? Equal access to high quality education and training is the only conceivable path towards a successful future. Investment in human capital is the way forward for any nation, or any continent.

With these earnest words, I hope to instill a sense of well-warranted importance and weight upon the upcoming discussions. Our future is in your hands.

Thank you very much.

Dear All,

It is with great regret that I cannot be with you today to close this conference as planned, but sudden institutional commitments have occurred.

With this letter I would like to express my best appreciation for the work of EMINENT 2021 on "DIGITAL EDUCATION for a MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURE" that Schoolnet organised today.

In these months, the pandemic and the climate crisis have made it clear to the world that education has a critical role to play in economic and social recovery and growth.

The pandemic and the climate crisis are demonstrating that we need to change course to address inequality and discrimination, and to ensure the regeneration of our economic and social models by facilitating green and digital transitions.

Today's crises are reminding us that knowledge and skills are not something static but dynamic elements in continuous, rapid evolution that allow us to respond to and, above all, steer change.

It is therefore clear that having quality, inclusive and digitally advanced education and training systems is a prerequisite for achieving the long-term goal of having digital and, above all, sustainable societies.

For this, it is necessary to reflect on the meaning of education in order to initiate a transformation of systems, the twin transition.

The Italian government, and in particular the Italian Ministry of Education, is going beyond the provision of individual interventions on digital objectives, but it is creating a systemic approach: all the measures and financial and human resources are integrated and focused on the acquisition of new skills, for structural and organizational digitalization and sustainability pursuing the objective of re-generating the school ensuring inclusion. No one has to be left behind.

At the European level, I believe it is necessary for Member States, communities, research centers and citizens, to join efforts in a broad alliance for digital and green transition with a whole-of-government approach and targeted investments.

Digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence must be integrated into educational approaches in the whole EU in order to facilitate the development of so-called computational thinking and transversal problem-solving skills. It is necessary to define educational methodologies that create inclusive learning

opportunities, providing as a sphere of influence all levels of education and training, as well as measures for updating the skills of the teaching staff.

With this vision we are working to implement the measures of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience plan which include investments in strengthening both the hardware part and training on new skills, as well as a component that acts precisely on inclusion and social inequalities.

It is, therefore, essential to invest harmonically in the development of digital skills but also of advanced, sustainable cognitive and socio-behavioral skills, so that European citizens and, above all, young people can maintain a high degree of employability throughout their lives and, from an overall point of view, human capital is increased with positive effects on the willingness and ability to face the new challenges that await us.

In this framework, believe that the role of EUN shall be fundamental to the share experiences and practices from all countries thanks to its network. Sure that your work continues to be productive, inspiring and actionable, I hope to have the opportunity to meet with you all soon.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Patrizio Bianchi



Working together for stronger digital education and skills

Eminent 2021

7 December 2021

*Georgi Dimitrov,
Acting Head of Unit 'Digital Education'
Directorate-General 'Education, Youth, Sport and Culture'
European Commission*

Introduction

- **Large scale shift to distance and online learning** during COVID-19 outbreak has been far from simple.
- **1.6 billion learners** in more than 190 countries were **out of school**.
- **100 million learning staff were impacted** by the sudden closure of learning institutions.
- **Mass unprecedented use of technology** for learning **revealed many opportunities** for students and educators but also **significant challenges** in terms of equity and quality.
- To **transform education** for the digital age the **we must work together**. Public, non-governmental and private sector are all **essential** in **creating a truly effective and inclusive digital education ecosystem**.

The EU response



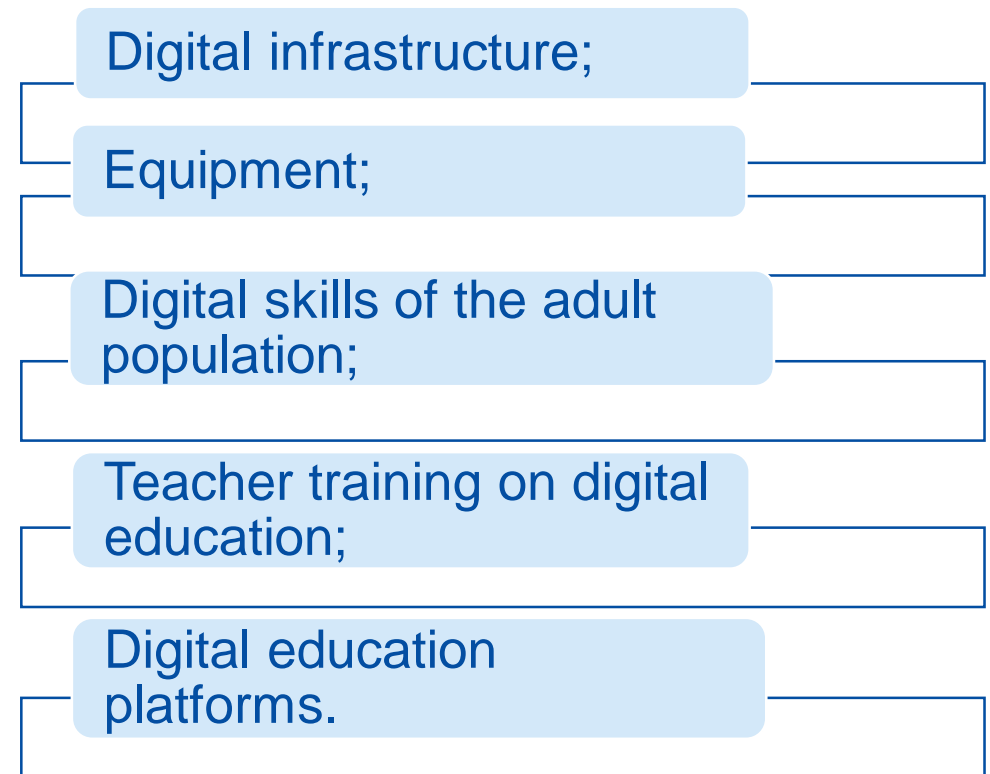
Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027



RRF and digital education

- **Most Member States** have identified **digital education** as a **strategic priority** in their **RRF plans**.
- **Relative share of planned expenditures** in the **RRPs** allocated to **digital education** **varies** from **country to country**.
- Member States **will need** more **dedicated support, guidance and leadership** from the **EC** to continue **investing smartly**, while undertaking the necessary **policy reforms** in **enabling effective and inclusive digital education**.

Top five investment areas in digital education



Collaboration in action

- The new **Digital Education Action Plan** is **call to action** for stronger EU and national **cross-sectoral collaboration** and **coordination** on digital education – a **vision** that will be **achieved**:
 - At the political level: through the **Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills**
 - At the technical level: by setting up the **Digital Education Hub**



Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills - 1

- **Objective:** Support Member States in the digital transformation of their education and training systems in an integrated, coherent and more ambitious approach
- **Format:** bringing together different sectors of government, as well as the private sector, social partners and civil society
 - meetings of national coordinators
 - Council configurations
 - bilateral exchanges with Member States
 - events with stakeholders



Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills - 2

Five pillars:

- Impact-focussed investment
- The place of digital competences in education and training systems
- Governance of digital education and skills policies
- The role of industry, social partners and relevant stakeholders
- The content of digital competence frameworks



Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills - 3

- **When:** the next 12 months, by end of 2022
- **First steps:** Policy debate held at Education Council 29/11; nomination of national coordinators expected
- **Expected outcomes:**
 - Shared diagnosis on the situation and perspectives at national level
 - Council Recommendations: on the enabling factors for successful digital education and on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training
 - Feed into the negotiations on the 2030 Policy Programme “Path to the Digital Decade”

Closing

- **EU considers digital education and skills a strategic priority in the long term digital transformation.**
- There is a set of **common challenges** we must address:
 - More **cooperation** and **coherent approach** on digital education at EU level
 - Support Member States to make the **best use of the available resources**
- Through initiatives such as the Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills as part of the DEAP we are **offering our part** and **inviting the Member States to move along** in adapting our education and training systems to the digital age.

Thank you

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