

Our position

Enabling Europe's digital future through education



AmCham EU speaks for American companies committed to Europe on trade, investment and competitiveness issues. It aims to ensure a growth-orientated business and investment climate in Europe. AmCham EU facilitates the resolution of transatlantic issues that impact business and plays a role in creating better understanding of EU and US positions on business matters. Aggregate US investment in Europe totalled more than €3 trillion in 2019, directly supports more than 4.9 million jobs in Europe, and generates billions of euros annually in income, trade and research and development.

Introduction

In October 2020 the European Commission launched its Digital Education Action plan for 2021-2027. As an organisation representing industry leaders active in a variety of sectors, including digital technologies, AmCham EU is committed to playing a role in fostering digital skills and improving opportunities for education and training for all in Europe. The COVID-19 crisis has unveiled the critical importance of digital literacy, skills and capacity at all levels of education and training and for all levels of digital skills. It demonstrated that to date, Europe is lacking the adequate digital infrastructure as well as a framework for enhancing the digital skills of all citizens for meaningful and safe participation in an ever-more digital society and economy.

All EU citizens of all ages should have the opportunity to obtain the digital skills and competences needed for our digitised world. From this perspective, enabling digital education through adequate infrastructure and equipment and by supporting the growth of a holistic set of digital skills is a fundamental step to ensure that EU citizens are equipped to thrive in an increasingly technology-driven world.

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Horizontal recommendations on distance and online learning

COVID-19 had a massive impact on learning and education; forcing learners, educators and teachers to adapt in only a matter of weeks. The traditional educational system has quickly changed to a 'digital classroom' in an effort to mitigate the negative effects of school closures and other safety measures. COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work, and education is no exception. Educators and teachers all over EU have used technology, online courses, video classes, and electronic textbooks to continue their learning plans. At the same time, quality of education depends on connectivity, using the proper tools and technology and having the required skills to use them. In order to support continuity and ensure quality in education, we recommend the following:

- Incentivise the digitalisation of academic and educational content to increase accessibility and stimulate the use of digital resources;
- Mobilise EU and national funding streams and projects to ensure connectivity of schools, digital infrastructure and equipment;
- Encourage member states to develop standardised, robust plans and curricula to train educators and teachers to make use of technology for educational and training purposes and to increase the productivity of both face-to-face and online lessons (Train the Trainer);
- Broaden the scope of digital education to key fields such as privacy, cybersecurity, online safety and media literacy, starting from early education;
- Strengthen digital infrastructure, including in remote areas, to increase connectivity and access to online learning tools;
- Make use of cross-industry collaboration and public-private educational partnerships from legislative to implementation stages to ensure efficiency;
- Stimulate students' motivation with certification-based courses and training content (including micro-credentials, such as badges and nanodegrees);
- Reduce bureaucracy of learning content accreditation by national authorities, validating outcomes of non-formal education and informal learning;

- Promote open online courses, role-based courses, and learning content developed in collaboration with the private sector.

Special focus on vulnerable communities

COVID-19 has impacted us all and revealed the extent of the EU's digital skills gap. This is particularly visible in vulnerable communities, including disadvantaged (mainly rural and remote) communities, women and girls, older demographics and sectors and livelihoods that the digital transition could render obsolete. There is a high risk that the skills gap will be widened further if concrete action is not taken to support these groups. Apart from connectivity and infrastructure, these communities need to benefit from trained personnel and digitally skilled educators in order to continue the learning plans in this uncertain climate. At the same time, in order to be able to provide education services in a digital environment schools need to accelerate their digital transformation plans. To avoid a learning crisis in the EU, apart from the horizontal recommendations presented above, specific actions should include:

- Enhance digital skills in youth and younger generations still in formal education, but also in non-formal education settings and through life-long learning opportunities for vulnerable adult communities to equip them for meaningful and gainful participation in our digitised society and economy;
- Utilise EU funding streams to connect schools from disadvantaged communities to internet and allow them to benefit from digital infrastructure and equipment;
- Create opportunities for collaboration between industry and social partners as well as local and international organizations (e.g. UNESCO, World Bank) that work on reducing poverty and the skills gap in rural and remote communities.

Digital skills, STEM and Advanced Digital Skills

The revised Digital Education Action Plan will need to be adapted to serve the ambition of creating a Europe fit for the Digital Age which has to include both the digital literacy of all EU citizens as well as the training of specialists and researchers in digital technologies. The revision should consider the following recommendations:

- Foster digital skills with a holistic definition of digital skills under the Digital Education Action Plan. The Plan's initiatives and actions should encompass basic digital skills but also media literacy, online safety and well-being so that EU citizens develop an understanding of the risks and opportunities of digital technology and can use them safely and meaningfully;
- Invest more in stimulating the interest of citizens, including girls and women, in science and technology from a young age;
- Build a solid and standardised foundation of digital skills as lifelong learning for all – digital skills should be universal, inclusive and accessible for all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds and career interests. Courses need to be designed in an interactive and visual manner to increase interest and motivation;
- Embed digital skills training in entrepreneurship courses to foster innovation;
- Include digital skills initiatives in a wide range of educational activities, disciplines and across all levels to create better, smarter and more resilient products and services. Advanced digital skills for Europe's entrepreneurs and workers are also very important for increasing the EU's competitiveness and innovation in the digital age. They will furthermore be critical for economic recovery after COVID-19;

- Increase knowledge and awareness with the general public on AI and emerging technologies which include: open online courses on AI, role-based courses, supporting training and education organisations, fostering collaboration with the private sector and promoting and integrating frameworks for continuous learning between schools and businesses;
- Increase collaboration with companies offering training on AI, robotics and emerging technologies and upskilling and reskilling opportunities, including through an industry recognised certification-based training;
- Attract talent in research: improve talent acquisition and retention; incentivise collaboration between research and academia; master's and PhDs in AI, robotics and emerging technologies; contests and prizes in digital technologies and innovation.

Improving education systems

Education is the cornerstone of a society's wellbeing and progress. To be better prepared for the challenges of the present and prosper in the future, the EU needs to collaborate closely with Member States on improving education systems. Specific recommendations include:

- Digital transformation of the education system, coupled with training for educators, teachers, public servants and staff;
- Deploy technology to improve the efficiency and productivity of the education system and unlock new resources;
- Leverage digital technology to obtain better data and foresight for evaluation and learning purposes;
- Invest in lifelong learning and unlock learning opportunities for all professionals, disassociating investment in personal development with a type of employment.