

Online pathways to health equity: *digital health literacy in the EU's Digital Education Plan*

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Developments in digitalisation and new digital tools have been covered in EU policy for decades, driven by action plans, strategies and knowledge hubs, and addressed across diverse themes, including artificial intelligence, infrastructure and literacy. [The health sector is no exception](#), with use of **eHealth tools, telemedicine** and **electronic health records** now at the centre of discussion, especially following adoption of the Regulation on the [European Health Data Space](#) (EHDS). This paper focuses on one of the challenges within [Europe's Digital Decade](#): developing **digital skills**. As the designated approach to developing digital skills, the **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (DEAP)** is explored with a focus on its potential to reduce health inequities through **digital health literacy**.

Europe's digital transformation brings potential for social inclusion but also a risk of increasing inequities. The benefits of digitalisation in education or healthcare must be weighed against the risks caused by disparities in access to digital tools and skills. Overall progress is measured in [Europe's Digital Decade](#), where two of the 2030 objectives involve achieving:

- 100% of the **digitalisation of key public services**, providing 100% of the population an online identity and online access to their medical records.
- 80% of citizens aged 16-74 presenting **basic digital skills**.

This mismatch between the speed at which the digital transformation is taking place and the pace at which the population is able to upgrade their skills is in conflict with the **guiding principles** of Digital Decade Policy Programme, [one of which](#) is of particular interest for this paper: "**Digital education should play a pivotal role in increasing equality and inclusiveness**". However, today this remains more of a righteous ambition, as the Commission has indicated that the [2030 goals will not be reached](#).

The World Health Organization stated in its 2023 report [Digital Health in the European Region](#) that, while 83% of Member States have a national digital health policy/strategy, only 52% have developed **digital health literacy policies/strategies**. Therefore, the rapid digitalisation of healthcare systems could come with devastating consequences, considering that recent [Eurostat data](#) states that nearly half of the European population lacks the basic digital skills to benefit from these services. Moreover, it is likely that those who need innovative health solutions the most are also those who are unable to navigate **digital health services**, considering that the social determinants of health, such as education and socio-economic background, also impose barriers in access to digital devices and competences, further exacerbating existing **inequities in access to health**.

The DEAP contains a [list of specific actions](#). On the topic of digital health literacy, the most relevant are Action 7 (**guidelines for teachers**) and Action 8 (**AI and data-related skills**). The [Council Recommendation on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training](#) of 23 November 2023, provides an insight into the degree of focus on inclusion and digital literacy. A very welcome development, as it provides a relatively up-to-date insight on the status of the DEAP.

The recommendations do encourage member states to evaluate the **inclusivity** and **equality** of digital education policies (recommendation 1C) and to ensure **inclusion** of groups who have no formal representative bodies (recommendation 2B). However, there is no specific guidance on how this should be done. Recommendation 4 provides input on "**equitable and impact-focused investment** in high-quality, resilient and **inclusive digital education and training**." Unfortunately, this only provides

guidance on investment, ignoring how Member States should ensure that marginalised or vulnerable groups are included in digital education and training. Disappointingly, there is **no substantive mention of digital literacy**, which keeps it unclear where we stand on development of digital literacy. This is worrying, as the measures in the DEAP target the education system without making clear how it intends to serve the needs of individuals who may be excluded (e.g. Roma, migrants, older adults, or people experiencing homelessness). A more mainstreamed approach with the Union of Equality Strategies could remedy this.

A large difficulty lies in the fact that actions under the DEAP are **not binding to Member States**. The DEAP further links to a number of other European policy frameworks (e.g. European Pillar of Social Rights, 2030 Digital Compass and European Skills Agenda) which do not put any clear expectations on Member States when it comes to digital literacy.

On health more specifically, the EHDS Regulation is the designated framework on digitalisation and data. Education is key levelling the playing field and truly empowering all citizens to take control of their own health, delivering on the promises of the EHDS, but the DEAP makes no mention of how action could be mainstreamed with the EHDS.

Finally, navigating a digital world effectively requires **more than digital skills**. The DEAP emphasizes the need to improve the digital skills and competences of the population to be able to adapt to the digital transformation. Yet, the majority of the actions listed within this priority focus exclusively on digital skills, when a more comprehensive approach is necessary to thrive in a digital world. For example, according to [UNICEF](#), 95% of children in the EU believe that they are skilled enough to use a computer or tablet, but only 67% trust their ability to judge if a website is trustworthy (of which only 33% do so confidently).

Basic digital skills in the absence of a broader skillset could be more **detrimental for health**, particularly in the case of children. Education is crucial to defeat threats such as the commercial interests behind online health disinformation and social media profiling, cyberbullying or exposure to harmful contents. But **digital health literacy is more than just the combination of basic digital skills and health literacy**. [Key skills](#) such as the ability to evaluate the reliability of a source of health information or to assess its relevance have become essential. **Critical judgement** should be a core component of digital education in the pursuit of health and overall wellbeing. Above all, a policy approach to empower people with digital skills and digital health literacy should be inclusive to form a true pathway to health equity.