

The European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) is a confederation of more than 40 national and European trade union organisations from over 20 European countries, with a total of more than 5 million individual members. Founded in 1990, CESI advocates improved employment conditions for workers in Europe and a strong social dimension in the EU. Most of CESI's affiliates are employed in the different fields of the local, regional, national and European civil and public services. In the education sector, CESI represents several hundred thousand professionals across Europe, covering all main sub-sectors of the education system. CESI participates in the European sectoral social dialogue 'Education' as complementary social partner.

Societies continue to deal with many uncertainties brought by Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown measures, and in the education sector, too, the pandemic has created the largest sudden systemic disruption since the Second World War.

Consequences for the education sector have indeed been particularly dramatic. The pandemic has been a stress test for all actors within the European education systems, not only for pupils, students and their families, but also for teachers and further education professionals.

So-called distance learning has become necessary for an extended period, while at the same time digital equipment has been lacking in many cases, along with properly trained teaching staff.

Without distance learning, where it has been able to take place, education and training would have been affected much more severely by the crisis. At the same time, almost all actors in the sector were unprepared for what was coming up.

Despite the fact that digital tools and skills in the education sector have been on the European and national agenda for quite some years now, divergences among Member States persist with regard to the supply of digital infrastructure and equipment, as well as the presence of digital competences. Most teachers were neither equipped with mobile work devices nor work e-mail addresses and had to make use of their private devices. Professional, functioning and efficient digital communication structures and platforms –between pupils and teachers, between headmasters and teachers, as well as among teachers themselves– had (or have still) to be set up before teaching could (can) even take place. Beyond digital infrastructure, concepts for digital teaching and learning were indeed missing almost everywhere.

The fact that, despite this lack of preparedness and equipment, continuity in education has depended in major parts on the tireless efforts made by the teachers themselves, has to be recognised and appreciated.

In this context an intergenerational exchange among teachers has been fruitful in terms of use of digital tools and communication platforms, putting in place an “emergency” peer exchange on good practices related to teaching methods and pupils’ evaluation.

Children, especially those living in vulnerable and disadvantaged condition, have, for their part, equally been challenged by distance learning, both due to both to digital poverty and due to difficulties for parents to be able to assist their children in learning processes.

Altogether, the education sector was ill-prepared and overwhelmed.

Already in the *Manifesto for the teaching profession: Horizon 2025*¹ CESI and its teacher member unions underlined the two major challenges faced by teachers in the area of digital education:

1. the acquisition of necessary digital equipment and infrastructure
2. appropriate training for teaching personnel in the use and deployment of digital teaching tools and methods

In this context, CESI welcomes an update of the EU Digital Education Action Plan and puts forward the following priorities for this:

- **Boosted public investment in education to support digital infrastructure and connectivity and access to IT tools and internet for all students and teachers – as a basic and technical prerequisite for high-quality remote teaching and learning that may still be necessary in the foreseeable future in many places in Europe**
- **Guaranteed high-quality and inclusive training and lifelong learning for teachers and trainers in necessary digital skills, to be delivered during the working time**
- **Constructive dialogue among all actors and stakeholders in the sector (schools, teachers, students, families, trade-unions) and systematic exchanges of best practices on how to better shape digital education, to the mutual benefit and advantage of all**
- **The development of digital learning and teaching tools and methods complementary to school-based and face-to-face learning, which must remain at the centre of education as much as possible, as the ‘human factor’ in face-to-face teaching is essential for effective and successful learning**

Education is one of the most challenging task in the world, since it is meant to “build” future citizens: it is not only about the acquisition of information and knowledge, it is about relationships and shaping young minds and critical thinking.

Teachers and human interaction come first and are essential to effective teaching and learning. Digital tools and methods shall complement the human factor, supporting teachers in an increasingly evolving education landscape, and then specifically in unforeseen situations like the current pandemic, being a teacher’s “walking stick”, not the leg.

¹ <https://www.cesi.org/new-manifesto-on-the-future-of-the-teaching-profession-in-europe/>