

RREUSE input to the public consultation on the Digital Education Action Plan

1. Introduction

RREUSE (Reuse and Recycling European Union Social Enterprises) represents social enterprises working in environmental services with over 30 European members and one from the USA. RREUSE's mission is to ensure that policies, innovative partnerships and exchange of best practices promote and develop the role of social enterprise in the circular economy. RREUSE welcomes the opportunity to give feedback on the Digital Education action plan, initiated in June 2020.¹ Members were consulted as part of Social Economy working groups and an online members' meeting in June 2020. Though members participated in the discussion (virtual break-out rooms) there was hesitation regarding the scope of digitalisation in general (i.e, what does this topic mean in real terms for members, as employers for training purposes, for both informal and formal education). As an initial contemplation, while areas such as 'social' and 'ecological' are seen as converging areas, 'digital' is in many ways diverging (increased materialisation and rapidly growing driver of e-waste). The RREUSE network advocates for manual training and labour opportunities over automation (providing more circular and social jobs whilst protecting the environment).

2. The twinned Green and Digital priorities: further consultation needed to better understand social and circular activities and training in the Digital Education action plan

Though the European Commission has clearly communicated Europe's Digital strategy², with a twinning of the green and digital priorities, there exists ambiguity in the details of the twins at EU and National level. Whether these twinned priorities are fully cohesive, notably how they will work succinctly in education, is not yet clear. An example was given in Ireland in 2020, whereby the National Economic and Social Council was asked to prepare a template for transition plans (just transition), looking at both green and digital jobs. However, the output was overwhelmed by recommendations respecting the digital transition. According to CRNI, RREUSE's all-island National contact and member, little definition of the green priorities existed. Accordingly, there is concern from our members for future drafting of National guidance on employment and education. Important briefing papers addressing the so called 'twinned priorities' could overlook green skills which may in turn negatively impact opportunities in education.

¹ The Digital Education Action plan gathers the views of citizens and stakeholders on the future of digital education during the covid19 recovery period and beyond. (Available [here](#)).

² European Commission (2019) Priorities 2019-2024: A Europe Fit for the Digital Age (Available [here](#)).



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An obvious link between the digital and the green transition is the use of ICT products which has a significant impact on the planet. E-waste is the fastest growing domestic waste stream with 21% more e-waste generated in 2019 than 5 years before³. One way to ensure that Digital Education fits in a green agenda would be, for its implementation, to source as many ICT products as possible from the second-hand market or at the very least make sure that these products are purchased according to green procurement criteria. ICT products used by companies or administration offices could, when reaching the end of their first life, be donated to schools (as facilitated by social enterprises such as [Rehab Recycle](#) or [Les Ateliers du Bocage](#)). Digital Education must go hand in hand with the implementation of the Circular Electronics Initiative forecasted in the [new Circular Economy Action Plan](#).

3. Contradictions for activities and services including education continuing during covid19, namely VET.

Throughout Europe, and further afield, the range of Social Economy activities and services including educational services were limited due to the pandemic, and there were often contradictions and restrictions on the type of services that could continue. A member of RREUSE 'Emmaus Europe', a major European movement usually uses activities to finance its social services (accommodation and training of residents). However, the majority of activities were ceased, despite certain (and partially online) activities presenting possibilities and opportunities to expand. **RREUSE would like to recommend that activities that can safely continue be prioritised for the inclusion and wellbeing of employees and those in training situations. Further supports could be made available at National level to ensure the continuous digital training where appropriate. We would also recommend that those already enrolled in VET or placements be given priority to increase their chances of completion of education and prospective employment.**

4. Social Inclusion: Examples from the Social Economy

Since 2013, Emmaus Connect demonstrates that digital technology offers a unique opportunity to increase its inclusion capacity. The initiative ensures that digital technology also benefits those who need it most: people in precarious situations. The association works in the field to meet the requirements of people in need and the professionals who support them. The initiative designs educational resources and offers workshops to learn about key digital services. As part of the programme, it offers solidarity access to equipment and a form of personalised connection. The association also develops services (assessment tools, mapping, training) for social actors and public service operators to better support in the era of 100% online.⁴ Emmaus France also has a training programme 'Label Ecole' for e-commerce which is linked to their inclusive vision for "disrupting" the injustice and precariousness of our society. Within the Label School, the focus is on meeting the

³ ISWA (2020), The Global E-Waste Monitor 2020 (Available [here](#))

⁴ For more details about Emmaus connect, please visit [here](#)

learners where they are at, 'full of talent and motivation.' The courses are aimed at the growing ecosystem of e-commerce, with the intention of gaining more diversity in its recruitment.

Label Emmaüs and Emmaus Connect are prime examples of social economy enterprises ensuring all have the right to a second chance and a place in our society.

5. Challenges: A current state of play in the post lockdown era

During our consultation, a number of social economy actors voiced a lack of support for the digital transition due to long standing issues in education systems and varied approaches in Member States (lack of National frameworks to support or formalise certain skills). However, RREUSE members favourably looked to the potential of the ESF+ as a channel to guide and fund appropriate resources to ensure that digital education is as inclusive as possible.

Therefore, we recommend the digital education action plan uses existing funds and recovery funds to adequately prepare for future crises at large whilst adapting to the changing nature of employment.

6. Digital Inclusion: transitioning from offline to online.

For many across the RREUSE membership, including WISE's (work integration social enterprises), there must be further assurance that the digital transition will include those who are traditionally excluded from the labour market/ educational settings.. A well-known Austrian network of social enterprises has been working on the topic for a long time, using innovative solutions- focusing on digital inclusion as a priority. A project commencing in 2019 'What it means to have sustainable and inclusive digital transformation' was postponed beyond 2020 due to the pandemic. Some key areas of interest include:

- The project focused on including people who do not have necessary digital skills.
- To date, the project coordinator commented 'Creating websites/ online classes are useful and nice, but people do not own devices, or have the background knowledge of the websites/ platforms that may feature. This is a major problem to begin'
- Digital inclusion has to take place offline first, which is increasingly difficult because of the situation Europe (and the world) is currently facing.
- For WISE's this topic is particularly pressing- how to include qualification of target groups. We need to start with simple access to give people the means of their daily digital tools to make their lives easier (online forms for contact with authorities) applying for personal financial support online. Otherwise, people are excluded and stressed when they have to do something.
- There is a growing need for pilot schemes.

- The algorithm used in Austria for education and placement uses data from the past, which is not sufficient to predict labour market changes. The data of the crises will not be helpful either.

Therefore, we recommend that the digital education action plan encourages innovation, supporting initiatives that particularly welcome and include people who are traditionally excluded from mainstream educational pathways. The action plan should also envisage that all manual work or training is not replaced, rather complimented

7. Bolder, more coherent message of Digitalisation to compliment macro sustainable policies.

Members have voiced the need for a more strategic and ambitious approach, namely coherence with other EU policy such as the European Green Deal. To adequately and sustainably meet the needs of the digital education action plan, we must also prioritise the circular economy .i.e. social enterprise services that repair and refurbish IT equipment and fight for the right to repair.

One example could be to foster the development of digital tools helping monitor the impact of green activities. The re-use sector still struggles to demonstrate its added value when compared to recycling activities, mainly because of a lack of consistent data on the number or amount of products saved from the bin and made available again on the EU market. The development of easy to use digital tools to report on these activities would be helpful to green entrepreneurs in order to, for example, demonstrate how circular they are or how much resources they manage to save.

8. Opportunities in informal Digital education

Insieme, a well-established social cooperative based in Vicenza, Italy, recruited a staff member responsible for digital work, purposefully expanding the team as a result of covid19. This Italian social cooperative's message was targeted to a wider audience (informal education). This has resulted in working with 'a second hand influencer' who filmed a tik tok in one of the second-hand shops, marking the day Italy came out of lockdown. This [tik tok message](#) has reached over 250,000 views and the social cooperative immediately experienced the effects of the accessible message.

Therefore, the digital education action plan should also be open to emerging digital platforms as a means of mass engagement. Social Economy Enterprises and actors with online followers and virtual supporters must also be able to include numbers as part of their overall social impact measurement.



Conclusion

While the digital education action plan presents many opportunities and challenges for all, social economy enterprises have showcased their willingness to adapt. However, digital education and digitalisation at large must be fully inclusive, doing as little harm to the environment and social connections that are the foundations of a healthy Europe. For the reasons highlighted above, RREUSE members are looking forward to be closely consulted as valued partners in future digital action plans.

For more information please contact Elaine Hanlon, Social Affairs Policy Officer – elaine.hanlon@rreuse.org, www.rreuse.org

RREUSE is an independent non-profit organisation representing social enterprises active in the field of re-use, repair and recycling, with 30 members across 26 countries in Europe and the USA.

Our main vision is for Europe to support the role of social enterprise in a circular economy, providing meaningful work opportunities to thousands of vulnerable members of our community through innovative economic, social and environmentally beneficial activities.

RREUSE's primary mission is to help tackle poverty, social exclusion and a throwaway culture by promoting policies, best practices and partnerships that support the professionalism and development of social enterprises working in environmental services with high potential for local and inclusive job creation, notably re-use and repair.