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**FEPS YOUNG  
ACADEMICS  
NETWORK**

# **Are e-learning platforms a promising way forward for social cohesion in Europe?**

**Education and Social Cohesion Working Group**

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March 2016

**The FEPS Young Academics Network is organised with the support of the Renner Institut.  
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## **FEPS YOUNG ACADEMICS NETWORK**

The Young Academics Network (YAN) was established in March 2009 by the Foundation of European Progressive Studies (FEPS) with the support of the Renner Institut to gather progressive PhD candidates and young PhD researchers, who are ready to use their academic experience in a debate about the Next Europe. The founding group was composed of awardees of the “Call for Paper” entitled “Next Europe, Next Left” – whose articles also help initiating the FEPS Scientific Magazine “Queries”. Quickly after, with the help of the FEPS member foundations, the group enlarged – presently incorporating around 30 outstanding and promising young academics.

FEPS YAN meets in the Viennese premises of Renner Institut, which offers great facilities for both reflections on the content and also on the process of building the network as such. Both elements constitute mutually enhancing factors, which due to innovative methods applied make this Network also a very unique project. Additionally, the groups work has been supervised by the Chair of the Next Left Research Programme, Dr. Alfred Gusenbauer – who at multiple occasions joined the sessions of the FEPS YAN, offering his feedback and guidance.

This paper is one of the results of the third cycle of FEPS YAN, (the first one ended with three papers in June 2011, while the second one led to five papers in spring 2013), in which six key themes were identified and were researched by FEPS YAN working groups. These topics encompass: “*Precarious employment in Europe*”; “*Full employment: A progressive vision for Europe*”; “*Get the party started: Modernizing progressive politics*”; “*The 2014 European elections*”; “*Enhancing EU enlargement*” and “*Young and easily allured? A comparative analysis on the relationship between populism and youth in Europe*”. Each of the meetings is an opportunity for the FEPS YAN to discuss the current state of their research, presenting their findings and questions both in the plenary, as also in the respective working groups. The added value of their work is the pan-European, innovative, interdisciplinary character – not to mention, that it is by principle that FEPS wishes to offer a prominent place to this generation of academics, seeing in it a potential to construct alternative that can attract young people to progressivism again. Though the process is very advanced already, the FEPS YAN remains a Network – and hence is ready to welcome new participants.

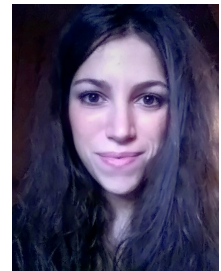
FEPS YAN plays also an important role within FEPS structure as a whole. The FEPS YAN members are asked to join different events (from large Conferences, such as FEPS “Call to Europe” or “Renaissance for Europe” and PES Convention to smaller High Level Seminars and Focus Group Meetings) and encouraged to provide inputs for publications (i.e. for FEPS Scientific Magazine “Queries”). Enhanced participation of the FEPS YAN Members in the overall FEPS life and increase of its visibility remains one of the strategic goals of the Network for 2014.

## AUTHORS



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to examine the correlation between e-learning platforms and social cohesion in Europe, where social cohesion is understood as “the ability of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization” (Council of Europe, 2004). E-learning has recently received increasing public attention because of its potentiality to provide new inputs to lifelong learning, informal education, and ongoing training. Our main argument is that the supposed transformative power of ICT should be translated into evidence-based policies, which requires taking into account the data available as well as pointing out the limits of these new educational formats.

In this paper we assess three of these challenges. First, the current trends regarding digital access and digital literacy across Europe. The data available show that in order to generalize the benefits of e-learning, European Union needs to tackle urgently digital exclusion. In the second section we examine the skills and values that e-learning is presupposed to enhance for the sake of social cohesion. Some transformative arguments have been put forward, in particular some findings showing that e-learning provides a unique opportunity to empower groups of citizens suffering different kinds of exclusion. At the same time, the examples quoted in this paper also show a tendency to use these new educational tools online for consumerist and competition purposes. A tendency that, as we argue in the paper, is affecting not only e-learning but educational public policy in general. Finally, the third section examines the legal challenge behind the expansion of e-learning platforms, especially for vulnerable groups such as children and minors.

We conclude by putting forward a set of possible policy recommendations to contribute to the research, policy-making, and public debate around this topic. In particular, we propose: a) to take a stand to close the gap of digital divide, b) to use e-learning platforms as a tool for public policy objectives, and c) to promote a European legislation promoting some minimum standards among e-learning providers.

## KEYWORDS

**E-learning, European education, social cohesion, digital literacy**

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>:

Social cohesion, a term invented at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been given multiple definitions over the decades. Cohesion within communities was traditionally determined first by mechanical solidarity, based on similarity within the same group and on religious commonalities, and later by organic solidarity, based on the division of labor<sup>2</sup>. The process of urban agglomeration started to bring together people who had nothing in common, presenting the first challenges in terms of family disintegration and social conflict<sup>3</sup>. Following this historical trend, Winton Bates, pertinently defines social cohesion as it is broadly understood today, namely, “a widespread opportunity for members of the population to share in the benefits of economic activity; and a high degree of personal security<sup>4</sup>”. An approach shared notably by Green et al., where social cohesion may be used to emphasize: “(1) a sense of shared identity or belonging to a common community; (2) a sense of continuity and stability; (3) equitable distribution of rights, opportunities, wealth and income; and (4) a strong civil society and active citizenry<sup>5</sup>”. In that sense, the main factors that influence social cohesion are closely related with the types of public policies in place, from the economic policies trying for example to narrow the income gap between citizens, to the educational reforms trying to break down educational barriers.

At the European level, the definition that is recurrently used is also linked with this idea of bringing citizens together through a conscious and proactive agenda. Social cohesion is then considered not “as a natural condition in modern societies but as the result from interrelations between free individuals and private and public institutions within a framework of standards and laws recognized as legitimate by the

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank all the researchers of the Young Academic Network for their suggestions throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> cycle of the FEPS-YAN. In particular we would like to thank Marcella Millana, MEP Victor Negrescu and FEPS alumna Lorenza

<sup>2</sup> E. Durkheim, (1893) *De la division du travail social. Étude sur l'organisation des sociétés supérieures*, Félix Alcan 1983, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> N.F. McGinn, Education policies to promote social cohesion. In: W.K. Cummings et al (eds.) *Policy-Making for Education Reform in Developing Countries: Policy Options and Strategies*. Maryland: R&L Education 2003, pp. 277-308.

<sup>4</sup> W. Bates, *The Links between economic growth and social cohesion*, New Zealand Business Roundtable 1996, Preface Page ii.

<sup>5</sup> A. Green, J. Preston J.G. Janmaat, *Education, equality and social cohesion A comparative analysis*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Publishing Company 2006, p. 5.

community<sup>6</sup>". This is the same approach we are adopting in this paper: namely, to focus on the "ability of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization<sup>7</sup>".

Education remains one of the indicators (and also one of the tools) that is often used in politics for assessing social cohesion<sup>8</sup>. The Council of Europe has, in fact, established a list of criteria to determine the cohesiveness of a community, which included in particular the enjoyment of rights and non-discrimination and a system of incentives to encourage second chances for citizens officially or socially excluded of the mainstream educational system<sup>9</sup>. These guidelines, which date from 2005, need, however, to be updated and rethought, in particular in relation to the recent development of e-learning platforms which potentially facilitate cultural inclusion, counteract early school leaving and encourage life-long learning and training.

E-learning has recently received increasing public attention because of its potentiality to provide new inputs to lifelong learning, informal education, and ongoing training. The ever-expanding usage of ICT in public life, for example the various smart applications, have proved more and more useful to improve the education system. In this paper we do not intend to discuss the broad spectrum of initiatives that have sprouted to endorse e-learning policies but to focus in assessing the strategy adopted by the European Commission in order to promote the inclusion of ICT in all learning systems and environments (formal, non-formal, informal-school, higher and adult education and training). A trend that data shows is rapidly evolving.

In 2014, the European University Association published the results of a mapping survey on e-learning in European higher education institutions conducted in October-December 2013<sup>10</sup>. Such data is valuable as

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<sup>6</sup> Council of Europe, *Revised strategy for social cohesion* [WWW] Available from: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/socialpolicies/socialcohesiondev/source/RevisedStrategy\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/socialpolicies/socialcohesiondev/source/RevisedStrategy_en.pdf), 2005 [Accessed 08/30/14], p.27

<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe, *Concerted development of social cohesion indicators. Methodological guide*, Strasbourg Council of Europe Publishing. [WWW] Available from: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/socialpolicies/socialcohesiondev/source/GUIDE\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/socialpolicies/socialcohesiondev/source/GUIDE_en.pdf), 2004 [Accessed: 08/30/2014], p.5.

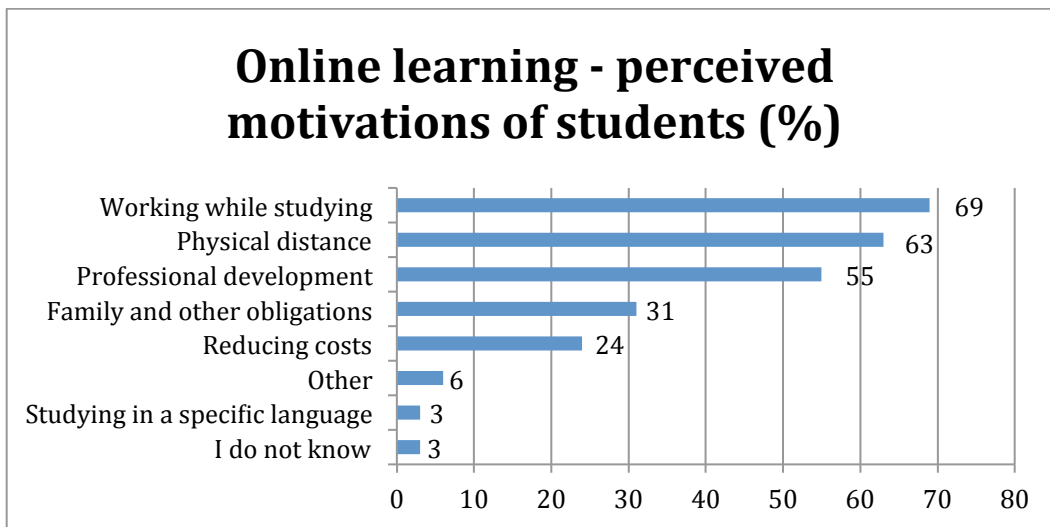
<sup>8</sup> See for example the 1997 speech 'Education, Education, Education', 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2001, by then British Prime Minister Tony Blair [WWW] Available from: <http://goo.gl/tse49a>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> M. Gaebel, V. Kupriyanova, R. Morais and E. Colucci, E-learning in European Higher Education Institutions. Results of a mapping survey conducted in October-December 2013, European University Association [WWW] Available from: <http://goo.gl/PVHCDI>, 2014.

there are just few comparative international empirical studies on the topic: 96% of the higher institutions surveyed use e-learning mainly in the manner of blended learning<sup>11</sup>. Yet, there is still a gap between the usage in small institutions (44%) and large institutions (62%), and according to the answers provided by 249 institutions the most motivational incentive of students to undertake e-learning is that they can work while studying (see Fig.1). In fact, e-learning is an innovative technological option to combine working and studying, not to mention that the percentage of companies that introduce e-learning is rising.

**Figure 1: Online learning – perceived motivations of students**



**Source:** Authors, with data from Gaebel et al, 2013.

For all the above reasons, the aim of this paper is to critically analyze the concept of e-learning as a tool to foster social cohesion by examining its present limits and to provide a few policy recommendations for its reasonable and realistic implementation. We argue on the advantages and disadvantages of the use of e-learning in education in Europe through the prisms of social cohesion. Our aim is to offer a balanced account of a topic that is often central to the progressive agenda.

<sup>11</sup> Blended learning is hereafter understood broadly as an approach that incorporates various methods of teaching and learning. It mixes traditional methods (face-to-face) and the usage of ICT, inclusive for distance learning technology. Similarly, blended learning continues the teaching paradigm while allowing the implementation of asynchronous (e-mails) and synchronous (chats, video conferences) elements. The term is also used as an all-encompassing, overarching definition concept for the usage of ICT in tuition. The main distinction is that this type of learning is not completely online, nor completely face-to-face.



The paper is divided in three parts. In the first one we examine the concept of digital divide (unequal access to ICT) as the core problem to implement e-learning policies uniformly in Europe. Usually understood as an access gap, digital divide lately started indicating disparity in usage of the ICT tools (digital illiteracy). In the second part, we question if e-learning is actually a useful tool to foster civic competences. In the third and last part, our aim is to evaluate the current legal provisions regarding a safer use of such platforms.

## Chapter 1: Unequal access and digital illiteracy: limits to e-learning?

### *Access to ICT and the digital divide*

One of the striking limits of e-learning is related to access. The very foundational idea of learning at distance has no value if users are not provided with a computer and internet connection. We cannot, in fact, discuss the [dis]advantages of e-learning for social cohesion if we do not take into account that nowadays 20% of European population does not have access to the internet<sup>12</sup>. Although technology seems to have conquered all aspects of 21<sup>st</sup>-century society, access to ICT is not yet evenly distributed in Europe. This unequal access to information technology has been called digital divide. The digital divide is still widely present among Member States (national divide) and within the European Union as a whole (regional divide). The concept, of which access to the internet is only one aspect, refers to the ease of provision and access to ICT, quality of service (broadband for example), availability of technical assistance, affordable prices, use of mobile devices, etc. The divide variables are usually age, gender, income, professional status, disabilities, ethnic status, minority groups, rural/urban living.

The term “access” is too often assessed with a positive prejudice, based on the belief that the capacity to be physically connected will ultimately and eschatologically solve all societal problems<sup>13</sup>. On the contrary, we argue that the term “access” should be assessed more holistically, beyond the mere “physical access”, and should include elements such as motivational access, material access, skill access and usage<sup>14</sup>. In addition to barriers of access, there are other secondary factors that lead to resistance to change, such as computer anxiety and technophobia (those who do have computers and internet access but they reject the use of it), lack of digital skills (operational, information and strategic skills) and computer and media illiteracy, which is usually found among senior users.

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<sup>12</sup> European Commission, *Measuring Digital Skills across the EU: EU wide indicators of Digital Competence* [WWW] Available from: <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/measuring-digital-skills-across-eu-eu-wide-indicators-digital-competence>, European Commission, 2014 [ Accessed: 30.09.2014]

<sup>13</sup> J.V. Dijk, One Europe, digitally divide. In A. Chadwick and P.N. Howard (eds.) *The Handbook of Internet Politics*. Routledge: London and New York, 2008, p.288.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.289.

### *EU policies to bridge the digital divide*

Since the first developments of ICT, the EU has tried to create specific policies and regulations addressing, on the one hand, the economic benefits of innovation and, on the other hand, the problems concerning inclusion and equality that might derive from uneven diffusion of technology. Already in 1996 the EU defined the principle of universal service for all users and in 2003 the communities established its consequent regulation. In 2006, it was decided to reframe current policies towards a more inclusive scope: it was in fact impellent to deal with “access” but also “usage”, since data clearly showed that usage divide (digital illiteracy, for example) was as challenging as access divide. The 2006 Riga Declaration (eInclusion) established that “attention [had to be] paid to further improve user motivation towards ICT use, as well as trust and confidence through better security and privacy protection. Furthermore, greater gender balance in the information society remains a key objective<sup>15</sup>”. The goals set in 2012 include: the creation of a new and stable broadband regulatory environment; new public digital service infrastructures through Connecting Europe Facility loans; the launch Grand Coalition on Digital Skills and Jobs; revision and update on EU cyber-security and EU's Copyright Framework, etc<sup>16</sup>. It is expected that by implementing these goals, the European GDP will increase by 5%, or 1500€ per person, over the next eight years.

### *The digital gap among European states*

Notwithstanding these encouraging objectives and priorities, it seems to us that much more remain to be done at the European level to bridge the digital gap, especially between northern and eastern states. Such gap is measured with factors such as general wealth of the population, level of literacy, language skills, policies that promote information technology, which are all crucial to determine the ICT development of a country. The divide is often transversal, and even in a country with globally high level of access (like Italy, for example) there can still be found groups digitally excluded, in particular “seniors, citizens in a situation of labor market exclusion and to a lesser extent some ethnic minority groups”<sup>17</sup>. The data provided by a Eurostat survey conducted in March 2014 offer a striking panorama. In 2013,

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<sup>15</sup> European Council, 11 June 2006, *Riga Declaration* [WWW] Available from: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-06-769\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-06-769_en.htm), 2006 [Accessed: 29.09.2014]

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, *The Digital Agenda for Europe - Driving European growth digitally* [WWW] Available from: <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/digital-do-list-new-digital-priorities-2013-2014>, 2012 [Accessed: 05.10.2014]

<sup>17</sup> J.V. Dijk, One Europe, digitally divide. In A. Chadwick and P.N. Howard (eds.) *The Handbook of Internet Politics*. Routledge: London and New York, 2008, p.293.

19 % of the population (aged 16–74) across the whole of the EU-28 had never used a computer<sup>18</sup>. The region in which more than a half of the population had never used a computer was southern Romania. At the same time, in 25 regions individuals who had never used a computer amounted to 35% to 50% of the population: among these regions nine were in Italy, principally in the south, six in Romania, five in Bulgaria, three in Greece, one in Spain and one in Poland.

Germany, France, UK, and Scandinavian countries are the most homogeneous in terms of ICT access. Southern European countries, such as Spain and Italy, suffer from a north-south disparity; while eastern Member States struggle to go at the same pace. For what concerns access to the internet, the 2014 Eurostat survey has shown that 72% of Europeans use internet on a regular basis, while 20% have never used internet. Furthermore, despite the efforts to provide all European homes with broadband connection, in 2013, “just over three quarters (76 %) of all households (with at least one member being aged 16–74) in the EU-28 had a broadband connection; this was 9 percentage points higher than in 2011 (67 %) [...] Broadband connectivity rates were particularly low in some parts of eastern and southern Europe. This was especially the case for five regions in each of Bulgaria and Romania<sup>19</sup>”.

What is important to notice is that European digital divide does not cut Europe in two, East and West, but is a multifaceted phenomenon. Hungary and Czech Republic, for example, show better and more homogeneous results than Italy and Spain. Moreover, recent studies have demonstrated that the axiom “high income equal to higher usage’ is incorrect. ‘Low-income users spend more time online than high-income users<sup>20</sup>”.

### *Beyond physical access to ICT: the notion of digital competence*

Scholars have recently questioned if the most efficient means to bridge this European digital divide is the extension of connectivity (broadband internet and computers) or rather the development of digital

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<sup>18</sup> Eurostat, *Information society statistics at regional level* [WWW] Available from: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Information\\_society\\_statistics\\_at\\_regional\\_level](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Information_society_statistics_at_regional_level), March 2014 [Accessed: 28.09.2014]

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> S. Pantea and B. Martens, *Has the Digital Divide Been Reversed? Evidence from Five EU Countries*, Digital Economy Working Paper 2013/06, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, European Commission, p.2.

skills<sup>21</sup>. As mentioned above, digital divide cannot be reduced to physical access (see Fig.2). One of the main problems to be addressed is the development of digital skills for those who are not digital natives<sup>22</sup>. In 2006 the European Parliament and the Council included digital competence as one of the eight fundamental skills for Lifelong Learning. Furthermore, “recognizing the crucial role of digital competence in today's society, the European Commission's 2010 Digital Agenda for Europe devoted a whole pillar to digital literacy, skills and inclusion<sup>23</sup>”. In 2011 the DIGCOMP<sup>24</sup> was created: a project to develop a Digital Competence Framework, which defines the competences needed by individuals to be digitally competent. A survey conducted in 2012 by the European Commission to establish the level of digital competences at the European level showed that 23% of the EU population was digitally illiterate<sup>25</sup>. “In ten countries (MT, LT, PT, PL, HR, CY, IT, EL, BG and RO) 30% or more of the population have no digital skills. In four countries (IT, EL, BG, and RO) rates are 40% or more. In Italy, with its large population, this equates to almost 18 million people without digital skills<sup>26</sup>”. From the data it becomes more and more clear that the digital divide is measured not just in terms of access but in terms of competences.

The issue of digital skills, in terms of access to accumulating skills, is even more important if applied to e-learning. It seems not only appropriate to reflect on the urgency of establishing new schemes towards the development of digital skills together with the provision of broadband connection, but also to reflect on the hypothesis that e-learning helps in any way to develop and improve social cohesion. In this first chapter we have already offered a nuanced account of the ‘digital divide’, in the following section we will examine the reasons why e-learning profits often from a positive perception regarding its benefits and advantages for social cohesion. In both cases, we are proposing a more balanced and critical evaluation.

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<sup>21</sup> D. Radovanovic, *The Internet and Digital Divide*, in M. Ragnedda and G.W. Muschert (Eds.) *The Digital Divide. The Internet and Social Inequality in International Perspective*, London: Routledge 2013, pp. 167-178.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, the term ‘digital natives’ does not imply that those born in the digital era are all equally able to access ICT (it suffices to take into account, for example, young people in minority ethnic groups). Because of the limited space available here we can only mention criticisms moved against the digital native concept.

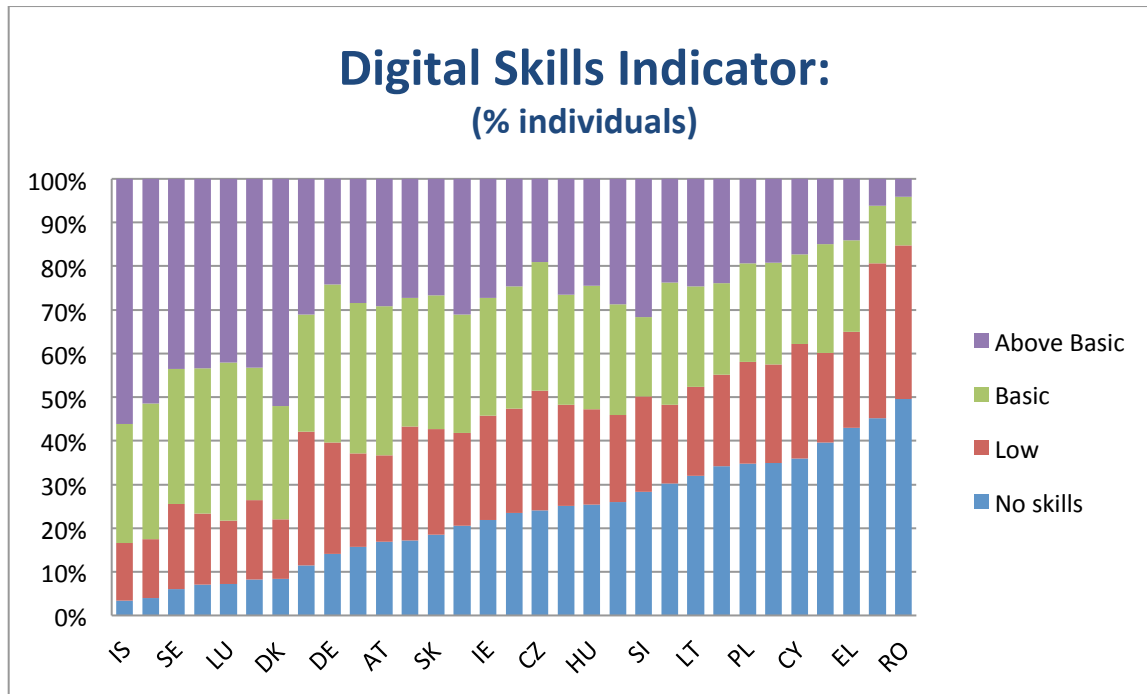
<sup>23</sup> DG Connect, European Commission, *EU Digital Divide Infographic* [WWW] European Commission. Available from: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/eu-digital-divide-infographic>, 2014 [Accessed 05.10.2014], p.3

<sup>24</sup> The project acronym derives from digital and competences.

<sup>25</sup> Eurostat, *Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals* [WWW] Available from: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/information\\_society/data/comprehensive\\_databases](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/information_society/data/comprehensive_databases), 2012 [Accessed: 01.10.2014]

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p.14

Figure 2: Rates of digital skills among the EU population



Source: Authors, with data from Eurostat (2012) (see detailed reference at the end of the paper).

## Chapter 2: The question of e-learning as a useful tool to foster civic competences

The rhetoric that has surrounded the notion of e-learning has been devoted to introduce, either formally or informally, a group of initiatives that supposedly serve social purposes, in particular educational equity. These elements are often presented as part of a broader spectrum of skills which help citizens to be more socially cohesive. As we did in the previous section regarding the benefits and potential challenges of digital access, in this section we aim to explore the limits behind the hypothesis that e-learning profits from the development of such social skills.

The literature assessing this hypothesis, namely that e-learning helps social cohesion, is only starting to develop theoretical frameworks to assess it. The ability to find new data to investigate such question is proving even more crucial in the current context because some institutions are starting to make profit by simply introducing blended e-learning practices<sup>27</sup>. A non-comprehensive review of what the leading educational institutions are claiming to do is already revelatory. Tait, one of the leading scholars working on the relationship between e-learning and development, has recently studied excerpts from the mission and vision statements of universities that use e-learning as one of their differential traits<sup>28</sup>. The Open University in the UK for example, claims as part of its mission “to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential<sup>29</sup>”. In Spain, one of the most prestigious open education universities, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), explains that “since 1972, UNED has sought to translate into action the principle of equal opportunity in access to higher education through a methodology based on the principle of distance learning and focused on the needs of the student<sup>30</sup>”.

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<sup>27</sup> See for example M. Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010

<sup>28</sup> A. Tait and J. O’Rourke, Internationalisation, social justice and open, distance and e-learning: Working with the grain. In T. Anderson and O. Zawacki-Richter (eds) *Online distance education – Toward a research agenda*. Edmonton: Athabasca University Press.

<sup>29</sup> Open University, *The Open University Explained* [WWW] Open University UK, 2013. Available from: <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained/the-ous-mission> [Accessed 05.10.2014]

<sup>30</sup> UNED, *Uned* [WWW] Available from: <http://portal.uned.es/portal>, 2013 [Accessed 05.10.14]

Both examples reflect two commonalities in the narrative used by e-learning platforms: better access and more equity in educational provision. In this paper we have already examined the question of access. The issue of “equity” can also be assessed from a more nuanced perspective. The competencies identified over the years for effectively living in changing societies are basically associated with the “ability to learn, to think and to create in a plural and inclusive way<sup>31</sup>”. Nowadays e-learning is portrayed as a powerful tool to improve and consolidate such skills. Some of the potential examples are currently associated with the possibility to break down the limits of space and time, by accommodating professional and personal schedules, or by allowing access to those citizens that otherwise would have been excluded by the cost of travel. Other examples can be linked with more cognitive areas, such as the capacity to create collaborative processes where the national or ethnic component of the classroom is surpassed. An argument that could be both linked with the methods to break down social reproduction and social capital<sup>32</sup>; as well as with the benefits of contact theories for intercultural education and its capacity to break the prejudice through contact, as identified in the fifties by Allport<sup>33</sup>.

From an institutional point of view, the specific benefits are more focused on improving the access for disabled (or the imprisoned to offer another example), for whom studying on campuses is sometimes difficult, or even by providing a “pressure valve to release frustration about educational opportunity”, as Tait interestingly puts forward<sup>34</sup>. Regarding the economical side of the argument, e-learning offers the capacity to deliver large scale opportunities for those professionals willing to improve their competencies in function of specific market needs (which increases at the same time economic growth and productivity). As noted by Reza<sup>35</sup>, it is particularly puzzling to find how little evidence is available to validate all these hypotheses, particularly taking into account that such arguments occupy a very central position when discussing e-learning benefits. Users, institutions and academics find themselves surrounded by a variety of “rhetorics”, where universities and specialised educational institutes vary

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<sup>31</sup> J.O. Lugo and G.L. Hershey, *Human Development, A Psychological, Biological and Sociological Approach to Life Span*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co 1979.

<sup>32</sup> E. Warren, The Nature and Logic of Bad Social Capital. In: *The Handbook of Social Capital*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press 2011.

<sup>33</sup> G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1954.

<sup>34</sup> Tait, op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> R. Reza, Benefits for students, labour force, employers and society. In H. Perraton and H. Lentell, (eds) *Policy for open and distance learning*. London: RoutledgeFalmer 2004, pp. 209-223.



between those that have explicit goals regarding social cohesion, those where e-learning is used as a tool to extend the wider access to education, and those where e-learning is used simply as a way to introduce a new offer in a very competitive and consumerist-oriented field (see Nussbaum for example for an account on the consequences of this tendency, and the increased difficulty to maintain the social sciences curricula<sup>36</sup>).

When confronted with such rhetoric, the first striking limit is the lack of comprehensive accounts about what should be done in terms of curriculum and pedagogy to make e-learning an efficient tool for social cohesion. A shortage that some scholars link with the increasing importance of the concept of “lifelong learning”, which is now at the top of the priorities at the European level<sup>37</sup>. In the nineties, Rogers was already pointing out the lack of frameworks, guidelines and benchmarks regarding the notion of “adult learning” and “lifelong education”, and the incapacity to highlight the benefits for broader objectives such as democracy, social cohesion and equality of opportunities<sup>38</sup>. Significantly, nowadays the educational strategy of the EU is based on four main objectives: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship. All four objectives are considered a priority for the European Commission, but the accent is put on the first one, especially on the notion of “lifelong learning”.

One way to interpret such strategy is to consider that the individual is placed at the centre of the system, emphasising the role that each citizen can play in order to improve her own social status. Rose<sup>39</sup>, as cited by Nóvoa and Lawn<sup>40</sup>, argues that the strategy of making the citizen increasingly responsible can be seen as a way of transferring the demands that traditionally have been associated with the Welfare State. In those circumstances, “the new citizen is required to engage in a ceaseless work of training and

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<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, op.cit.

<sup>37</sup> European Commission, *The Lifelong Learning Programme: education and training opportunities for all* [WWW] European Commission, 2013. Available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/index_en.htm) [Accessed 05.10.2014].

<sup>38</sup> A. Rogers, *Adults learning for development*. London: Cassell Education with Education for Development 1990.

<sup>39</sup> N. Rose (1999) *Powers of freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999.

<sup>40</sup> A. Nóvoa and M. Lawn (eds), *Fabricating Europe. The formation of an Education Space*. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers 2002.

retraining, skilling and reskilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of incessant job seeking”<sup>41</sup>.

Without the capacity to oppose a different vision, the incipient educational policy being developed at the European level will continue to prioritise a “functional” approach to education, at the peril of transforming the notion into some sort of consumerist good. Regarding this particular point, the work done by Rumble<sup>42</sup> offers a practical alternative in tune with progressive politics, namely the contribution that e-learning platforms can make by providing education at affordable prices, based on a system of progressive fees and redistributive taxation. An option that currently goes against the odds when taking into consideration the evolution in countries where tertiary education is linked, again, with a raising fee policy.

Similarly, the effects of e-learning for social cohesion should be approached with caution, depending on the educational stance adopted<sup>43</sup>. For example, while some arguments suppose that learning is an individualistic set of actions of internalizing knowledge and creating meaning, teaching on the contrary includes the teacher and a community of students<sup>44</sup>. E-learning platforms focus more on the learning that the teaching, where the learner is part of a virtual constructed “class room” with limited functions of the teacher in regard to creating the educational environment. For example, a teacher is very limited to introducing pedagogical methods or innovations simply because the IT environment is already constructed and any changes during the course are not likely to be introduced. A derivative argument from this part theoretical, part philosophical discussion, albeit very fundamental is the central role of verbal/ non-verbal communications. E-learning platforms lack the vivid, verbal communication although some may include video content. Proponents of e-learning point out that it does not substitute learning but offers a new approach towards the text itself in its role of communication channel, a media.

In that sense, while social cohesion lays on common understandings of how values and norms are

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.161.

<sup>42</sup> G. Rumble, Social justice, economics and distance education. *Open Learning*, 22 (2), 2007, pp. 167-176.

<sup>43</sup> See for example D.R. Garrison and T. Anderson, *E-learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A Framework for Research and Practice*. RoutledgeFalmer 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. pp.12-21.

created, sustained and redistributed it is highly disputable how this is done within an e-learning platform. Further, it is yet unclear how e-learning responds to self-reflection in the learning process. Teachers (persons engaged with tutoring in general for example designers, facilitators, university and school teachers, tutors, lecturers, etc.) practice with all their personality behind, with all their life experience. Along with the group they teach they construct a unique interactive environment. We should stipulate that the teacher in blended learning also plays such role. As noted by Ulrich Beck, the “educational revolution” from the 60s and 70s has succeeded in diminishing illiteracy levels but further detached a person from their social and economic class. Further, according to him, “the difference in how people are affected by class and risk positions is essential. To put in blindly, in class positions being determines consciousness, while in risk positions, conversely, consciousness (knowledge) determines being. Crucial for this is the type of knowledge, specifically the lack of experience and the depth of dependency on knowledge, which surrounds all dimensions of defining hazards. The threatening potential that resides in the determinants of the class situation – the loss of a job, for instance – is evident to everyone affected. The affliction is clear and in that sense independent of knowledge<sup>45</sup>”. Also, teaching may be interpreted as a form of art, especially - theater. No matter the identical information someone transfers (either teacher or an artist) to different audiences; the side results are always different. In this regard, e-learning platforms equalize the information content depriving the subjects in the process from self-elaboration. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”<sup>46</sup>.

In this chapter we have explored the limits of e-learning as a tool to foster social cohesion. In particular, we have touched upon three particular limits: the first one, the continuous use by educational institutions of a positive rhetoric regarding e-learning as a way to foster social skills, while they lack the data to support such positive assumptions. Secondly, the tendency to move towards a functionalist and consumerist vision of education, where e-learning is positively perceived because it allows some practical solutions (such as distance learning, access to a larger offer of curriculum... etc), but it does not promote some topic and educational skills (like social values) when they don't have an immediate

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<sup>45</sup> U. Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 1992, p.53.

<sup>46</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Schocken/Random House 1936.

application for improving professional and working skills. Third, e-learning cannot substitute some of the benefits that philosophical authors have identified regarding the transmission of knowledge face-to-face. To put it briefly, this chapter has shown that e-learning is more a complementary tool to social cohesion than a real driver for improving it. The capacity to remain a helpful tool will mostly depend of the usage that policy-makers and institutions make of it, and in particular the capacity to create a safer environment with the minimum legal regulation to protect its users. The next section explores in detail the challenge ahead.

### Chapter 3: The legal challenge behind the 'safer use' of e-learning platforms

For the previously mentioned goals to be reached and fostered, a minimum legal harmonization must be introduced. Introducing, for example, e-learning in formal education, national legislation, as well as the *acquis communautaire*, should undergo a process of further enhancement. This refers to all levels of education, due to the fact that the main pillars of education are almost always and everywhere built by public authorities. The introduction of e-learning platforms throughout Europe requires a clear and unequivocal legal framework which can help competent authorities (European Union or member states) implement certain measures. As a starting point, implementing authorities must take into consideration the basic principles of communication laid down in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive<sup>47</sup>, as a cornerstone of audio and audiovisual media services in Europe. Few of these basic principles are defined in the general provisions of the Directive: "Audiovisual media services provided across frontiers by means of various technologies are one of the ways of pursuing the objectives of the Union. Certain measures are necessary to permit and ensure the transition from national markets to a common program production and distribution market, and to guarantee conditions of fair competition without prejudice to the public interest role to be discharged by the audiovisual media services"<sup>48</sup>.

This provision gives a solid base for the creation and further enhancement of e-learning platforms. These tools are enabling common use of various technologies as one of the ways of strengthening shared objectives of the EU. "In light of new technologies in the transmission of audiovisual media services, a regulatory framework concerning the pursuit of broadcasting activities should ensure optimal conditions of competitiveness and legal certainty for Europe's information technologies and its media industries and services, as well as respect for cultural and linguistic diversity"<sup>49</sup>.

Having in mind that education is dominantly a country-regulated public sphere, with some exceptions which are more inter-governmental or inter-ministerial, like the Bologna Declaration on higher

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<sup>47</sup> DIRECTIVE 2010/13/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL of 10 March 2010 on the consideration of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Service Directive), (codified version), (Text with EEA relevance), Official Journal of the European Union, L 95/2, 15.4.2010.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. par.2.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. par. 4.

education, providers of e-learning platforms should have in mind that all the activities must be in compliance with national education rules. On the other hand, private e-learning providers should always take into account ICT and business rules defined in the above mentioned Directive. Audiovisual media services are as much cultural services as they are economic services. “Their growing importance for societies, democracy — in particular by ensuring freedom of information, diversity of opinion and media pluralism — education and culture justifies the application of specific rules to these services”<sup>50</sup>. This is why the great social responsibility of e-learning platform distributors is also very important. That means that these actors must be open and transparent, regularly following Freedom of Information rules, as well as financial and accounting rules. In compliance with the “i2010: European Information Society” Initiative launched by the European Commission, e-learning providers can use partnerships with other media companies to foster the process of modernizing and convergence of media. The main purpose of the initiative was to enable growth and jobs in the ICT and media industries. The strategy focused on the creation and production of European content by modernizing and deploying all available EU policy instruments: regulatory instruments, research and partnership with industry. The Commission had to modernize the legal framework for audio and audiovisual media services, so it could contribute towards a consistent internal market framework for information society and media services. “The goal of the i2010 initiative will in principle be achieved by allowing industries to grow with only the necessary regulation, as well as allowing small start-up businesses, which are the wealth and job creators of the future, to flourish, innovate and create employment in a free market”<sup>51</sup>.

By taking active part in the i2010 initiative, e-learning distributors can contribute to job growth and development ICT society in the EU. Another vital point is not to confuse e-learning with media literacy. Media literacy means that people have adequate skills to use media effectively and safely. A media literate public uses new technologies to understand the nature of content and services. Also, media literate audience can better protect itself from harmful and offensive audiovisual material.

When introducing e-learning platforms, content creators and distributors must be aware of the European Framework for Safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children, developed by European

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. par.5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. par.11.

mobile providers and content providers. Due to the fact that e-learning platforms are used both from adults and children, and frequently include mobile devices for transfer and dissemination of information, some basic principles regarding minors' protection must be respected. The signatories of the Framework recognize four basic strategic pillars: "Mobile services offer an additional way to consume content (still and video images, music, chat, etc.) already offered in other ways - typically by the same providers; The importance of parental oversight: accordingly, mobile providers should endeavor to empower parents with information and tools to facilitate their oversight; Any initiatives to classify content should be based on national societal standards regarding decency, appropriateness and legislation; and A framework-based approach to industry self-regulation will be effective in adapting to the fast moving environment of mobile technology and services – it will be future proof<sup>52</sup>.

Based on the previously mentioned strategic pillars, recommendations on safer mobile use have been drafted. Some of these recommendations could also apply to the use of e-learning platforms. The recommendations have been clustered in five groups: Access Control Mechanisms, Raising Awareness and Education, Classification of Commercial Content, Illegal Content on Mobile Community Products or on the Internet and Implementation, Stakeholder Consultation and Review.

To conclude, this third section has explored the need to reflect not only on the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning, but also on the ways to regulate the use of such platforms and to offer a legal safer environment, in particular for pupils and children. More generally, throughout the paper we have assessed three key challenges regarding e-learning and social cohesion. First, the reliance of e-learning towards the existing barriers in terms of digital access. Secondly, the scarcity of data proving that e-learning promotes skills and values that might increase social cohesion. And thirdly, the need to regulate and to create a common legal framework with minimum standards regarding the use of digital platforms of e-learning.

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<sup>52</sup> European Mobile Industry and European Commission, *European Framework for Safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children* [WWW] Available from: <http://goo.gl/uETTqC>, p. 1.

## Policy Recommendations<sup>53</sup>

E-learning has long been among the interests of the European Union. In the past fifteen years, various strategies have been undertaken to implement ICT in learning practices across European countries. The first steps carried out by the European Commission regarding e-learning were taken in the framework of the 2000 Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Agenda set the goals for the first decade of the new millennium towards a knowledge-based economy and sustainable development achievable by integrating ICT in society. The eLearning Action Plan and eLearning Initiative (2001-2004) were the first actions undertaken to apply technology to education. The principal aim was to make lifelong learning the driving force behind a cohesive and inclusive society and the means to achieve that scope were to equip schools with access to the Internet and multimedia resources and to promote universal digital literacy.

Towards the end of the eLearning Action Plan and eLearning Initiative, e-learning already started to disappear in policy discourses<sup>54</sup>. A new biannual plan was adopted (2004 to 2006) to effectively integrate ICT in education. A budget of €44 million was allocated to promote digital literacy (10%), European virtual campuses (30%), e-twinning (45%) a platform for teachers' collaboration, and the remaining was allotted for transversal actions and administrative assistance (15%). The four areas of action (digital literacy, virtual campuses, e-twinning, and transversal actions) aimed at implementing innovative teaching programs, teacher's networking and exchange among schools and universities. In 2006, a new 7-year plan, the Life-long Learning Programme, was elaborated. The programme, conceived to run from 2007 to 2013 and with a budget of nearly €7 billion, aimed to increase learning opportunities from early childhood to adult life and targeted particularly the non-digital natives<sup>55</sup>. With the recent Horizon 2020 the pioneering and inspirational momentum of the Lisbon Strategy has been readapted to a perhaps less ambitious scope in order to confront the problems stemmed from the economic crisis. However, the

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<sup>53</sup> This paper has been written as part of the 4th Cycle of the FEPS Young Academics Network (2014-2015), [www.fepeurope.eu](http://www.fepeurope.eu), the main pan-european think tank for progressive and socialist thinking in Europe. As such, our policy recommendations are primarily intended to be a contribution to the general debate among fellow researchers, citizens, and decision-makers, with the objective to contribute in some way to evidence-based progressive policy-making.

<sup>54</sup> C. Dondi, A. Szűcs, E. Wagner, European E-Learning from Supranational Perspectives. In M. Kindt, U. Dittler and H. Kahler (eds.), *E-Learning in Europe - Learning Europe*. Münster: WaxmannVerlag 2009, pp.295-315.

<sup>55</sup> In the words of the European Commission: *ICT has become embedded in our social and economic fabric and it should be similarly embedded in education and training systems*. EACEA, *Information and communication technologies - ICT (KA 3)*, [WWW] [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/ka3/information\\_communication\\_technologies\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/ka3/information_communication_technologies_en.php)



increasing budget that has been allocated to promote learning opportunities attests the attention that the European Commission is now paying to the importance of education in society.

In such context the challenge for progressive forces is to provide a complementary narrative for e-learning, based on a broad understanding of the social and civic role of education in a modern and transnational society<sup>56</sup>.

### **1. Take a stand on closing the gap of digital divide**

In the March 2014 Manifesto of the Party of European Socialists, the digital divide was not concretely claimed as one of PES' priorities towards social inclusion. Internet access was mentioned in the 7<sup>th</sup> point of the Manifesto titled *A safe and healthy life for all*. However, the reference was somewhat vague and perhaps a bit generic: *The EU must adapt to new challenges, especially the digital agenda and guarantee broad access to the internet*. Then the focus rapidly switched to privacy and security: *We need solid EU legislation on the protection of citizens' personal data and access to information [...]*. A more tangible stand on the importance of broadband access to close the digital gap would be advantageous for PES to show a commitment towards equal access to technologies.

### **2. Incentivize the expansion of digital competences**

Notwithstanding the efforts that have been made by the European Commission to provide households with broadband connection and to guarantee Internet access to all, it seems to us that the digital gap will be reduced but not entirely closed by just supplying the access. It will certainly not be enough to make e-learning platforms an efficient instrument for social cohesion and more opportunities. Together with the provision of broadband (in the direction of Internet as a right for all) other means should be employed to guarantee development of digital skills. The delivery of user-friendly guidelines on how to use basic internet tools in native languages; or the organization of community-based free-training would be beneficial at local level to overcome the barriers that technology creates.

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<sup>56</sup> See in particular: Comité économique et social européen, *L'éducation pour l'inclusion : un outil de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale*, 2011 [WWW] available from : <http://goo.gl/VMpKhm>. See also European Commission, *Programme Ouvrir l'éducation*, 2013b [WWW] available from : [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-13-859\\_fr.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-859_fr.htm).

### **3. Empower students by promoting self-supporting e-learning courses**

Despite the advantages provided by the digital format, e-learning is currently reproducing the logic of top-down education, instead of giving to students the opportunity to empower themselves. The relationship that exists between a revolutionary technology and the capacity to be used for global development is the basis of the work by Amartya Sen, for example. The “capability approach” consists precisely in using such technology to deliver a good that transcends the capitalist logic. To paraphrase Sen most-known theory, “it seems appropriate to argue that education which plays a role in expanding a child’s capabilities should be a kind of education that makes people autonomous”<sup>57</sup>. A practical way to implement such demand could be the creation, by European institutions, of a free platform where a group of students can propose a given topic that they would like to be taught about.

### **4. Targeted e-learning as a tool for public policy**

E-learning has not been conceived as a tool that public policy could use to target specific group of citizens. Yet, there is a potential for it, in particular for a progressive agenda. Why universities should be targeting students interested in improving their marketing skills, and public institutions shouldn’t be targeting priority groups for professional insertion? The question here is why let monopolise the benefits of e-learning to only those that are eager to take advantage of it, instead of going in the search of those who are culturally and socially unfamiliar with it. We think it could be useful for progressive forces to develop a pro-active policy regarding the use of e-learning platforms as a tool for public policy goals.

### **5. Adoption of a Directive for e-learning cooperation in Europe**

It seems to us urgent that European institutions adopt a Directive for e-learning Cooperation in Europe, inspiring Member States to find solutions for e-learning cooperation by amending their own legislation. Minimum standards prescribed in the Directive could be fulfilled by member states, no later than 5 years after the adoption of such Directive.

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<sup>57</sup> M. Saito, Amartya Sen’s Capability approach to Education: A critical exploration, in: *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1, 2003, pp.26-27.

**6. E-learning Platform producers and distributors must respect 'safer use' regulations**

All e-learning platform producers and distributors must respect “safer use” regulations similar to those prescribed for mobile services providers. Protection of privacy, public safety and minors standards must be a conditio sine qua non for introduction and usage of e-learning platforms. Only a well-regulated and coherent e-learning environment can give full sense to the current European Framework for Safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children.

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