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Promoting online education and research across national borders

Report¹

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

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Summary

The report discusses the potential of online education and argues that the quality and deployment of international online learning programmes can help raise the standards of direct classroom learning. In the context of interactive education, the right mix of the old and the new is needed, also with the view to including disadvantaged students and students with special needs.

It emphasises the importance for member States to strengthen online education and calls on them to commit to a number of interventions to enable educational institutions, teachers and students to make a transition to a more inclusive and interactive education through online resources, including computer and video games.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15300](#), Reference 4592 of 26 May 2021.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is conscious that education and learning are at a technological and systemic watershed, whereby the internet and mobile communication enable new forms of distance learning and interactive education which are yet to be utilised to their full potential.
2. Public-private partnerships have been established in member States in order to advance online education and research across national borders, ranging from the provision of mobile online access tools and satellite internet to the creation of multilingual online learning and teaching material.
3. Recalling the decisions taken by the G7 under the Presidency of the United Kingdom in 2021 regarding digital technology as well as online education as a means to overcome inequalities globally, the Assembly is aware of the negative impact on school education and higher education in Ukraine caused by the military attack of the Russian Federation; it also notes the good examples of online education established by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine and other member States benefiting hundreds of thousands of displaced Ukrainian students and teachers, such as the All-Ukrainian Online School.
4. The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees of the Council of Europe enables recognition of the educational and professional qualifications of refugees, even when their documentation is incomplete, in accordance with the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165, Lisbon Recognition Convention).
5. The Assembly refers to its [Recommendation 1836 \(2008\)](#) "Realising the full potential of e-learning for education and training", [Resolution 2250 \(2018\)](#) "Encouraging the movement of international students across Europe", as well as [Resolution 2411 \(2021\)](#) and [Recommendation 2217 \(2021\)](#) "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and culture".
6. It is aware of the great potential of online learning for the inclusion of disadvantaged students and students with special needs, in particular students with reduced mobility or visual or hearing impairments.
7. The Assembly also refers to the Council of Europe's Digital Agenda 2022-2025, its Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture and its Digital Citizenship Education Programme, as well as the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 of the European Union; it recalls Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)10 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member States on developing and promoting digital citizenship education, and CM/Rec(2022)18 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on countering education fraud.
8. The Assembly emphasises the importance for member States to strengthen online education and calls on them to commit to the following interventions:
 - 8.1. analyse inequalities and access barriers regarding online education in order to counteract them through targeted strategies and actions at local, national and European levels;
 - 8.2. effectively support schools, institutions of higher education, research institutions and libraries in order to achieve a proper transition from blackboards and books to interactive and, where relevant, individualised online education;
 - 8.3. encourage the development of quality standards and norms for online education, including the use of online verification systems and databases, in order to better inform users of online education and permit them to make informed choices;
 - 8.4. advance the recognition of online study periods and results in accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
 - 8.5. support schools, institutions of technical and vocational education and training, institutions of higher education, research institutions and libraries to establish inter-institutional co-operation in online education across national borders, for example under the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (ETS No. 106);
 - 8.6. make use of the financing possibilities of the Council of Europe Development Bank, in order to develop online education in the framework of national and local social development policies;
 - 8.7. join and support the action of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, in order to raise awareness and strengthen online education across national borders with the global South.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 26 January 2023.

B. Draft recommendation

1. Referring to its Resolution (2023) "Promoting online education and research across national borders", the Parliamentary Assembly draws attention to the right to education under Article 2 of the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 9), and to its crucial role in creating and upholding democratic societies and ensuring social and individual progress.
2. This fundamental right has recently been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic and the military attack of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which have shown the fragility of current education systems in Europe.
3. At the same time, technological progress enables educational institutions, teachers and students to make a strategic transition to more inclusive and interactive education through online resources, thereby preparing coming generations for further changes in inter-personal communication, the media, democratic processes as well as work environments.
4. Therefore, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
 - 4.1. define the right to education, including online education, as a priority for Council of Europe action towards more inclusive and coherent democratic societies;
 - 4.2. convene on this subject a session of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe;
 - 4.3. update the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165, Lisbon Recognition Convention), possibly through a protocol, in order to set common standards on the recognition of online education periods and accomplishments;
 - 4.4. support the work of the Council of Europe on library legislation and policy in Europe, including encouragement to online learning and research through libraries;
 - 4.5. support the European Youth Centres of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and Budapest, so that they can provide more online education programmes for young participants across Europe;
 - 4.6. analyse the legal exception for educational purposes under the current copyright legislation in Europe in view of online education requirements;
 - 4.7. widen the scope of the European Support Fund for the Co-production and Distribution of Creative Cinematographic and Audiovisual Works (Eurimages), in order to include targeted help for the co-production and distribution of creative and socially responsible European video and computer games, designed to help an interactive learning process;
 - 4.8. establish practical projects in member States for promoting online education, possibly financed through voluntary contributions by member States as well as joint programmes with the European Union and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

C. Explanatory memorandum by Lord Alexander Dundee, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. In May 2021, in the wake of measures imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media tabled a [motion for a resolution](#) on a question which has had a significant impact on pupils and students, as well as their educational institutions. The goal was to identify the lessons learnt and their scope for promoting online learning and cross-border co-operation beyond the pandemic.
2. Millions of people are eager for proper access to knowledge and education, yet many are either denied it or else given insufficient access. This report focuses on online education and user-friendly programmes and courses which could appeal to both young and advanced students as well as to adult learners and professionals. It aims at assessing different approaches to online learning and new forms of open higher education. These may have been developed by several different educational institutions. The report will also draw attention to online research networks, which have flourished in recent years in all Council of Europe member States.
3. Targeted public support for educational institutions and students, criteria for admissions of those studying abroad, recognition of distance-learning accomplishments, and inter-institutional co-operation across national borders are still in their infancy and need to be further analysed.
4. The Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly are well placed to address this issue and to put forward recommendations to member States. The aim is to ensure that online education develops in ways that are consistent with the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, promote democratic citizenship and participation, non-discrimination, broad access to inclusive quality education, internationalisation of higher education and lifelong learning as well as the principles of ethics, transparency and integrity in education.
5. Our committee organised three hearings: firstly, on 2 December 2021, with the participation of Dr Michael Remmert, Head of the Education Policy Division, DGII – Directorate General of Democracy, Council of Europe, and Professor Derek Robertson, School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee, United Kingdom; secondly, on 23 June 2022, with Sir Ian Livingstone, author and entrepreneur, United Kingdom; thirdly, on 5 December 2022, with Dr Christian M. Stracke, Co-ordinator for Virtual Collaboration at the German University of Excellence in Bonn and former Chair of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, Mr Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin, Deputy Head of Division, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Paris, and Mr Mark West, Project Officer, Future of Learning and Innovation Team, UNESCO, Paris.

2. Defining distance learning, e-Learning and online learning

6. The scientific community has yet to agree on common definitions of the terms “distance learning”, “e-learning” and “online learning”. In spite of that, technology continues to innovate relentlessly. Some non-exhaustive definitions available in scientific literature³ are as follows:
 - Distance learning means the delivery of teaching materials, using both print and electronic media. The latter delivery includes an instructor who is physically in a different place from the learner, as well as possibly teaching from a different time zone. While distance learning tends to imply the assimilation of skills, distance education, on the other hand, is instead simply taken to be the learning of any subject at a distance. The term “distance learning” is sometimes understood to contain a pejorative element, as if its obvious restrictions of time and place are bound to be disadvantages, even if that might not be the case at all.
 - E-learning, a term which started circulating in the 1980's, is a form of learning that is accessible via technological tools that are web-based, web-distributed, or web-capable (including teaching methods delivered via CD-ROM, audio and videotapes, satellite broadcasting, and interactive TV). However, although its electronic techniques are useful, e-learning must still show that from their application the learner has gained knowledge all the same. Interactive learning between teacher and learner is also assumed to be part of the process or offer of e-learning; or at least considered to be part of its future scope and development.

3. [“e-Learning, online learning, and distance learning environments: Are they the same?”](#), ScienceDirect.

- The term online learning may appear to be hardly different from that of distance learning. Its definition is access to learning experiences through the use of some technology. Yet its claim to differ from distance learning may rest not so much upon its present analysis but rather more upon its future prospects. For online learning is already viewed as an updated version of distance learning, which improves access to educational opportunities, thanks to its connectivity, flexibility and ability to promote varied forms of interactive education.
- 7. Other forms of learning range from technology-mediated, online collaborative, interactive, to virtual or web-based learning. The first prerequisite is that some form of teaching occurs between two parties (a learner and an instructor). The second is that this should happen at different times and/or places. Thirdly, that different forms of teaching materials are used.
- 8. Distance education has increased along with the development of technologies and the implementation of new educational approaches. For each mode of engagement, different types of knowledge, learning, and contexts must be applied. In turn these challenge distance educators and students alike to select the best mix of both pedagogy and technology.
- 9. The first e-learning experiences of the 1990s computer-assisted instruction refer to cognitive-behavioural approaches, with a focus on individual learning. The “third generation”, marked by the advent of the internet and the introduction of the first courseware platforms, has greatly influenced the definition of new systems for online training.⁴
- 10. New technologies certainly inform and inspire learning design. The network may now have become indispensable and part of daily life; its digital tools and environment facilitating unexpected endeavours and outcomes along with journeys towards hitherto unanticipated horizons: those of communicating, sharing, negotiating, and building of knowledge. The central feature being an unprecedented high level of interaction between the internet players involved. Thus equally the education corollary being a blue international open sky of fresh opportunity for learning and the acquisition of knowledge.

3. Council of Europe’s work and online education

- 11. International organisations, such as the Council of Europe, are well placed to find out what are the shared interests and needs of its member States, offer platforms of co-operation for national and international experts to collaborate, take stock of their collective intelligence, then develop joined-up thinking.
- 12. The Council of Europe’s Digital Agenda 2022-2025 calls on member States to examine the implications of advanced digital technologies, in particular artificial intelligence systems on education, then develop new policy tools to help member States. This along with their digital transformation of school education and higher education in order to widen opportunities for all.
- 13. On 26 November 2021, the Assembly adopted [Resolution 2411 \(2021\)](#) and [Recommendation 2217 \(2021\)](#) “The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and culture”, calling on governments and parliaments of the Council of Europe member States firstly to evaluate the lessons learned from the implementation of emergency measures. Secondly, thereby to review their policies, with education plans taking a longer view, at the same time also acting to redress structural weaknesses which have intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 14. In particular, policy makers are encouraged to explore ways to safeguard the quality of online education from gender, ethnic, cultural, age and other stereotypes. The hasty transition to online teaching and learning during the pandemic has exposed the gaps in digital infrastructures and skills between schools, regions, countries and socio-economic backgrounds. One of the main disadvantages of remote e-learning is that it can deepen inequalities and reinforce stereotypes.
- 15. The Covid-19 pandemic also caused a focus upon the relevance of micro-credentials. These relate to “a certified small volume of learning”, often in an online format. Micro-credentials once awarded then enable the students concerned to take on jobs connected to new and emerging needs in society and the labour market. It is essential to work on common quality standards for micro-credentials and ensure their recognition.

4. [“Three Generations of Distance Education Pedagogy”, researchgate.net.](#)

16. Member States were encouraged to guarantee free access to virtual learning environments. Students should have access to the software and the tools they need for learning, like simulators and virtual reality programmes. Open educational resources must be prioritised as public education cannot be dependent on digital platforms provided by private companies.

17. The Assembly also noted the negative effects of the pandemic upon education. These include the absence of socialisation and the undermining of personal development. The physical health of learners has also been adversely affected by the extended use of digital devices. These factors, combined with enforced loneliness, have posed challenges to students' mental health and well-being. Quality online education has to recognise collaborative group work as a powerful means to help change behaviours and attain better results. Sharing experiences, giving feedback and working to a common plan, since all increase motivation, thereby lead to richer and enduring outcomes: covering higher levels and more creative forms of thinking, while equipping learners with relevant social and emotional skills.

18. In the early days of the pandemic, the Council of Europe Education Steering Committee tasked the Education Department's Digital Citizenship expert group to develop lesson programmes. These would help educators discuss with their students relevant topics ranging from cyberbullying, fake news, solidarity to responsible consumption, such topics being suitable for teaching in online learning environments (thereafter translated into various languages) to which so many schools resorted during different stages of the pandemic.

19. All the training offers are now gathered under one umbrella, where new training methods can relate to recent developments and emerging challenges. These comprise online workshops and webinars bringing together education professionals from different countries. Recently, a webinar on video game culture discussed the pedagogical potential of video games as a cultural tool offering incentives for learning, personal development and fun.

20. Online learning should be able to foster a culture of democracy, as set out in the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, especially in the context of the pandemic. Yet equally so within other adverse conditions and circumstances including those of climate change, populism, political extremism, authoritarian rule, disinformation and online hate speech.

21. Citizens need to be fortified in the first place with a set of key competences. Principally these are critical understanding, empathy, self-efficacy, flexibility and adaptability. They also include tolerance of ambiguity, and civic mindedness. Training of teachers on the RFCDC and the Digital Citizenship Education Programme will be among the top priorities of the Education Department over the coming years.

22. Several projects have already identified new avenues for action. These relate to the digital transformation of education and the growing use of artificial intelligence, including standard-setting instruments on inclusive online learning and the right to education in times of emergency. Developments are also expected in the field of fraud prevention; occurring through digitalisation in education and higher education and the modalities of recognition of qualifications obtained via online education or transnational education.

23. In 2019, the Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation on digital citizenship education in which a central focus was the application of artificial intelligence in educational contexts.⁵ The 2022 Council of Europe report on "Artificial Intelligence and education – a critical view through the lens of human rights, democracy and the rule of law" explores both the application and the teaching of artificial intelligence in education, while also assessing opportunities and challenges.⁶

24. Regarding the recognition of foreign qualifications, the Council of Europe, with UNESCO, is co-depository of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165, Lisbon Recognition Convention). This consists of 54 contracting Parties and includes 44 out of the 46 Council of Europe member States. The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated existing trends and developments of digitalisation in the recognition field, including the use of online verification systems and databases. The last monitoring report on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention indicated that 83% of countries have online open databases/resources for information. The report also noted that "the recognition process has become faster and smoother while, at the same time, a fair, transparent and accessible evaluation of qualifications in line with Lisbon Recognition Convention principles and criteria has been guaranteed (...)".

5. [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)10](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on developing and promoting digital citizenship education.

6. <https://rm.coe.int/artificial-intelligence-and-education-a-critical-view-through-the-lens/1680a886bd>.

25. The recognition of qualifications of migrants was specifically addressed in the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees – an important instrument, which allows the recognition of qualifications of refugees, even when their papers are incomplete. That project, which celebrates its 5th anniversary this year, is gaining political momentum, with 20 countries already participating.

26. Students' virtual mobility and "internationalisation at home", are already having an impact on the recognition of qualifications. Based on the work of the ETINED Platform, the Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education, the Committee of Ministers recently adopted a draft recommendation to member States on countering education fraud and promoting ethics, transparency and integrity in education.⁷ ETINED also addresses the impact of online teaching on final qualifications and how to protect personal data and prevent the growing numbers of diploma mills, along with fake and fraudulent qualifications.

27. The Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape and EBLIDA (the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations) have been drafting Guidelines on library legislation and policy in Europe,⁸ which include online learning and research.

28. Furthermore, the Council of Europe HELP online platform (Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals) is a successful example of online courses covering various human rights-related topics. These combine European Union and Council of Europe law and case law, and assist judges, prosecutors and lawyers to apply both systems in a practical and effective way.⁹ The platform offers self-study courses, available publicly with unlimited access, as well as tutored courses, organised in co-operation with national partner institutions and facilitated by a certified HELP tutor. Successful participants are certified jointly by the HELP Programme and the national partner institution.

29. Council of Europe's efforts regarding online courses should be reinforced and seek possible synergies with the private sector, non-governmental institutions and other national and international organisations, in line with human rights standards.

4. International action

30. The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation of the OECD has also analysed online tertiary education and pedagogic innovation, since universities are bringing e-learning into the mainstream of their programmes and offer entire courses to students enrolling from their home country. The impact of Open Educational Resources on education systems has also become an issue of public policy and international intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, EU and OECD play a prominent role as well.

31. In 2019, UNESCO launched Open Educational Resources,¹⁰ which the pandemic had brought to the forefront of the agenda in a large number of member States. The Council of Europe ought to complement this effort, in particular by reducing the geographical and linguistic divide, while encouraging regulations by public authorities of the offer of private industries producing digital educational resources (accessibility, affordability, non-discrimination, reduction of the social divide, responsiveness to the local context, multilingualism etc.).

32. At European level, the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) is an initiative of the European Union. This calls for greater co-operation among European countries to seize opportunities offered by online learning and support the development of digital education systems. It provides funding in areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and high-performance computing, while also promoting the development of advanced digital skills. These are considered a priority by the EU, as the decision to mark 2023 the "European Year of Skills" indicates. The EU has also marked 2025 as the "European Year of Digital Citizenship Education".

7. For a quality education free of fraud and corruption – a new Recommendation adopted by the Committee of Ministers – News (coe.int), 13 July 2022.

8. www.eblida.org/activities/draft-council-of-europe/ebilda-guidelines-on-library-legislation-and-policy-in-europe/

9. Although the primary target group of the Council of Europe HELP courses are legal professionals some interdisciplinary courses may involve other professionals (health and medical specialists, prison and probation staff, law enforcement, journalists, Ombudsperson staff, NGOs, etc.).

10. "Open Educational Resources", UNESCO.

5. The use of computer or video games in education

33. Debates held in the committee also pointed to some harm caused by the rhetoric of digital education. For descriptions of digital “revolution”, “transformation” and “improvement” are often evocative, aspirational and misleading stories, rather than sober, objective and accurate accounts of actual changes in education.

34. Today, a growing field of research is also focusing on the beneficial effects of computer games in education and the ways in which students can learn without being able to explain how. Online games can often enable the learner to take an interest in a wider selection of subjects while also improving the ability to understand and assimilate items of knowledge themselves.

35. Not least is the learning process demonstrated by children interacting with others in their environment. Play represents a social form of embodied imagination, leading as it does to advantages ranging from quite complex symbolic constructions, control of behaviour, co-operation with others to the understanding of expected limits. Learners are able to follow rules in play before they can adhere to those in real-life situations.

36. Creativity and computing are necessary skills for the 21st century. A report in 2019 by the Nesta foundation set out 20 recommendations to the British Government in this area, highlighting the deficiencies in the education system for the future of high-tech and digital industries.¹¹

37. The committee debates have underlined the importance of developing good quality games paying special attention to the use of artificial intelligence, subject, nevertheless, to proper regulation. Good citizenship training can also become more effective through interactive learning.

38. It makes sense to explore synergies between the video games business and the Council of Europe’s training offer which could match those programmes. The aim is to assess quality standards and promote Council of Europe values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

39. The Council of Europe ought to build up co-operation with game developers in order to encourage the consideration and consolidation of fundamental values in their products. That only corresponds to a growing tendency in any case and there is a current trend among independent game developers towards creating games with a socially responsible focus. And it is also quite feasible for the video game industry as a whole to collaborate in reviewing and updating the existing human rights guidelines for game developers from 2008 so that these include civic and social concerns as well.

40. Chiefly it is the payment of licensing fees which prevents the use of games in schools. That apart, there is much future scope for video games to enhance training and creativity. In terms of gamification, video games can be viewed as a different way of online education and learning. Examples are Microsoft Minecraft and LEGO Learning Through Play. However, most of these high-quality games are not free. And even if they were, other important issues in any case to be taken into account include privacy, data protection and child protection. Clearly, as soon as properly researched and deployed, the promotion of socially responsible games initiatives allied to award system incentives, then becomes a sensible and desirable direction to take.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

41. Online education should contribute to building up a culture of democracy. It must not be left alone to the private sector or dismissed as just another market. Even more to the point, it has to avoid exacerbating existing gaps and inequalities. Local authorities, regional administrations and national education ministries ought to become much more active. They have to co-operate at European and international levels, in order to achieve the objectives outlined in this report.

42. The Council of Europe is well placed to address these issues: firstly, in view of its mandate to promote democracy and respect for human rights; and secondly, thanks to its existing standards on education policies. In particular, it should work on:

- state of the art of online education in Council of Europe member States;
- the strengths and weaknesses of online education (thus admission criteria, use of artificial intelligence, teaching and learning impact assessments, risks related to deepening inequalities and reinforced stereotypes, possible negative effects of the extended use of digital devices for physical and mental health; the rights of the actors involved (students, teachers, researchers), and issues related to fraud and trust in institutions;

11. “20 Tools for Innovating in Government”, Nesta, 2019.

- how perspectives of online education have changed with emergency situations (pandemic, war, economic recession);
- future developments (learning analytics, open badges), support ways for educational innovation (free online open education), tools to enable accessibility (networks and infrastructures), online cross-border co-operation between research institutions, etc;
- possible uses of online education to develop “personalised” education which takes into account the specific strengths, interests and needs of each student and creates a unique learning experience based on individual traits;
- the role of the Council of Europe and interaction with the private sector, including the computer games industry, as well as other national and international organisations;
- the definition of common quality standards for the recognition of online study periods as well as of certificates and diplomas delivered, in particular also for degrees in higher education;
- development of common standards for micro-credentials, including those in an online format, in order to ensure their transparency and improve their scope for recognition.