Digital Literacy: an essential skill for the new world of work?

COFACE Families Europe launched a discussion at the end of 2016 at its Berlin conference on the social impact of digitalisation, looking at six dimensions including smart work, digital literacy, the digital economy, the potential of technology in social/health service provision, connected children and safety online, and the threats and opportunities of Big Data. As a result of the conference, we produced a series of short briefs summarising some of the emerging trends and challenges. This brief focuses on digital literacy.

Linking the worlds of education and work has always been a challenge. The ongoing and increasing pace of change in the world of work makes this issue all the more crucial. How can we ensure that families are equipped with the digital skills necessary to integrate the ever-changing labour market?

Lifelong Learning opportunities become essential to allow people to update their skills in real time, in accordance with new trends in the world of work. Education, both informal and formal, needs to move with these digital times. Digital literacy starts at the earliest age now, with generation C about to emerge – a generation which will have been connected all its life. Informal education in families is an essential first step to provide the tools necessary to address the use of internet, cyberbullying, online gaming and more. How can we help parents address this? Formal education needs to also mainstream digital skills at different levels. How can we help people become more flexible and adapt to the rapidly changing world?

EU context

In June 2016, the European Commission launched a New Skills Agenda for Europe. The data published on Digital skills shows that in 2014, 40% of the EU population had no or low digital skills. This is indicative of a real potential digital divide if action is not taken swiftly.

The European Commission is also taking measures to improve access to internet and make it a safer place for children. The Better Internet for Kids network aims to provide children a safe environment as they surf the web. The EU Strategy for a Better internet for Children provides actions to empower them as they explore the digital world. In addition, the “Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition” brings Member States together to define and implement digital skills strategies, calls on them to put together national digital skills coalitions among education, employment and industry stakeholders, attracts pledges from stakeholders from ICT and ICT-using sectors to provide training to individuals. As a member of this coalition, COFACE Families Europe is monitoring this closely.
**Actions: informal and formal education**

Digital literacy is only possible if one has access to the digital world in the first place. A sample survey carried out in 2016 by Gezinsbond (League of Families) in Flanders, Belgium showed that about 14% of the population does not yet have access to a computer or to internet – this group finds itself completely excluded from the digital society. There is therefore much to be done still to ensure nobody is left behind in the digital revolution and make the internet accessible and affordable for all. See more in the Gezinsbond factsheet. In addition, measures can be taken to address some of the skill gaps both through formal and informal education.

Informal education measures are being taken by civil society organisations in some countries to raise awareness of parents and children about the threats and opportunities of digitalisation. A programme called Webethics was launched in Belgium to provide information sessions to parents to help manage the internet daily with their children.

These are two-hour sessions which often take place in schools, and focus on four types of connected activities: searching and producing content online, having fun/playing, social media, and discovering their sexuality. For each type of activity, there are discussions on providing basic information, opportunities, threats, and providing advice. More here about the Webethics programme.

Formal education is also being reviewed in some countries in order to take into account the opportunities provided by technology. In 2013, European Schoolnet conducted a survey on ICT in Education across 27 European countries. In Estonia, there are measures taken to embrace technology at the earliest age to ensure that all children are provided with access to technology and access to digital skills relevant for the future world of work. Challenges include the ocean of information available and how to empower children and teachers to navigate
this world, harnessing the potential of online learning sources and digital devices.

There is a 2020 Life Long Learning strategy in Estonia which has a number of objectives in relation to digital skills and putting in place the infrastructure to ensure all schools have access to technology and the internet, as a pre-condition for digital learning. Training for teachers and management is also essential to ensure that such infrastructure is used appropriately.

The future: Digital Intelligence (DQ)?

The World Economic Forum has developed a Digital Intelligence (or DQ) map highlighting the set of social, emotional and cognitive abilities which enable individuals to face the challenges and adapt to the demands of digital life.

This could maybe serve as a checklist for parents, educators, leaders to empower both adults and children. Digital literacy is one of the 8 key dimensions.

The digital world clearly offers many opportunities for all, for learning and access to information, and will inevitably be an essential part of our society in the future. The challenge is to ensure a real balance between embracing the opportunities while also avoiding the threat of over-digitalisation.

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