Yerun
Young European Research Universities

YERUN VIEW ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ACTIONS AND POLICY AREAS UNDER THE DIGITAL EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

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YERUN (The Young European Research Universities Network) is composed of 23 innovative young European research universities leading the digital transformation in higher education. Based on consultations with our members, three critical areas under the Digital Education Action Plan have emerged: (**1) the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in education**, **(2) addressing the digital divide and promoting digital upskilling**, and **(3) safeguarding digital resources, ensuring data protection, and upholding intellectual property rights**.

1. The application of Artificial Intelligence in university education

AI is increasingly influencing university education, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The Digital Education Action Plan acknowledges the importance of AI, especially through initiatives like ethical guidelines and AI competence development.

Ethical guidelines and AI awareness

Action 6 of the Digital Education Action Plan emphasises the creation of ethical guidelines for AI and data use in education. YERUN members report that this action has prompted valuable institution-wide discussions and resulted in the development of tailored ethical guidelines for educators and students. These guidelines help promote responsible AI use in teaching and assessment.

Workshops have been crucial in equipping faculty with AI skills, allowing them to understand and engage with AI tools while addressing the ethical challenges posed by these technologies. These workshops have also started healthy conversations within universities on AI's place and potential limitations. In many cases, universities have formed task forces to ensure AI policies remain up to date.

Members have suggested **YERUN should work towards a set of common guidelines for a shared understanding of the use of AI in education**. This would provide a common platform for competence needs and an understanding of AI and digital competence across the network.

AI and data-related skills in the European Digital Competence Framework

Action 8 of the Digital Education Action Plan updates the **European Digital Competence Framework to incorporate AI and data-related skills**. YERUN members have embraced this framework, using it to **develop national and international training courses for educators.** These courses help staff enhance their digital competence and adapt to rapidly changing educational technologies. Student curricula have also been updated to reflect the growing importance of AI and data management, equipping learners with skills essential for the future workforce.

2. Digital upskilling and the battle against the digital divide

YERUN members emphasise the need to **prioritise digital upskilling and address the digital divide** to ensure equal access to quality education for all students and staff.

Blended learning models and continuous faculty development

Blended learning, which combines online and in-person instruction, has proven highly effective for YERUN members. This flexible model provides a richer learning experience and supports inclusivity, diversity, and equity in education. Many institutions have embedded blended learning into their core strategies, tailoring delivery methods to students' evolving needs.

Continuous professional development for faculty has been essential to the success of digital education. Universities have implemented ongoing training programmes, enabling staff to adapt to technological advances and enhance the quality of digital education. **Regular upskilling ensures educators make the best of integrating digital tools into their teaching practices.**

Many institutions now offer specialised courses for educators, with some reporting that **up to 60% of participants in professional development are focused on AI-related content**. Universities are not only recognising and rewarding AI-driven teaching projects but are also encouraging experimentation with these emerging technologies. **Collaboration is key to driving innovation**, with learning communities centred on generative AI enabling educators to share experiences and explore its potential across a range of disciplines. The European Digital Education Hub and European University alliances have become crucial in promoting cooperation and knowledge-sharing on AI-related practices across universities.

Promoting inclusivity in digital education

Inclusivity has been a significant focus for many YERUN members. New initiatives have been launched to ensure that digital education is accessible to all students, regardless of background or ability. Special efforts have been made to improve the accessibility of digital platforms for students with disabilities.

However, challenges remain in closing the digital divide. As pointed out previously by YERUN, **some students still lack access to devices and reliable internet, or the digital skills required to fully participate in online learning**(1). Strengthening support for disadvantaged students through targeted policies will be essential to address these inequalities.

One successful initiative has been the development of micro-credentials and distance learning pathways, which YERUN has previously published operational guidelines on(2). These flexible learning options allow educators and students to pursue lifelong learning, acquire AI-related competencies, and improve digital literacy across institutions.

As digital learning and hybrid teaching models grow, geographical boundaries are becoming less significant, allowing universities to recruit students globally without requiring physical presence on campus. This shift has created new opportunities for **flexible education, enabling students to access programmes regardless of their location.** Digitalisation enhances the diversity of offerings and allows students to balance work, family, and studies. Furthermore, universities are collaborating more extensively in the global market, attracting students through innovative, flexible study models.

1. *YERUN, The Role of YERUN Universities in Tackling the Covid-19 Crisis, July 2020, available at: https://yerun.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/YERUN-Covid-VFinal-OnlineSpread.pdf.*
2. *YERUN, ProcToGo: YERUN Guidelines on Micro-credentials, March 2024, available at: https://yerun.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ProcToGo-YERUN-Guidelines-on-Micro-credentials.pdf.*

3. Safeguarding digital resources, ensuring data protection, and upholding intellectual property rights

With the increasing adoption of digital tools and AI-driven systems, the protection of the rights of universities, and the data they possess on staff and students, has become a point of concern.

Data privacy and security challenges

Many YERUN institutions have expressed concerns about the adequacy of current data privacy and security measures. As more sensitive information is collected through digital platforms, **protecting this data from breaches or misuse has become a top priority**. Universities are adopting advanced AI systems, which further heightens the need for robust security protocols.

Despite existing measures, **cybersecurity remains an evolving challenge**. Member institutions recognise that no system is foolproof, and that universities must remain vigilant and proactive in strengthening their defences.

Equally, **intellectual property (IP) issues have increasingly become a challenge for universities**, particularly in the context of digital innovation and collaborative research. As academic institutions engage more with external partners, the boundaries around ownership of research outputs, digital content, and innovative technologies are becoming blurred. This is further complicated by the rise of generative AI, which poses unique security concerns. Generative AI systems, although useful, **can produce content and ideas that some may pass off as original ideas**. This raises questions about authorship, plagiarism, and IP rights. Moreover, these tools often rely on vast datasets, which can be susceptible to breaches and misuse, compromising the confidentiality of research data and personal information.

The need for continuous improvement

Cybersecurity must be a persistent focus - especially as digital learning environments evolve. Institutions must continue to invest in regular staff training and professional staff dedicated to data protection, implement encryption technologies, and develop response strategies for potential breaches. Continuous improvement in cybersecurity protocols is vital to keep pace with emerging threats. However, this need for investment comes at a time **when many institutions face pressure to reduce costs and staff numbers from their member states**, highlighting the tension between resource constraints and the growing importance of safeguarding digital infrastructures.

Conclusion

YERUN members have made considerable progress in implementing the Digital Education Action Plan, particularly in integrating AI into education, addressing the digital divide, and safeguarding digital resources. However, as the next phase of the Plan approaches, there are areas for improvement. Strengthening collaboration between universities, improving accessibility for disadvantaged students, and ensuring robust data protection measures will be essential to maximise the benefits of digital education and AI technologies. These efforts will ensure that higher education remains **relevant, inclusive, innovative, and secure** in an increasingly digital world.

- About YERUN -

YERUN - Young European Research Universities Network - founded in 2015 and based in Brussels, brings together excellence and value-driven young research universities. The network's objective is to strategically represent its members in the decision-making process at EU level, thus shaping their future and promoting their role in European societies. Further to its policy advocacy activity, the network also strengthens cooperation opportunities among its members in areas of mutual interest and raises their visibility via a dedicated communication strategy.

- YERUN Members -

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