



Press Release

Luxembourg, 23 February 2021

Greater efforts needed to equip all Europeans with basic digital skills

In today's world, digital skills are increasingly important. However, within the EU, little progress has been made in recent years in improving basic digital competence among adult Europeans. The Commission has issued guidance and supported Member States, but there have been relatively few EU-funded projects focusing on basic digital literacy for adults. The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has reviewed what the EU has done to increase digital skills among adults, and what is planned for the 2021-2027 period.

In 2019, more than 75 million European adults of working age did not have at least basic digital skills. This was particularly the case for older people, those with a low level of education and the unemployed. At the same time, over 90 % of jobs already require at least basic digital skills.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of basic digital skills for citizens," said Iliana Ivanova, the ECA member responsible for the review. "We observe that adults with higher digital competence find jobs more easily; they also earn more than their less skilled peers. Our review shows that the EU has long recognised the importance of basic digital skills for all citizens but there is still a lot to be done. Now is the ideal time to shed light on this issue and I hope that our key stakeholders will find our review useful in their preparations for the start of the new 2021-2027 programme period".

Education and vocational training is a Member State responsibility. However, the digital divide between adults with and without basic digital skills varies considerably between Member States. According to the indicators used by the Commission, levels of basic digital competence within Member States have not significantly improved in recent years.

From 2015 onwards, the Commission took a number of measures to improve citizens' digital skills. As a result, between 2016 and 2018, national projects under the "Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition" initiative offered nearly 11 million Europeans of all age groups a chance to improve their digital literacy. However, around half of those were primary and secondary school students, and there are no figures on what impact such activities ultimately had on this initiative's objectives.

Activities in the specific area of basic digital skills for adults are normally part of wider initiatives. This generally makes it impossible to determine the total EU funds spent in this area alone. Nevertheless,

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' review. The full review is available at eca.europa.eu.

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the available data suggests that funding specifically for adult digital upskilling is relatively low: for instance, projects specifically addressing digital training in the Member States represented only around 2 % of total ESF funding in the 2014-2020 period, even though this was a priority area.

For 2021-2027, the Commission has for the first time set a specific objective to increase the proportion of citizens with basic digital skills, from 56 % in 2019 to 70 % in 2025. In order to assist lawmakers and the authorities involved in programming and programme implementation, the auditors point to some challenges. These relate to the allocation of specific amounts of future EU programmes, the definition of sub-objectives and milestones and the consistent assessment of digital skills in a constantly and rapidly changing digital environment.

Background information

This review is not the result of an audit but rather an analysis of mainly publicly available information. It does not include any assessment of action taken by the Commission in this area or recommendations. The auditors look at the development of basic digital skills among adults of working age (25-64) in recent years in the context of EU action in this area since 2010, particularly in the last five years. The EU's long-term high-level strategy, Europe 2020, which ran from 2010 to 2020, included the Digital Agenda for Europe as one of its seven "flagship initiatives". The EU thus also plays a role in helping Member States to address common challenges, such as ageing societies, skills deficits, technological developments and competition at a global level.

ECA review 02/2021 "*EU actions to address low digital skills*" is available on eca.europa.eu in 23 languages.

The ECA is involved in the EUROSAI cooperative project group "Workforce 2030 – Challenges and opportunities", which looks at the global, technological and demographic changes facing the world in the future and their effects on the workforce. National audit institutions have launched a number of parallel audits, and this review will form part of the final report of the working group.

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