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PROPOSAL

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To:	Mr Jeppe TRANHOLM-MIKKELSEN, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union
No. Cion doc.:	COM(2021) 455 final
Subject:	Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education

Delegations will find attached document COM(2021) 455 final.

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COM(2021) 455 final

2021/0255 (NLE)

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education

(Text with EEA relevance)

{SWD(2021) 219 final}

EN   EN

1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

Equal access for all to high-quality education is crucial for both economic and social progress. Education policy should enable all citizens to achieve their full potential and to develop their competences through lifelong learning. This is a key message of the following: the Commission Communication *Establishing a European Pillar of Social Rights*[1]; the vision for a European Education Area[2]; the *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027*[3]; the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)*[4]*;* and the *Council Conclusions on equity and inclusion in education and training in order to promote educational success for all*[5]. Achieving this objective has become even more pressing in light of the educational challenges that were brought to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(1) Challenges to be addressed by the proposed recommendation

School site closures and wider societal restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted existing strengths and weaknesses of primary and secondary education, including vocational education and training (VET). Education and training systems have demonstrated a tremendous capacity to innovate and adopt new approaches[6] but also significant shortfalls from a lack of readiness to take advantage of different learning environments and tools.

–   For learners, the learning process was often slower and less in-depth, and sometimes delayed. It was generally made more difficult due to the absence of the systematic classroom attendance and rhythm, and close interaction with teachers and fellow pupils.

–   Physical, mental and emotional well-being was compromised in certain cases as many schools could not offer structured activities or access to facilities, and the health and motivation of children relied on what their families[7] and domestic environment could provide.

–   Many families and learners, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, lacked the necessary capability and resources to cope with learning at home[8]. This led to a

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1   COM(2017) 250.

2   https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en

3   COM(2020) 624.

4   OJ 2021 C 66/1, 26.2.2021.

5   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021XG0610(01)

6   For example, new legislation was rapidly triggered together with giving more autonomy to authorities and school leaders at the local level. Many schools have formed or renewed partnerships with parents, local communities, businesses, private companies, NGOs, and cultural (including broadcast media) organisations, as reported in the Digital Education Action Plan open public consultation.

7   The European Commission's Joint Research Centre gathered the perceptions of children and families in nine EU countries for their report *How families handled emergency remote schooling during the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020*.

8   According to the results of the open public consultation to prepare the Digital Education Action Plan, parents and learners reported particular difficulties with the shift to remote emergency teaching. Parents report that their children had a particularly bad experience with motivation to learn, examination/assessment and feedback, and the poor quality of online learning content. Socio-economic

major concern for pupils who would normally receive targeted learning support at school, subsidised and healthy meals[9], or access to a variety of extra-curricular activities, including physical activities.

– Many systems, schools and educators were unprepared for such change in terms of both digital competence and resources, including connectivity and infrastructure[10]. Some primary and secondary teachers reported lacking clear guidance and communication from public authorities. They also reported a lack of support and training on designing learning for times when all, or most, pupils would be learning at home.

– Important education professionals – visiting specialists, home liaison officers, educators in cultural organisations, as well as trainers and tutors in work-based learning, – and their resources could no longer access schools.

– Science, arts curriculum subjects and vocational education and training were all disrupted, given their reliance on access to particular spaces, laboratories and equipment and on supervision by trained professionals, which is typically for both pedagogical and safety reasons.

– Schools faced challenges in maintaining the personal and social benefits of being part of a school community when lacking on-site presence.

Striving towards a vision of a better-quality and inclusive education and training is by no means limited to the COVID-19 context. The ongoing challenges for designing education and training remain: building meaningful learning experiences in different environments and for learners of different ages, abilities and circumstances; supporting broad competence development appropriate to learner needs for global society today and in the future; supporting well-being; and supporting educators and schools to adapt and keep improving their own organisational and pedagogical approaches, for the benefit of all learners. In order to meet these challenges and improve capacity, a blended learning approach requires a coherent approach by the education and training system as a whole as part of a culture of continuous improvement.

(2)   The objectives of the proposed recommendation

This proposed recommendation is part of the immediate response to lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, when many pre-existing challenges and inequalities were exacerbated and brought to the fore. The recommendation would propose shorter-term measures to address the most pressing gaps observed so far and overcome the effects on the younger generation. At the same time, it would outline a way forward for blending learning environments and

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gaps between learners was identified as the major challenge going forward. See also forthcoming study: Cachia R., Velicu A., Chaudron S., Di Gioia R. & Vuorikari R., "Remote schooling during Covid-19 spring 2020 lockdown. A closer look at European families."

[9]   The EU School Scheme allows children learn about healthy diets and lifestyles. See School scheme explained | European Commission (europa.eu)

[10]   According to the results of the open public consultation to prepare the Digital Education Action Plan, 69% of primary schools and 64% of secondary schools had no previous experience of distance learning using digital technologies. Respondents reported a range of obstacles and barriers including the lack of digital infrastructure and digital capacity, poor learning design, insufficient communication between and school and home, and the lack of digital competences, particularly for educators.

tools in primary and secondary education that can help build more resilient education and training systems, in line with the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 and the European Education Area, and to prepare the ground to deliver on the Digital Decade[11] objectives. The aim is to increase the inclusiveness and quality of education and training and improve the broad competence development of all learners.

The proposed recommendation does not advocate for a mainstreaming of reduced educator presence in learning, neither encourage spending more hours in front of a screen. Also, it does not strive for a sudden and indiscriminate replacement of print, paper and pencils by digital technologies in primary and secondary education[12]. A proliferation of platforms and communication channels can increase the risk of digital fatigue and organisational burnout for students, educators and parents. Rather, as part of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the proposed recommendation seeks to support the continuous evolution and improvement of a well-balanced school education (in terms of pedagogy as well as learning materials) that promotes high quality and inclusiveness, with the additional benefit of being sufficiently resilient to cope and adapt.

(3)   Specific provisions of the recommendation

Blended learning in formal education and training happens when a school, educator or learner takes more than one approach to the learning process:

–   blending school site and distance learning environments; and

–   blending different tools for learning that can be digital (including online) and non-digital as part of learning tasks.

To ensure an optimal use of blended learning, teachers and learners must be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes, and be receptive to using appropriate digital tools and to changes in teaching. The blended learning approach also needs to be sufficiently flexible to allow adaptation to learners' needs and freedom for educators to adopt it according to their context and audience. Providing conditions conducive to blended learning also depends upon the learners' resources and the school's organisation, culture and resources, i.e. access to appropriate, affordable and well-functioning environments and tools. To achieve this, this proposed recommendation emphasises the need for action at various levels (the school and its local ecosystem; Member State or regional education system level; support as appropriate at the EU level) and for different time horizons: short-term as an immediate response to the pandemic and medium-term to use this approach to promote quality and inclusive education.

(4)   Complementarity with other initiatives

The proposed recommendation is designed to complement other Commission initiatives that will address related challenges for school education, namely the actions presented in the

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[11]   https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en

[12]   Research has demonstrated this may cause a setback in the development of pupils' deep-reading abilities; see *Stavanger Declaration Concerning the Future of Reading* (https://ereadcost.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/StavangerDeclaration.pdf). The Declaration, signed in 2019 by more than 100 researchers, contains the key findings of four years of empirical research in the context of the EU-funded COST research action *Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitalisation (E-READ)*.

Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027[13] and the Pathways to School Success initiative under the European Education Area to help all pupils reach proficiency in basic skills and complete upper secondary education, the Skills Agenda for Europe[14], and particularly the Council recommendation on VET[15] which proposes a modernised EU policy vision of VET including its digitalisation and use of blended learning. The proposed recommendation also complements other initiatives under the Erasmus+ programme, including Erasmus+ Teacher Academies.

2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY

- **Legal basis**

The initiative is in conformity with Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Article 165 lays down that the Union is to 'contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems'. Article 165(2) further specifies that Union action in education will be aimed, in part, at encouraging the development of distance education. Article 166 provides that the Union is to implement a vocational training policy to support and supplement the action of Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training.

The initiative does not propose any extension of EU regulatory power or binding commitments on Member States. Member States will decide, according to their national circumstances, how they implement the recommendation.

- **Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)**

Member States have their own culture and legislation for the design and organisation of learning. They are fully responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education and training systems. However, Member States face a number of common issues relating to the preparedness of their education and training systems, as shown by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners, their families, teachers, trainers and institution leaders. The recommendation aims to support Member States in strengthening preparedness and resilience of their education and training systems, through the development of well-balanced blended learning approaches.

The added value of this proposed recommendation at EU level lies in the ability of the EU to:

- – facilitate a common approach towards short-term solutions to problems encountered during the pandemic that led to or exarcebated gaps in learning outcomes;

- – promote a common European understanding of the opportunities created by blending learning, including improving the quality and inclusiveness of

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[13]   COM(2020) 624.
[14]   COM(2020) 274 final.
[15]   OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1–16

education and training, and the broad competence development and well-being of learners;

–   facilitate the sharing of policymaker, researcher and educator expertise and best practices at system and school levels;

–   support initiatives at EU level to foster competence development of educators and learners in blending learning environments and tools; and

–   encourage investment in the above areas.

In line with the principle of subsidiarity, the proposal outlines a way forward for blending learning environments and tools in primary and secondary education and makes recommendations to this end.

- **Proportionality**

Neither the content nor the form of this proposed recommendation exceeds what is necessary to achieve its objectives. The commitments Member States will make are of a voluntary nature and each Member State remains free to decide on which approach to take.

- **Choice of the instrument**

To contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, this Treaty provides for the adoption by the Council of recommendations, on a proposal from the Commission.

A Council recommendation is an appropriate instrument within the field of education and training, where the EU has a supporting responsibility, and is an instrument that has been frequently used for European action in these areas. As a legal instrument, it signals the commitment of Member States to the measures presented and provides a stronger political basis for cooperation in this area, while fully respecting Member State authority in the field of education and training.

3.   RESULTS OF *EX POST* EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

- ***Ex post* evaluations/fitness checks of existing legislation**

Not applicable.

- **Stakeholder consultations**

During 2020 and 2021, the European Commission consulted with ministry of education representatives, European network organisations (teacher educators, parents, students, employers, trade unions), educators, and other members of the public. Additional approaches and contexts have been useful to better understand the challenges and possibilities in this area: online meetings and webinars; surveys to targeted school education and training audiences; and research projects.

An important phase was the open public consultation from February to September 2020 as part of the preparatory work for the Communication on the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027. This focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and gathered more than 2 700 replies from 60 countries. A consultation of European schoolchildren also took place via the eTwinning online community of teachers and school leaders.

- **Collection and use of expertise**

The proposal is based on a wide range of reports and studies on: pedagogical approaches to key competence development; teacher and school leader professional development; the use of digital technology in school education; and the governance of school education. For specific aspects, three expert consultants engaged under the Education and Training 2020 framework[16] also provided input. The review took note of reports and studies from the OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, as well as the work of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (especially in the area of pedagogical approaches to key competence development, the use of digital technology in school education, and the learning experiences of children and families during the early stages of the pandemic). This information is included in the accompanying Staff Working Document.

- **Impact assessment**

Given the complementary approach of the activities to Member State initiatives, the voluntary nature of the proposed activities and the scope of the impacts expected, an impact assessment was not carried out. The development of the proposal was informed by previous studies, consultation of Member States and the public consultation.

- **Regulatory fitness and simplification**

Not applicable.

- **Fundamental rights**

This proposed recommendation respects the fundamental rights and observes the principles recognised by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, namely the right of education, laid down in Article 14, and the right to the protection of personal data, laid down in Article 8. Personal data must be processed fairly for specific purposes, based on the consent of the person concerned or some other legitimate basis laid down by law; moreover, everyone has the right of access to data that has been collected concerning him or her, and the right to have it rectified. The measures will be carried out in accordance with EU law on the protection of personal data, in particular Regulation (EU) 2016/679[17] of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (General Data Protection Regulation).

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[16]   European policy cooperation (ET 2020 framework) | Education and Training (europa.eu)

[17]   http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2016.119.01.0001.01.ENG

4. **BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS**

This initiative will not require additional resources from the EU budget.

5. **OTHER ELEMENTS**

- **Implementation plans and monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements**

To support implementation, the Commission proposes to develop, in cooperation with Member States, specific guidance material, handbooks and other concrete deliverables, based on evidence, peer learning activities and identification of good practice. This will fill the identified gaps in supporting the development of a blended learning approach at school and system level.

The Commission intends to report on the use of the recommendation in the context of the strategic framework for European cooperation in the area of education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond.

- **Explanatory documents (for directives)**

Not applicable.

- **Outline of the recommendation and staff working document**

The draft recommendation proposes guidance and action that can be pursued by Member States in order to address short-term consequences of the pandemic, and for a well-balanced and well-targeted blended learning approach to lead to high-quality and inclusive primary and secondary education. It sets out the European Commission's commitment to complement and support Member State actions in this area.

The accompanying staff working document describes a wide range of recent research evidence together with European stakeholder opinions and experiences in order to support the proposed recommendation and provides examples of existing policies and projects in a rapidly developing field.

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education

(Text with EEA relevance)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

(1)   The COVID-19 pandemic has affected and put unprecedented pressure on education and training systems worldwide and across the Union. The societal restrictions brought major changes to teaching and learning as well as and to communication and collaboration within education and training communities.[18] They had an impact on learners, their families, teachers, trainers, and institution leaders, as well as on community professionals who support education, such as social workers and cultural educators. Member States were able to rapidly mobilise options and support for distance learning, in particular digital solutions. Lessons have been learned about new possiblities for education, including the significant increase in teacher digital competence and closer links between schools and the wider community. However many Member States experienced shortcomings in the system with a widespread lack of readiness and resources for the shift to a different approach to teaching and learning, which highlighted and aggravated existing inequalities, gaps, and needs. Education and training systems need to address these and also to improve their resilience, to better cope and adapt with changing circumstances in the future.

(2)   The Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 outlines the European Commission's vision for high quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe. It is a call to action for stronger cooperation at European level to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and make education and training systems fit for the digital age. It highlights the potential of technology to facilitate more personalised, flexible and student-centred learning. It seeks to address inequities in education when digital competence, access to appropriate tools, and reliable online connectivity are lacking. It stresses the need for strengthening digital capacity in education and training systems.

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[18]   OJ C 212I , 26.6.2020, p. 9–14

(3)   The European Pillar of Social Rights[19] states as its first principle that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that allow full participation in society and successful transitions in the labour market. Principle 11 of the Pillar states that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. The effective implementation of those priciples greatly depends on the resolve and action of Member States. EU-level actions can complement national actions and the Commission presented its contribution in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.[20] The European Skills Agenda[21] defines actions to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills and to put them to use, by strengthening sustainable competitiveness and by building resilience to react to crises, based on the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic; it also proposes to foster science education in research and innovation actions. The Council recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee invites the Member States to guarantee for children in need (i.e. at risk of poverty or social exclusion) effective and free access to education and school-based activities. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child calls for building inclusive, quality education. Fostering the development of competences is one of the aims of a European Education Area that would be able "to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for jobs, social fairness, active citizenship as well as means to experience European identity in all its diversity." [22]

(4)   In a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world, each person needs a wide range of competences and to develop them continually throughout life. The key competences as defined in the European Reference Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning[23] aim to lay the foundation for achieving more equal and more democratic societies. They respond to the need for inclusive and sustainable growth, social cohesion and further development of the democratic culture.

(5)   The Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning[24] states that competence development is facilitated by including a variety of learning environments and tools, including digital technology, and tasks within the learning design; providing support to educational staff as well as other stakeholders supporting learning processes, including families; supporting and further developing the assessment and validation of key competences acquired in different settings; and reinforcing collaboration within education and between education and other fields as a more comprehensive programme of action.

(6)   The Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience[25] proposes a modernised EU policy vision of VET including its digitalisation and use of blended learning.

(7)   The Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future[26] recognise that teachers, trainers and school leaders are an indispensable driving force of

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[19]   COM(2017)250
[20]   COM(2021)102
[21]   COM(2020) 274 final.
[22]   COM(2017)673
[23]   OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1–13, Annex
[24]   OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1–13
[25]   OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1–16

education and training who should be involved in the creation of education and training policies with autonomy in applying these policies in practice but who also need the support of a comprehensive approach to initial education, induction and continuous professional development.

(8) The pandemic increased a long-standing concern for the physical, mental and emotional well-being of children and young people. All children and young people should be supported to enjoy a healthy and active lifestyle, encouraging positive lifelong habits, and have the opportunity to participate in a range of sports and other physical activities, which enhance motor skills and boost mental and emotional well-being. Children and young people also need support for their mental and emotional well-being during learning, including learning tasks under increased pressure and understanding safe and responsible online behaviour. Support is also needed for those learners who spend extended periods of time away from peer or school staff support.

(9) Blended learning in formal education and training happens when a school, educator or learner takes more than one approach to the learning process: blending school site and other physical environments away from the school site (distance learning); blending different learning tools that can be digital (including online) and non-digital. Using their professional judgement, teachers and schools will select and facilitate the use of these as part of engaging and effective learning tasks that support broad competence development.

(10) Learning in different environments, including the school site, the home, the outdoors, cultural sites, and places of employment can be motivating for children and young people and enhance their broad competence development. This in turn can help them to understand and be motivated by the relevance of formal education and training to their lives in society and increase their engagement with local and global challenges, for instance those related to the environment and climate change.

(11) A blended learning approach recognises the value of the school as a shared space for personal and social interaction, which itself is important for learning as a way of understanding and making meaning of the world.

(12) A blended learning approach can enhance broad competence development, due to the variety of learning tasks and tools it can encompass. The use of digital technology, including connecting devices online, can facilitate the interaction of the learner with other learners, learning programmes, and other sources of information, and can support learning in different environments. The complementary use of scientific equipment, craft tools, realia (objects found and used in everyday life), published texts, and writing and visual arts tools, can support creativity and personal expression, both as an individual and collaboratively.

(13) Education is a fundamental human right and a right of the child. Access to it has to be guaranteed, independent of the environment in which it takes place – the school site, at a distance, or a combination of both – and independent of the different personal and social circumstances of learners. Beyond the pandemic, a blended learning approach is an opportunity to improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education and

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[26] OJ C 193, 9.6.2020, p. 11–19

training, such as better learning provision in rural and remote areas, including the outermost regions and island communities, and for other learners who may not attend the school site full time: those who are part of traveller communities; young carers; those with health issues or residing in hospitals and care centres; those engaged in high-performance training; and those in vocational training or paid work. All environments and tools should be equally accessible to minority groups, children with disabilities and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and do not lead to discrimination or segregation.

(14)   Blended learning requires a coherent, system-wide approach to create the enabling conditions. This includes engaging practitioners with different expertise and promoting collaboration with the community, which encourages a shared responsibility for the development of young people. Effectiveness of system measures to support blended learning will also rely on articulating and supporting relationships between different elements of the ecosystem, between the education authorities, education resources industry (providing technology, publishing, and other curriculum equipment), research, education and training institutions and communities.

(15)   Blended learning is a widely established practice in initial vocational education and training[27], however the pandemic restrictions challenged the capacity of institutions and organisations to provide work-based learning and maintain communication with trainers and mentors as well as impacting on the provision of apprenticeships. The reduction in access to practical experiences highlighted the known need for vocational education and training to take advantage of digital technology including digital devices and learning platforms, ePortfolios and Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality for simulations. It also reinforced the need to understand and coordinate how digital technologies are used for learning in the different settings (e.g. on site at school or during work placements).

(16)   The importance and relevance of non-formal learning is evident from the experiences acquired through youth work, voluntary work, and participating in cultural activities, including grassroots sport. Non-formal learning plays an important role in supporting the development of essential interpersonal, communicative and cognitive skills including among other things, creativity, that facilitate young people's transition to adulthood, active citizenship and working life.[28] Identification of new ways of learning includes better cooperation between formal and non-formal learning settings.[29]

(17)   This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES

(1)   Based on lessons learned in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, support the recovery and preparedness of education and training systems by addressing the consequences of the pandemic on learners, educators and all educational professionals and develop

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[27]   Initial vocational education and training is usually carried out at upper secondary level and post-secondary level before students begin working life. It takes place either in a school-based environment (mainly in the classroom) or in a work-based setting, such as training centres and companies, depending on national education and training systems and economic structures.
[28]   http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9624-2017-INIT/en/pdf
[29]   2015/C 172/03

a longer-term strategic approach to blended learning, in line with the priciples set out in this Recommendation[30]. Build on successful innovations introduced or tested during the pandemic to share and scale good practices.

(2)   Support learners by considering the following measures:

As a direct response to the crisis

(a)   Providing additional learning opportunities and targeted support to learners facing learning difficulties, with special educational needs, from disadvantaged groups or having been otherwise affected by school disruption. This could include, for example, enhanced individualised support and personal tutoring, mentoring systems (including peer mentoring), additional learning time during the school year and/or holiday period, access to additional learning environments, such as public libraries and community spaces, and to after-school services with pedagogical support.

(b)   Prioritising the physical and mental well-being of learners and their families. This could include developing guidance for mental health; including student well-being and anti-bullying policies in school objectives, monitoring and quality assurance processes (as part of regular quality assurance or school inspection work or in the context of specific assessments of the school situation in the context of the pandemic); assigning dedicated staff or facilitating access to qualified mental-health and support professionals and services.

(c)   Boosting the development of digital competences of learners and families and the digital capacity of the education systems by encouraging investment at school and community level in available devices, connectivity and by providing opportunities to boost digital skills, including using technology for both independent and collaborative learning. Implementing investments and reforms foreseen in national and Recovery and Resilience Facility plans to ensure that all learners can access the necessary equipment and learning opportunities.

To support recovery and the longer-term preparedness of education and training:

(3)   Exploring ways to develop a blended learning approach in primary and secondary education for the benefit of all learners and to ensure a lasting positive impact on teaching and learning adapted to pupils' age, capacity, and learning objectives. This could include reinforcing the development of combining school site and distance learning environments in order to create more flexibility and appropriate conditions for where learning takes place, taking into account the different needs arising from different socio-economic and housing conditions; reinforcing the development and embedding of tools for learning, in order to provide opportunities for investigation and expression, including the development of science literacy; supporting learning across different environments; creating an appropriate balance between teacher- and student-led learning on the one hand, and collaborative and independent learning on

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[30]   The Framework for Blended learning presented in the Staff Working Document can be a basis for specific actions adapted to countries' situations

the other; testing learning methods to make new opportunities attractive and better learning solutions for both learners and teachers.

(4)   Using blended learning as a way to support learners' autonomy and personalised learning (taking into account pupils' age, capacity, and specific learning needs), and to develop their Personal, Social and Learning to Learn competence (one of the eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning[31] and further developed in the LifeComp European framework[32]).

(5)   Support teachers by considering the following measures:

As a direct response to the crisis:

(a)   Supporting digital upskilling courses, programmes and tools[33] for teachers. Developing and disseminating on-line and on site pedagogical modules and resources to help teachers adapt their teaching methods for blended approaches, based on their experience and feedback, and engage with teachers in the use of new tools and materials.

(b)   Increasing focus on the well-being of educators, school leaders and other educational staff. This could include facilitated access to qualified mental-health and support professionals and services, promoting organisation of peer support to mitigate stress and enhanced training opportunities on resilience/mental well-being in Initial Teacher Education and Continued Professional Development programmes.

(c)   Mobilising or recruiting additional staff to allow more time for individual support at school and in after school activities.

To support recovery and the longer-term preparedness of educators:

(d)   Embedding blended learning design in statutory Initial Teacher Education[34] and continued professional development[35] programmes to help educational staff to adapt the learning design as appropriate to their professional contexts and help them to be competent in facilitating learning with a range of indoor and outdoor environments, tools and tasks.

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[31]   OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1–13
[32]   LifeComp comprises three intertwined competence areas: 'Personal', 'Social', and 'Learning to learn'. Each area includes three competences: Self-regulation, Flexibility, Wellbeing (Personal Area), Empathy, Communication, Collaboration (Social Area), Growth mindset, Critical thinking, and Managing learning (Learning to learn Area). LifeComp competences apply to all spheres of life and can be acquired lifelong through formal, informal, and non-formal education. https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/lifecomp
[33]   The European Commission is launching in October 2021 the new SELFIE for Teachers tool which can support educators to plan the development of their digital competences.
[34]   A period of formal study in order to gain a recognised qualification and be employed as a teacher. This is typically offered by education departments in universities or independent teacher education institutions (cf. glossary in the Staff Working Document).
[35]   The learning that professionals engage in at any stage of their career to enhance their practice (cf. glossary in the Staff Working Document).

(e)   Providing access to centres of expertise, and to appropriate resources that guide and enhance learning design and facilitation. Supporting education and training staff to develop a blended learning approach in their specific contexts through staff exchanges and peer learning, networks, collaboration projects, and communities of practice.

(f)   Developing guidance on new approaches to assessment and final examinations with suitable tools for formative and summative assessment that are appropriate for different levels of education and training and equally valid for school site and distance learning settings.

(g)   Encouraging educational staff to participate in exploratory projects and research, including testing the use of tasks in other learning environments and the use of digital technology to support learning.

(6)   Support schools by considering the following measures:

As a direct response to the crisis:

(a)   Providing tools and resources for blended learning, as well as guidance to schools on how these can be used.[36]

(b)   Supporting effective partnerships for infrastructure and resources between different education providers, including from business, arts, cultural heritage, sport, nature, higher education, and research institutes, the educational resources industry (including technology, publishing, and other curriculum equipment) and educational research.

(c)   Supporting schools to evaluate their inclusion strategies and practices and take the necessary measures to remedy shortcomings, including by making use of EU tools.[37]

To support longer term recovery and to improve the capacity for organisational change

(d)   Investing in high-speed internet connectivity of school site and distance learning environments, on which online learning depends.

(e)   Allowing a sufficient level of autonomy for school-level decision-making (by school boards, heads, leaders), in order to facilitate innovation, reactivity and adaptation to local needs.

(f)   Supporting school leaders in managing organisational change with dedicated professional development and guidance for their roles. Supporting schools and associated education providers to reflect on a blended learning approach within their strategic planning, which may include the use of self-assessment tools.

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[36]   The SELFIE tool can support schools to reflect and gather evidence on their current situation and needs. The tool is modular and can be adapted by each school to take their particular context into account.

[37]   The European Toolkit for Schools 'Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving', offers a wealth of resources and practical examples, as well as a self-assessment tool for schools.

(g) Supporting dialogue and networking between a range of stakeholders engaged in both school site and distance learning, in order to generate feedback and ideas for future development from different sources. This should also include dialogue, guidance and strategies to protect children's safety, security and privacy in the digital world.

(h) Focussing part of the internal and/or external review and quality assurance mechanisms of a school on the blend of learning environments and tools, incorporating evaluation of/via other providers than the school.

(7) Make full use of EU funds and expertise for reforms and investment in infrastructure, tools and pedagogy to increase resilience and preparedness for future-ready schools, in particular Erasmus+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, European Social FundPlus, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Digital Europe Programme, Horizon Europe and the Technical Support Instrument.

(8) Invest in monitoring, research and evaluation of the policy challenges and of the impact of these initiatives in order to build on lessons learnt and inform future policy reform, including by building on on experiences of learners as well as on the data collected to develop best practices and tailored AI solutions for improved learning programmes.

(9) Provide appropriate framework for implementation of this recommendation by taking into account the measures supporting blended learning in the national action plans for implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

HEREBY INVITES THE COMMISSION TO:

1. Support the implementation of the Recommendation by facilitating mutual learning and exchanges among Member States and all relevant stakeholders through:

1.1. the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)[38];

1.2. the new European Digital Education Hub and new Strategic Dialogue with Member States, which will be established under the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 to support cross-sectoral collaboration on digital education;

1.3. EU online platforms and communities for education and training, including the School Education Gateway, eTwinning and the European Toolkit for Schools 'Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving';

2. Support the development of resources, in cooperation with Member States, such as:

2.1. evidence-based guidance material on learning design and school organisational practice within a blended learning approach, including on digital tools, approaches to the assessment and validation of learning and data protection, privacy and safety in a blended learning context;

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[38] OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1–21

2.2.   using the potential of the forthcoming European Digital Education Content Framework to support the creation and sharing of high-quality digital education content, which will be developed as part of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.

3.   Support professional development opportunities for educational staff and other stakeholders by:

3.1.   providing massive open online courses (MOOCs) on blended learning for teachers, trainers, school leaders and teacher educators hosted by the School Education Gateway platform and promote the wide use of these courses for staff in schools;

3.2.   sharing good practice from Erasmus+ staff exchanges, projects and networks, including through the eTwinning online community, the future Erasmus+ Teacher Academies as well as the Centres of Vocational Excellence;

3.3.   launching the new online SELFIE tool for teachers to help them reflect on their digital competences and plan for further improvement. This builds on the SELFIE tool for whole school digital planning which can help support effective blended learning approaches, including in VET.

4.   Support initiatives to further develop and promote inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, as part of the European Education Area concerning school education, particularly regarding the inclusion of learners in different circumstances that affects their access to particular learning environments and tools, and the inclusion of those who require targeted support in the learning process.

5.   Continue its support to Member States in undertaking reforms in order to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of school education systems and support their digital readiness in line with the objectives of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.

6.   Include a focus on the development of a blended learning approach in primary and secondary school education under the framework of regular progress reports of the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council
The President