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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	Critical thinking and human agency in education and training in a changing digital environment *- Exchange of views*

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 19 November 2026.

ANNEX

Critical thinking and human agency in education and training in a changing digital environment

Presidency steering note

The ways in which people learn, communicate, work and participate in society are changing. The evolving nature of the digital environment and the prevalence of artificial intelligence (AI) are accelerating this change, bringing significant opportunities for education and training, while also raising fundamental questions about the impact of emerging technologies on critical thinking and human agency.

Education and training have a central role in nurturing and further supporting the development of critical thinking and human agency. While learners need the technical skills to use digital and AI-enabled tools effectively, it is essential that they have human agency, including the capacity to assess information critically, make independent judgements, persevere when faced with difficulty, sustain attention, distinguish fact from misinformation and disinformation, and take responsibility for their own learning. Media literacy, digital literacy and AI literacy are consequently extremely important in enabling citizens to use informed judgement in a changing digital environment. These capacities are relevant across all levels and types of education and training throughout life, including school education, vocational education and training (VET), higher education and lifelong learning.

The Presidency therefore invites Ministers to consider how critical thinking and human agency can be fostered throughout education and training. The discussion will explore how education and training can respond to a rapidly evolving digital environment while ensuring that technological developments support, rather than replace, the underlying capacities required for meaningful learning and active participation in society.

The recently published PISA 2025 data highlight declines across Europe in learner achievement, particularly in reading and mathematics. Particularly troubling is the decline in the kinds of skills that matter most in the AI age. These skills include how learners access and engage with information, their capacity to concentrate and read deeply, think critically, navigate ambiguity, persevere and make independent judgements.

PIAAC 2023 shows similar challenges among adults. It underlines the gaps in information-processing skills (literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving) among adult populations as technology changes the nature of work and the skills required to participate effectively in economic and social life. These skills underpin individuals' ability to adapt, change and navigate uncertainty.

In a digital environment in which information can be generated and circulated instantaneously, human agency is more important than ever. Citizens need the skills to use new technologies confidently and effectively, while also retaining the ability to evaluate their outputs, make informed choices and decide when the use of a digital tool is appropriate and whether the response provided by that tool is relevant and reliable.

These issues are increasingly relevant to European cooperation in education and training. In its recent Resolution on the second cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (2026-2030), the Council has set developing digital skills and citizenship education as one of its strategic priorities. The Resolution emphasises the importance of strengthening the promotion of critical thinking and digital citizenship supported by digital and media literacy, including understanding of AI, in response to the growing challenge of misinformation and disinformation.

Other relevant existing EU tools and initiatives, such as the EU-OECD AI literacy framework for primary and secondary education, the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 3.0), as well as the European Democracy Shield, place emphasis on enhancing support for citizens to develop these skills. All these initiatives underline that it is crucial that these skills are promoted across all levels and types of education and training.

A significant challenge for education and training systems is therefore not simply to keep pace with technological development. It is also a matter of shaping how technology is incorporated into learning and teaching and ensuring that the availability of digital and AI-enabled tools strengthens rather than diminishes the capacities on which learning itself depends.

Member States share the objective of ensuring that learners develop the critical thinking and human agency needed to navigate a changing digital environment. This exchange of views provides Ministers with an opportunity to share the challenges they are encountering, positive national approaches and innovative practices, while also considering where European cooperation might provide further support to Member States in responding to these common challenges.

In this exchange of views, Ministers are invited to reflect on the following questions:

1. What are Member States' experiences in supporting learners' development of critical thinking and human agency in a changing digital environment, and what national approaches are proving particularly effective?
2. How can European cooperation support education and training systems to develop the critical thinking and human agency needed to navigate a rapidly changing digital environment?

Ministers are requested to limit their interventions to three minutes.