# Cities social trends paper: Digital skills provision in cities
## May 2022

### Background

Investment in digital skills has become fundamental considering the digital revolution unfolding globally.The EU has made taking the digital skills gap a priority in the last few years and it is a core component of the five-year European Skills Agenda plan. Cities are crucial actors to address the most important challenges related to skills at the local level. They make the difference in co-designing and implementing EU policies in this field in an impactful way. Thus understanding cities' experiences in providing digital skills is invaluable in shaping EU and national policies, but cities also need national and EU support to achieve the goals set out in the Agenda.

To better understand the existing measures taken by cities to provide digital skills, Eurocities surveyed its members in Spring 2022. The survey sought to map out the type of support cities provide, who they target and how, and where they need support. The following document is based on the responses from 16 cities [1] and seeks to help identify where gaps exist and where cities need further support from the EU and national level.

### Key findings of the mapping

#### For cities, digital skills are about social inclusion, not just employability.

For most cities, digital skills education and training is a competence shared with the national government. However, cities still undertake activities to support the acquisition of digital skills even where they have no legal competence. This is because **cities see digital skills as being crucial not just for employability, but also for social inclusion**. This means they also invest in promoting connectivity, digital communication

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[1] These cities are: Barcelona, Bilbao, Ghent, Glasgow, Helsinki, Liepzig, Lille, Malmo, Rubi, Solna, Stockholm, Tampere, Terrassa, The Hague, Utrecht, and Vienna.

or access to services. An approach to digital skills which takes into consideration social inclusion has become even more pressing during the COVID-19 pandemic which accelerated the digitalisation of everyday tasks, be it in employment, education or accessing public services.

Key targets for this support are those with the greatest need, and to that end, **city measures tend to focus primarily on NEETs, the low skilled, the elderly, and women and girls**.

This focus on social exclusion is exemplified by measures undertaken during COVID-19 lockdowns. In 2020, the Bilbao City Council made use of its Mirada Activa Berria programme to provide digital competencies to the elderly in order to enable them to keep in touch with friends and family. The programme aims to promote community participation of elderly people experiencing isolation or loneliness and two workshops were organised on how to use messaging tools. Here digital skills were seen as a tool for promoting the well-being of the elderly population.

## National approaches have significant impact on what cities can deliver

While cities see and try to respond to digital skills gap regardless of whether they have legal competence, they cite **the lack of national strategies on digital skills as a key barrier for progress**. This gap results in several challenges.

For one, it means **there is no agreed definition of what encompasses 'digital skills'**. For example, should measures be focused on basic digital skills, or advanced, what topics should be covered, what methodologies should be used. Furthermore, national governments might have an approach to digital skills that focuses on labour market integration and thus prioritises the working-age population, while not considering the social need for digital skills. This results in incongruous approaches at different levels of government.

**It also results in overlaps.** For example in Finland, every education provider produces their own materials to support digital skills development. Greater coordination at all levels would reduce duplication and the burden carried by individual local agencies through a comprehensive national approach.

Moreover, **lack of strategies results in a lack of resources**. Adequate funding is not allocated based on a clear analysis of the level of needs and interventions that must be implemented. **This results in cities often only being able to implement temporary measures**, which they are unable to sustain in the long-run even where needs persist.

Finally**, failing to have national strategies results in a lack of accountability and therefore of progress**. Strategies or 'action plans' are fundamental for setting targets and ensuring they are achieved.

In Belgium, for example, there is no specific ministerial competence over digital inclusion. This means that policy-makers at all levels can individually decide whether to launch initiatives, and there is no clear responsibility if little or no action is taken. This creates challenges for Belgian cities like Ghent. In Ghent, approximately 1 in 5 people live in poverty, resulting in some having little or no access to the internet and ICT tools such as laptops, smartphones, tablets, etc. While those who are eligible for a Participation

and Social Activation (PASOA) grant can receive a subsidy[2] for ICT related needs such as internet access, the budget of the subsidy is insufficient to award grants to eligible persons. While the city and Flemish government have partnered since 2020 on various project to provide digital hardware to those in need, no reoccurring resources are budgeted which mean that responding to needs cannot be sustained.

In order to overcome these challenges, **national governments must develop clear digital skills strategies in partnership with local authorities to tackle digital skills gaps in a structural manner**. These strategies should be flexible enough to allow cities to meet the specific needs of their context and population, with adequate financial support to match.

## Improving digital skills must go hand in hand with investing in infrastructure and human resources

Updating digital infrastructure was a common need identified by cities. This takes two forms: 1) **combatting digital exclusion by access to digital tools and improving connectivity among the poorest**; 2) **improving digital skills teaching and learning by updating digital infrastructure in schools, universities, and training centres.**

Glasgow City Council does this through its "Empower Learning" programme – which seeks to provide faster broadband, improve connectivity and update audio-visual equipment in every primary and secondary school classroom. A second programme in the city, "Connected Learning" aims to tackle digital exclusion by providing digital devices to students. The roll-out was accelerated during COVID-19 and as a result, over 50,000 devices have been deployed to students allowing all students to benefit from the digital learning environment during lockdowns when schools were physically shut.

In May 2020, Bilbao extended its free wifi network in neighbourhoods with less coverage, and later on in neighbourhoods with the highest incidences of the digital divide. The service allows free and universal connection and has a monthly average of 2.6 million device connections. It highlights the crucial role that the provision of free wifi access plays in supporting digital inclusion and as a result – digital skills development.

However, ensuring adequate infrastructure to facilitate digital inclusion and digital skills development is not enough. A crucial starting point for providing digital skills is having education providers with adequate digital skills. Too often, however, this is not the case and **cities note a high digital skills gap among teachers**. Digital skills strategies in the education sector should promote the learning of teachers as well as students. There are low levels of participation in ICT/digital skills training, coupled with a lack of monitoring tools to assess the level of competence and skills of teachers. Age plays a factor here too, such as in Leipzig where teachers of older age tend to have lower digital skills.

To tackle this, training needs to be made more accessible to teachers. This means promoting digital skills training for formal educators but also minimising the administrative load they have to allow more time

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[2] 100 euros per person or 400 euros per family

to participate in training. Moreover, given the rapid pace of development of new technologies, learning cannot be on a one-off basis.

The city of Helsinki tries to tackle this challenge through peer learning among teachers and exchanging of practices under an ESF funded project, BLIVA. Thirty primary and secondary schools are involved in the two-year project which aims to contribute to the professional development of teachers and thus to teaching development through digitalisation.

## Raising awareness is fundamental to increase take-up

Cities highlight the crucial role of raising awareness of the benefits of digital skills education and training, particularly given challenges in reaching certain targets groups. This not only supports a greater understanding of why digital skills are important – such as by emphasising the high level of demand from employers , but cities have also seen that this helps tackle the lack of interest and low rates of take-up by those with need.

Recognising the digital skills gap between men and women, awareness-raising campaigns should bring in a gendered perspective targetting women and girls and sharing the professional benefits of developing their digital skills.

Vienna's Employment Promotion Fund (waff) uses social media for its outreach. The organisation collaborates with online influencers to promote its services and reach vulnerable groups. It also features testimonials from those who have received support on how this has helped them.

## Lack of data on digital skills needs and demand is a universal problem

Nearly all cities lack data on digital skills gaps at the local level. Often only national data is available. **In order to understand the scale of need, it is crucial that cities are provided with the resources or support to allow this type of data collection.** This will allow local authorities to better tailor their services and ensure adequate investment based on the local context. Data collection should not just focus on digital skills gaps, but also on-demand from local employers and businesses. This would allow cities to tailor their trainings, strengthen the employability of learners, and help local economies to flourish. Moreover, cities see the value in EU level dissemination of good practices, resources for digital education, and knowledge sharing on current and future skills needs to help tailor their support.

Cities try to overcome this challenge by working with civil society organisations working closely with disadvantaged populations, but also directly with businesses. Utrecht's U-TECH Community works with three main stakeholders: companies, education providers, and government agencies. The partners work together on projects, taking ownership for the development and training of ICT professionals. Similarly, Barcelona's IT Academy is a 12 week programme aims to harmonise the needs for growth and competitiveness in the city's business sector, with tackling unemployment and upskilling. Courses are specifically designed to help individuals into the growing ICT sector.

## Based on the findings of our mapping, we call on the EU and national governments to:

- **Develop national strategies on digital skills**, supported by adequate funding to implement local measures with a long(er)-term vision. The drafting of these strategies should take place in partnership with cities, and be flexible enough to adapt to the local context.  Need longer-term strategies to secure funding for digital skills measures over longer-term.

- **Ensure that strategies are based on a long-term approach** and promote continuous learning. This means ensuring that digital skills provision is regularly assessed and updated in accordance with technological developments so that learners are receiving relevant skills.

- **Invest in digital skills forecasting at the local level** to enable cities to better understand local digital skills needs and employers' digital skills demands and tailor their response measures accordingly. The forecasting should be ensured through a triple helix approach by linking the public sector, education providers, businesses and employers to improve trainings and improve labour market outcomes.

- Given the crucial role of digital skills for both employment and social inclusion, ensure that digital skills education begins from an early age to promote digital inclusion for all. To achieve this, schools should also be adequately equipped with ICTs and teachers must have better access to training.

- **Reduce the digital gap by ensuring connectivity** in the poorest neighbourhoods, such as through access to free wifi. Need to ensure investments in human capital (Skills) combined with investment in infrastructure (free wifi) and access to essential services, by blending ESF+ and ERDF and InvestEU.

- Promote greater investment in the supply of tailor-made and individualised digital skills training and career guidance which results in better outcomes for support recipients. Investment in formal education should go hand in hand with investment in **non-formal** digital education in order to better reach vulnerable groups such as the low skilled or low qualified.