Digital Skills at Risk: A Swedish Example of the Need for Stronger DEAP Accountability

- Position Paper: A Swedish and European Edtech Perspective on the DEAP

Introduction

The EU's Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) is designed to elevate digital skills, adapt education systems to the digital age, and maintain Europe's digital leadership. However, the soft law nature of DEAP, where member states have significant autonomy in implementation, presents challenges. Sweden's recent policy shifts, despite its historical leadership in digital education, exemplify the risks of this approach. These developments have garnered attention across Europe, raising concerns about the broader implementation of DEAP objectives. This paper examines Sweden's experience and provides recommendations for enhancing the DEAP's effectiveness at a European level.

Ambitious DEAP Targets and the role of edtech

The DEAP sets a bold but necessary target: 80% of EU citizens should possess basic digital skills by 2030. The EU competitiveness report, [Looking ahead](#) by Mario Draghi underscores digital skills as pivotal to Europe's economic growth, the twin green and digital transitions, and investment in innovation. Achieving our digital skills goal requires an annual growth rate of 6% in digital skills—a considerable undertaking. Since DEAP operates under "soft law," member states are responsible for crafting policies that enhance their digital skills competitiveness.

In line with this, all EU member states committed to setting national digital education strategies in [November 2023](#), an agreement to speed up the pace to reach the goals. These commitments emphasize investments in teacher training, infrastructure investments, and public-private partnerships.

The European edtech sector, comprised primarily of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), plays a critical role in delivering quality digital education. With nearly 50 countries and over 200 languages, Europe demands diverse edtech solutions that cater to varied curricula and local classroom needs. However, scaling edtech in Europe's complex public sector remains challenging. It is essential that the EU supports the development of local edtech companies that maintain European values and address regional educational needs. Edtech for and from Europe.

Sweden's Declining Digital Competence

Historically, Sweden has been a digital pioneer, but recent trends reveal a worrying flat line, where basic digital skills in the population haven't increased [between 2021-2023](#), more worrying is the decline for the younger generations. According to the latest Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI 2023), Sweden's 16-24-year-olds are experiencing a significant drop in digital proficiency—a first for the country. This signals systemic weaknesses in delivering digital competencies through national curricula and threatens Sweden's long-term competitiveness.

Recent policy developments exacerbate these concerns. In 2023-2024, the Swedish government scrapped its digital strategy for schools (2023-2027), and the National Agency for Education was instructed to remove digital competence requirements from preschool curricula. Moreover, a state inquiry has been tasked with reviewing curricula for grades 1-9, and an AI Commission was established to advise the government on AI competitiveness—without the mandate to address educational needs in schools, despite identified gaps.

On a positive note, the government has announced a forthcoming STEM strategy (late 2024) and allocated some resources to technical universities to increase deep tech skills. However, the overall shift away from digital education strategies for younger students creates a paradox: while Sweden focuses on advanced technical skills, it neglects foundational digital literacy in early education. This creates a vacuum, fostering "unconscious screen time" and leaving critical questions unanswered. How will Sweden equip its students with the digital skills needed for future jobs and civic participation? How will they navigate a fast-paced digital world safely and critically?

Important to note, to understand the context of these developments, is that these policies are not without opposition. Key stakeholders, including teacher and school leader unions, municipal organizations, research communities, and industry representatives, have voiced concerns over the devaluation of digital skills education and its long-term societal impact. Sweden's lack of alignment with DEAP goals and the implications of it, and a limited public discourse on the matter, presents opportunities for improved communication and transparency to increase accountability.

Recommendations for Europe and the Next Phase of DEAP
As this halftime review of the DEAP implementation reveals a lack of public knowledge of the DEAP-goals and our undertaking, and how it is deeply connected with our overall competetiveness, we propose the following actions to strengthen DEAP implementation across Europe:

1. **Increase Accountability Through Assessment and Communication**
   The reorientation of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) under the Digital Decade 2030 Programme reduces comparative rankings and detailed tracking of digital skills progress across countries. This is a missed opportunity. Clear, comparative rankings and transparent tracking of national initiatives would highlight successes and areas for improvement, sparking public debate and increasing government accountability from all involved stakeholders. Enhanced assessment tools and annual ranking reports would ensure that digital skills remain a high priority on both national and EU agendas, and also ensure the national authonomy in education policies.

2. **Harmonize Quality Assurance and Support Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)**
   One of the key challenges for the edtech sector is demonstrating quality and relevance, as no harmonized criteria exist across European markets. The education sector also lacks

robust public-private partnership models, which are essential for creating sustainable, impactful solutions. Establishing testbeds where edtech solutions can be piloted and validated in real educational environments would support evidence-based decision-making. The DEAP can play a crucial role in harmonizing quality assurance mechanisms and ensuring sustainable funding for testbeds or other evaluation tools.

3. **Foster and Fund Edtech Innovation Across Europe**
   Edtech is crucial for the future of European education, yet its development is hindered by fragmented, short-term funding and rigid procurement processes. The EU must prioritize long-term, cross-border initiatives that stimulate market dynamics and support edtech startups and scale-ups. Ensuring procurement processes are aligned with innovation goals will pave the way for continuous improvement in digital education tools. Dedicated initiatives to promote European edtech will help create a competitive market and position Europe as a global leader in digital education and seize the opportunity to promote edtech as a strategic export sector. The EU should actively support edtech as a strategic industry, fostering innovation, facilitating market entry, and ensuring that European values underpin global digital education initiatives.

Conclusion

Sweden's recent policy shifts serve as a cautionary tale for the DEAP and highlight the risks of the soft law nature without stronger accountability measures. While DEAP has set ambitious goals for digital skills development, Sweden's case shows that without binding requirements and consistent oversight, even leading countries can falter. The EU must strengthen its approach in the next phase of DEAP by communicating results, or lack of results, to engage all stakeholders to demand accountability, fostering long-term investment, and ensuring that all member states remain aligned with the plan's objectives. Only then can Europe ensure that its citizens are equipped with the digital skills needed to stay competitive.

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Swedish Edtech Industry is a non-profit industry association that brings together edtech companies providing services and products to the Swedish education market. Currently, the organization has around 100 members from various parts of the digital ecosystem, such as educational publishers, learning platforms, and administrative systems services.