

Education must not fall victim to COVID-19

I have always believed that education is the basis of equality and freedom and the best social uplifting tool. Therefore, I am deeply convinced the issue of education in times of COVID-19 is central to the future of all of us, in developed, emerging and developing countries alike. This is why it was important for me to participate in this SOS education event, carried out on the occasion of the annual United Nations General Assembly.



During the COVID-19 lockdowns earlier this year, schools were closed for more than 90 per cent of the world's student population, leaving at least a third of children completely cut off from their education. Today, hundreds of million students remain affected by school closures. The consequences for their education, protection and well-being are considerable.

“The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated deep inequalities in access to education and digital connectivity.”

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated deep inequalities in access to education, quality learning and above all digital connectivity. This is true in developed countries, where the closure of schools and universities has highlighted the persistence of the digital divide, between those who can afford computers and fast Internet access for everyone in the family and those who only have smartphones or no access at all. Between those who live in bigger houses with gardens and those living in small flats.

“The pandemic could call into question one of the most positive trends seen over the past half-century: the great progresses made in access to education.”

But obviously these inequalities are even more important in developing countries. If these difficulties continue, the future of an entire generation is at risk. This would call into question one of the most positive trends we have seen over the past half-century: the great progresses made regarding

access to education.



According to World Bank data, in 1970 68% of children in low- and middle-income countries attended primary school, this proportion reached 89% in 2018. It is striking that the gap in school enrolment rates between girls and boys, which was 18 percentage points in 1970 in these countries, is only three points today. Moreover, this gap is nil at secondary level and the reverse is true at tertiary level: there are now more women than men in the universities of low- and middle-income countries.

All economists agree that a rise in the level of education is a necessary precondition for the economic take-off of countries, even if not a sufficient one. However, many challenges remain: teaching conditions are often difficult and teaching quality insufficient. Already before COVID-19, more than half of all 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read a simple story. And millions of adolescents are not learning the transferable, digital and entrepreneurial skills to prepare them for the future. We see also a worrying rise in unemployment among young graduates in many countries.

“What has been achieved in education over the last 50 years has made a tremendous contribution to reducing gender inequalities worldwide.”

Still, widespread education favours the establishment of democratic societies that respect human rights, preparing people to exercise an enlightened citizenship. It enables societies in particular to move towards the empowerment of women and girls. What has been achieved in the field of education over the last 50 years has already made a tremendous contribution to reducing gender inequalities worldwide, even if much remains to be done and not just in the developing countries.

Progresses in education in danger

However, all of this is in danger if education is not prioritised in plans to reopen economies. When children miss out on education they are at increased risks of exploitation, violence, abuse and neglect. Children from troubled families face the double burden of losing their education and losing out on the safety that school provides. And girls are at a greater risk of forced marriage and early pregnancy.

As ever, the most vulnerable are paying the heaviest price: those living in poverty or conflict, from ethnic minority groups, with disabilities, and internally displaced or refugee children. As schools remain closed, they fall deeper into deprivation and fall further behind their peers.

We know from recent data that an additional 150 million children could be plunged into poverty due to COVID-19. In July, the World Bank estimated a \$10 trillion loss in global earnings due to the time in school that children have

already missed, highlighting that economic losses will stretch far beyond own families.

“Governments around the globe must prioritise their children when it comes to decisions on re-opening and funding.”

Governments around the globe must prioritise their children – who are the future earners of any society – when it comes to decisions on re-opening and education funding. Helping to popularise this idea was the aim of the event organised with UNICEF.



European Union at the forefront of supporting education worldwide

The European Union has been and will remain at the forefront of supporting education worldwide. It is also the leading international donor when it comes to child support. Through the € 36 billion of the [Team Europe initiative](#) the EU and its Member states are supporting our external partners to fight Covid-19 and its socio-economic consequences. A significant part of that effort goes to children and schools. In our upcoming Comprehensive Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee, we intend also to strengthen our support to digital education and the protection of the most vulnerable children.

I will pay a lot of attention to make sure that all EU external policies continue to attach high priority to education and that we help ensure that all children have an equal start in life. Even in times as difficult as those of Covid-19.

[UN and EU sign agreement to enhance cooperation and strengthen r](#)



29 September 2020, New York—The United Nations and the European Union signed an agreement today in the margins of the 75th session of the General Assembly to enhance cooperation and strengthen collective response in peace operations and crisis management.

The “Framework Agreement Between the United Nations and the European Union for the Provision of Mutual Support in the context of their respective missions and operations in the field” was signed by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Operational Support, Atul Khare, and the Head of EU Delegation to the United Nations, Ambassador Olof Skoog. Building on the success of our joint achievements, this Agreement reaffirms that partnerships are essential to address the growing scale and complexity of challenges to international peace and security.

The Agreement will facilitate operational alignment and enhance complementarity between EU and UN field missions in the areas of logistics, medical, and security support. In particular, this Agreement will enable the UN and EU to expand co-operation in operational support services by building mutual understanding of our respective procedures and structures for the planning and execution of logistics support in missions and operations in the field.

This is also a concrete step forward in advancing the UN’s Action for Peacekeeping Initiative (A4P) and the Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations, reinforcing the principle that strengthened partnerships are vital to effective and efficient mandate delivery.

The Framework Agreement complements existing cooperation arrangements between the two organisations and reflects the mutual commitment of the EU and the UN to multilateralism and a rules-based order. Our joint resolve serves to strengthen strategic and operational collaboration in response to global crises, threats, and challenges that cannot be addressed by individual nations acting alone. Furthermore, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the importance of multilateral action, and how this maximises impact on the ground.

The United Nations and the European Union have progressively increased collaboration in peacekeeping and crisis management and fostered innovative

approaches to co-operation. Initiated in the Western Balkans in 2003, co-operation has since expanded to include a number of theatres in Africa and the Middle East. Today, we closely coordinate our activities i.e. in Somalia, Central African Republic, Libya and Kosovo, and work side-by-side in support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

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The Digital in a fractious world: Europe's way – Speech by President Charles Michel at the FT-ETNO Forum



I am delighted to join this edition of the FT-ETNO. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to close this first session.

I didn't actually choose the title of my speech. But I happily endorsed it. Because Europe will definitely have its own way of becoming a leader of the digital age. So, I'd like to explain why I believe this is within our reach.

Like everyone, we in the European Union have to draw lessons from the Covid crisis. During this global disruption, which has affected absolutely all sectors of life and the economy, we have seen the best and the worst. This also applies to the digital world.

We saw technology helping us stay connected during our confinement. We saw it supporting businesses to maintain some, if not all, activity. We also saw how much the digital gap in our societies increases the inequalities.

And we realised how disinformation can be dangerous and hurtful in times of crisis, when information can be lifesaving, literally.

We also saw that our overdependence on external supply sources, of what seemed to be ordinary goods, constitutes a serious risk to our societies and our economies.

I personally think there's an even more fundamental lesson to be learned from the crisis. In our countries that haven't experienced war for many decades, we simply rediscovered what is most precious in our societies: human life and health.

This is why I'm convinced that well-being must be the focal point of our concern. When I say well-being, I'm thinking of both the individual and the collective well-being. Didn't the crisis remind us that there cannot be life without social life?

Well-being means much more than prosperity, much more than the sacrosanct GDP. Well-being also means a caring society. This should be our new European horizon. In other words: elevating our social market economy to a higher, more human level.

And our digital transformation can, and must, play a key role in this process.

You might have heard or read, in the first weeks of the crisis, that Europe's response was slow. Yet I'm sure most of you, Financial Times readers, received fair and balanced information.

So you know, right from the outset, we took bold monetary and financial measures to support businesses and people – emergency measures worth 540 billion euros.

Then in July, the European Council adopted a ground-breaking budget along with a recovery fund, amounting to 1.8 trillion euros. Of which 750 billion will be raised on the financial markets through European Union bonds. This has been called Europe's "Hamiltonian moment".

This plan is much more than a recovery plan or mere stimulus package. It's a strategy for transforming our societies and our economies. And our Green Deal and Digital Agenda will serve as the backbone.

Two figures speak for themselves: 30% of the 1.8 trillion euros must be invested in climate-related projects. And this week the European Council will most likely decide that 20% of the financial means must be dedicated to Europe's digital transition. Europe's future path will be green. And it will be digital.

Allow me now to focus on the digital and its link with a human-centred society. In the digital domain, like in all aspects of our economy, we want innovation to be at the service of people.

Technological progress is pointless, if it doesn't make people's lives better. We know that digitalisation will usher in enormous progress – in health, mobility, industrial production, and green technologies, to name just a few.

We must make sure these technological developments actually advance the basic values of our European societies, like freedom of speech and privacy.

That's why the European Union was tough when legislating, for instance, on personal data protection. Our experience with the GDPR showed us just how important it is. In the digital sector, by nature the most global one, we wanted to not only regulate our own market, but also make sure our standards set the tone worldwide. By doing this, we are not only protecting our human

and democratic values at home. We are also contributing to spreading these values across the world.

And this is one of my deep convictions: the values that underpin the European digital development will not be a constraint, nor a limitation to our business development. On the contrary: technologies respecting fundamental freedoms, clouds where data are safely stored and encrypted, artificial intelligence that is safe, ethical and trustworthy, these will constitute a global competitive edge for our businesses.

Between the American model of “business above all”, and the Chinese state-controlling authoritarian model, there is plenty of room for an attractive and human-centred model.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, may well be our distinctive way, “Europe’s way”, into the digital revolution.

If we want to set global standards, we must be a leader in digital technologies.

We also need to be strategically autonomous.

In both respects, I have no doubt we are on the right track. And we will act decisively.

Industrial data will be the fuel of tomorrow’s digital developments. And the biggest share of these data is European. [My friend] Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the Internal Market, always says, *“the winners of yesterday might not be the winners of tomorrow when it comes to industrial data. Because the platforms we know, mainly built on a B2C model, are not ready to meet the technical, security and service requirements needed by industry or public authorities”*.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have to act fast and invest in three key areas.

First, data. We need to fully exploit the potential of data. We must create European data storage capacities. And we need to drive forward the development of supercomputers and quantum computing. These clouds must be safe in two critical areas.

Our cybersecurity must be rock-solid: the stored data and our infrastructures must be protected against all threats and attacks. And we must guarantee that data will be used in a transparent and reasonable way. For example, using our health data for research purposes and scientific progress makes sense. But insurance companies using our individual data, with Artificial Intelligence, to select clients and optimise profits is not acceptable.

I’m also convinced that these safe and secure clouds will constitute a “Stored in Europe” brand that will deliver a competitive edge.

Second, semiconductors and microprocessors. These will be the basic elements of the value chains connecting objects, cars, and phones with edge computing. Creating the industrial capacity for these micro-electronics is the key to securing our European digital sovereignty. Today Europe accounts for 10% of global production. We need to reach 20%.

Third: we must accelerate the deployment of high speed and secure connectivity all over Europe. The development of 5G is key to this. This is also crucial to closing the digital gap, an unacceptable obstacle to social integration and, as we have seen during the pandemic, to education.

But we should already look beyond 5G. A low earth orbit satellite project could provide high-speed connectivity everywhere in Europe.

These three industrial priorities will be key to ensuring our strategic autonomy. And digital sovereignty will play a major role.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We, as European authorities, are responsible for creating the conditions for these business innovations. And we are acting. The European Commission will present a proposal for a Digital Services Act at the end of this year. And this week, the European Council will task the Commission to come up with a Digital Compass. It will outline the means and milestones to achieve our digital ambitions by 2030.

We will also ask the Commission to propose a framework for a European Digital Identification, an e-ID. I attach great importance to this project. A reliable and safe digital identity will simplify the lives of citizens. And offer them huge benefits in dealing with public authorities and businesses. It will also nurture more cross-border transactions, and advance the integration and attractiveness of our internal market.

Europe has a strategic card to play in this area. We must set our own standards. Instead of using those set by American and Chinese platforms. Setting our own technological standards has served us well in the past – remember the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM).

And one of Europe's key advantages in shaping global norms is our regulatory power. This extends our influence well beyond our European borders.

Finally, as a more famous "digital speaker", Steve Jobs, used to say: *"One more thing..."*

I must also say a word about fairness in the digital market. Large-scale activities carried out in this area can no longer escape fair taxation. The European Union is committed, alongside the OECD and the G20, to international cooperation to correct this injustice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We want to be a leader in digital. We want to reinforce our strategic autonomy. And we want to be stronger, to build a more prosperous and fairer

world. Thank you.

Council finalises its position on the Horizon Europe package



The Council today finalised its position on the proposed regulation establishing Horizon Europe, the EU framework programme for research and innovation for the years 2021 to 2027 (**Horizon Europe regulation**) and on the proposed decision on the specific programme implementing Horizon Europe (**specific programme decision**).

Today's agreement is an important step forward towards final adoption of Horizon Europe. We now need to make sure with the European Parliament and the Commission that our forward-looking EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation can enter into force in the beginning of the next year. This is our joint task – for the benefit of the European research and innovation community as well as the competitiveness of the EU.

Anja Karliczek, German federal minister of education and research

The main outstanding issue of the Horizon Europe regulation agreed upon today concerns the **internal break-down of Horizon Europe's budget**, including funds to be made available under the EU recovery instrument entitled the Next Generation EU (NGEU). The Council has also agreed on provisions regulating international cooperation and the association of third countries to Horizon Europe as well as provisions ensuring synergies with other EU funding programmes.

As regards the **specific programme decision**, the main amendments to the Commission proposal agreed upon today are mostly of a budgetary nature and reflect those introduced in the Horizon Europe regulation.

Next steps

Today's agreement on the two legislative acts paves the way for finalising negotiations with the European Parliament in view of the swift adoption of the package by the end of the year.

Background

The Horizon Europe regulation, proposed by the Commission in June 2018, establishes the EU framework programme for research and innovation for the

years 2021–2027. It lays down the objectives, the budget, the forms of EU funding and the rules for providing such funding in the field of research and innovation.

The decision on the specific programme implementing Horizon Europe, also proposed by the Commission in June 2018 as part of the Horizon Europe package, sets out the operational objectives and types of activities envisaged for implementing Horizon Europe.

On 4 June 2020, the Commission presented amended proposals for both legal acts to allow additional funding from the EU recovery instrument entitled Next Generation EU (NGEU) to flow to Horizon Europe.

On 21 July 2020, the heads of state or government agreed on the recovery plan for Europe, which combines the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for the years 2021-2027 and the funds to be made available through the NGEU.

[Visit the meeting page](#)

Saudi Arabia: High Representative/Vice-President Borrell meets F



On 29 September, High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud, in Brussels.

They discussed issues of common interest, including EU-Saudi bilateral relations, joint EU-Saudi initiatives in the context of the ongoing Saudi G20 Presidency, as well as recent regional developments.

High Representative Borrell reiterated the EU's intention to strengthen

bilateral engagement and cooperation with Saudi Arabia via the conclusion of a Cooperation Arrangement between the European External Action Service and the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to intensify dialogue on human rights, to which the EU attaches great importance.

High Representative Borrell and Foreign Minister Faisal also discussed the ongoing cooperation between the EU and Saudi Arabia in the response to the coronavirus pandemic in the framework of the Saudi G20 Presidency. They both welcomed the successful international pledging conference held in May, co-chaired by the European Commission and Saudi Arabia as rotating chair, and stressed their commitment to supporting international efforts aimed at accelerating the process of manufacturing the vaccine and ensuring its fair distribution to those in need.

In the framework of the mandate given to him by EU Foreign Ministers, High Representative Borrell reaffirmed the EU's willingness to contribute to de-escalation in the Gulf region, support dialogue and promote a regional political solution. High Representative Borrell also recalled the EU's support to the UN Special Envoy for Yemen and called for all parties to cooperate in bringing the tragic conflict there to an end. The discussion also covered latest developments relating to the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, the Sahel, the Sudanese transition and the Horn of Africa.