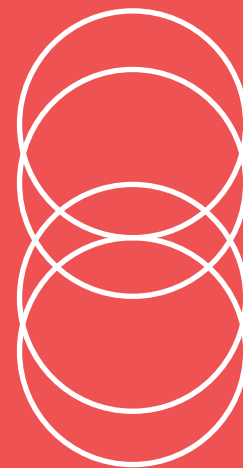# Belarusian education on the way of change

Summary

DIGITAL COMPETENCE IN NEW BELARUS:

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

The importance of digital skills and competences at all the education levels and in all spheres of life is undoubtful today. These facts indicate that the digital competence/literacy development has become a priority for both government bodies and civil society representatives. The digital competence/literacy development is seen in most cases as a purely educational task, and not as a guideline for national policy as a whole. The need to introduce the issue into a broad political context (national, regional and global) is not yet fully understood by the stakeholders.

Vilnius 2021

Беларусское
Образование
Перемен

EUROBELARUS
INTERNATIONAL
CONSORTIUM

ОФИС ПО ОБРАЗОВАНИЮ
Для новой Беларуси

The importance of digital skills and competences at all the education levels and in all spheres of life is undoubtful today. The relevance of the digital competence development is fixed in the strategic plans of the government of Belarus. Civil society organizations are implementing important projects to promote European digital competence framework. These facts indicate that the digital competence/literacy development has become a priority for

both government bodies and civil society representatives. However, the above-mentioned documents and efforts of public associations do not yet "maintain strategic focus". The digital competence/literacy development is seen in most cases as a purely educational task, and not as a guideline for national policy as a whole. The need to introduce the issue into a broad political context (national, regional and global) is not yet fully understood by the stakeholders. *The objective of this document is to initiate a discussion on the principles of designing the national policy for the digital competence development by providing a panorama of political decisions in this area.*

The proposed materials are presented in four sections.

*The first section **"Digital competence and digital literacy as a policy"** offers a strategic perspective on the digital skills' development challenge.*

Digital competence/literacy is a political concept reflecting requests and beliefs about the future needs of society, although questions about what digitalization really means are still unanswered, so digitalization is a "work in progress".

The design of a specific policy in the field of digital competence development involves, first of all, fixing the digital skills deficit associated with the use of technology in such areas as participation in public life, communication with others, performing everyday tasks, research, technological

changes in the labour market, exercise of political rights.

The main directions of relevant policies are to ensure equality of opportunity by closing the digital divide/inequality and investing in improving digital skills for economic growth and competitiveness. The priority selection dictated by the above-mentioned social skills deficit is crucial.

The design of a specific policy in the field of digital competence development involves, first of all, fixing the digital skills deficit associated with the use of technology in such areas as participation in public life, communication with others, performing everyday tasks, research, technological changes in the labour market, exercise of political rights.

*In the second section **"Terminology"**, on the basis of a historical excursion, the understanding of the corresponding concepts' essence is problematized.*

Experts are still debating on whether the terms "digital literacy" and "digital competence" can be considered analogous.

Definitions of digital literacy often refer to research papers rather than to policy documents; while publications defining digital competence cite a wide variety of sources.

Photography Unsplash

The term "digital literacy" is more commonly used in European inclusiveness policies and initiatives. However, its clear interpretation is hampered by the presence of many historically developed concepts of literacy.

The term "digital competence" is more often used in a general educational context and means a shift from a content-(and knowledge)-based assessment approach to a competence-based approach, with an emphasis on "new skills for new jobs".

The use of the term "digital literacy" in research papers is typical for English-speaking countries (United Kingdom, USA), while the digital competence research — for continental countries (Spain, Italy and Scandinavia, etc.). Digital competence publications are strategic and policy-oriented and focus on the professional use of technology in a variety of contexts.

The concept of digital literacy is linked to different historical perspectives, from

technical know-how through cognitive skills to social practices and active interaction with digital content.

A number of researchers offer new perspectives for the interpretation of the body of knowledge and skills necessary for life in digital society. One of them is the use of digital literacy in plural — digital literacies. The plural form emphasizes the ambiguous nature of the term: literacy is seen as a practice positioned in relation to social institutions and power relations that support them.

A complex landscape of definitions and an intricate web of concepts leads to the "lack of transparency" required for educators, employers and citizens in learning process organization and participation in it.

*The third section **"Global strategies and reference models"** provides an overview of the most important projects of international and regional organizations related to the designing the frameworks for digital competence and digital literacy.*

Currently, international and regional organizations are implementing a number of projects related to the search for a common concept of digital competence/

literacy as a conglomerate of knowledge, skills and relationships related to various goals (communication, artistic expression, information management, personal development, etc.), areas (daily life, work, privacy and security, legal aspects) and levels. An important condition for converging positions is the design of reference documents/reference systems/frameworks (European Digital Competence Framework (Dig Comp), UNESCO Model Media and Information Literacy Curriculum, etc.)

Reference competence systems/ frameworks are "artificial" structures that model a complex, constantly evolving reality. At the same time, experts draw attention to the fact that such reference systems/ competence frameworks "are always the result of consultation and negotiation processes and, thus, significantly differ from scientific and mathematical theories." In other words, the structure of reference models is determined, in fact, by the political priorities of the designing institutions.

Reference models are important for policy formulation, goals setting and monitoring (provide a "common language" for identifying key areas and specific competences); planning the educational process, including revision of the curriculum and qualification requirements for educators (describe the competences in detail, as well as, sometimes, the learning outcomes and the levels of proficiency (for example, basic, intermediate, advanced); assessment and certification (design of the credible and

reliable measurement and/or assessment tools. In such cases, the conceptual basis is implemented in the form of a set of questions or tasks that can be applied, for example, to measure the level of digital competence of a person.

Reference competence systems/ frameworks are "artificial" structures that model a complex, constantly evolving reality. At the same time, experts draw attention to the fact that such reference systems/competence frameworks "are always the result of consultation and negotiation processes and, thus, significantly differ from scientific and mathematical theories." In other words, the structure of reference models is determined, in fact, by the political priorities of the designing institutions.

*The fourth section "**Adjustment and application of the reference systems**" is dedicated to featuring a number of specialized digital skills models.*

Skills reference frameworks are widely used to design national digital education strategies, as soon as a neutral regional or global reference system helps to identify decision and priority gaps in program design.

Among the key factors that determine the formats for using reference systems for the policy design of the citizens digital competences development, experts identify: the type of planning (mid-term and long-term business development, political strategies, short-term project initiatives); the available budget (conducting an in-depth and forward-looking analysis of digital transformation that requires significant time and resources investment); the dialogue conducting with multiple stakeholders and the quality of expertise; the lead organization's perception and understanding of the competence issues caused by digital transformation.

On the basis of DigComp, specialized reference systems have been designed: digital competence framework for consumers (DigCompConsumers), for education professionals (DigCompEdu), a reference framework for assessing the digital competence of educational organizations (DigCompOrg). DigComp is a good basis for the design of a specialized digital competence frameworks. The obstacle to using DigComp is the cumbersome structure and the lack of the necessary set of examples for using the model.

Specific competences and levels of digital skills' proficiency are highly dependent on the context: country, development priorities, occupation, etc. This prompted UNESCO experts to design a "path mapping model" — a methodology for creating frameworks for specific specialties in specific areas to help countries, sectors, groups and individuals design strategies and plans to build their own digital literacy paths. This mapping methodology focuses on identifying the competences required for various digital use cases in the short, medium and long term.

The materials proposed for discussion allow us to formulate a number of questions, the search for answers to which seems to be a priority from the point of view of a consistent national policy design for the development of digital competence/literacy of citizens:

The main questions for the development of digital competence/literacy of citizens:

1. Does the available package of plans and programs allow us to conclude that a consistent policy in the field of digital competence development is being implemented in the country?

2. Are the actions being taken in line with the context and the actual challenges? To what extent the international reference models are/should be considered within the taken measures?

3. What needs to be done to promote the design of digital competence/literacy policies?

4. What conceptual frameworks fit the historical and political context of Belarus?

5. What is more effective for the design of a coherent policy: a clear conceptual framework and sensitivity to diverse contexts (individual and communities' cases) or ignoring semantic/ideological differences when taking technocratic decisions?

6. Are we well familiar with the reference models' specifics?

7. Why are we often unable to consolidate variety of expectations why developing reference models for digital competence/literacy?

8. Should we relate to the models' structure as to objective requirements?

9. Is there need for a specialized framework for every sphere of life? If not, how to identify priority areas?

10. What strategy to choose for the design of a specialized digital competence/literacy framework?