ETUCE-EFEE Joint Programme of Actions on Digital Transition in Higher Education and Research

Adopted by the ESSDE working group meeting on 1 October 2025

With this joint Programme of Actions, ETUCE and EFEE aim to identify, address, and act upon the evolving trends in working conditions related to the digital transition within the higher education and research sector.

Through collaborative efforts, this programme aims to build on opportunities and to address immediate challenges, while setting the foundation for sustainable progress in the years to come, towards more collegial and effective management, fairer, more inclusive and supportive working conditions in higher education and research.

1. Background

Digitalisation in higher education and research sector can bring opportunities related to increased access and inclusivity, enhanced teaching and learning, flexible working conditions, reduction of operational costs but also internationalisation of staff. However, it also poses challenges with regard to transforming academic roles by reshaping responsibilities, affecting academics' workload and their professional autonomy, raising privacy concerns, as well as challenging intellectual property rights and necessitating continuous upskilling in digital tools. A prosperous digital transition should support and facilitate the work of academics and researchers to provide high quality teaching, learning and research. Social partners intend to work together so that digitalisation contributes to reducing administrative burden and costs, improving communication paths and collaboration, potential increased inclusivity for students. Nevertheless, we also intend to address the potential risks of the "uberisation" process of higher education, i.e. the raise of precarious jobs and poorer employment conditions, implementing policies that ensure fair contracts and working conditions in blended and online teaching.

While digitalisation can contribute to research innovation, increased efficiency and better community engagement, it is also essential to develop strategies to combat digital-era mental health challenges, such as screen fatigue and isolation, while fostering a balanced digital-physical environment for overall well-being. Equitable access to digital resources, by providing high-speed internet, devices, and IT training, is crucial to addressing gaps that create inequalities among academic staff and students. This makes a case for the promotion of digital literacy by developing essential IT and communication skills while strengthening higher education's role in fostering informed, responsible, and engaged digital citizens.

2. Guiding Principles

ETUCE and EFEE agree on these guiding principles for the digital transition in the higher education and research sector:

Governance: Align a common vision, objectives and values, and coordinate planning for positive impact of digital transition;

Quality: Maintain high standards of quality teaching and research;

Inclusivity: Involve management, academics and other education personnel in the design and implementation of digital tools and practices;

Equity: Address intersectional disparities in access to digital tools and skills to reduce inequalities;

Well-being: Prevent psycho-social risks and prioritise the mental and physical health of academic staff and students in the digital age;

Sustainability: Promote practices that ensure a balanced integration of digital and physical work environments;

Accountability: Establish measurable actions and commitments when developing and implementing digital transition.

3. Commitments

ETUCE and EFEE and their respective members agree on the following actions to be implemented at European, national, regional and local level with the aim of building on opportunities and mitigating the impact of the digital transition on working conditions of academics and researchers in the higher education and research sector:

a) Unfolding Opportunities

1) Ensure equitable access to digital learning and research platforms for all students, educators, and researchers, including highly talented individuals, marginalised or remote populations.
2) Guide the design and deployment of innovative, flexible digital learning environments (e.g., blended learning, virtual labs, adaptive learning tools).
3) Use digital tools to strengthen international research collaboration, mobility, and knowledge sharing across disciplines and borders.

b) Updating Professional Development and Training

1) Promote the integration of digital and AI literacy in teacher training programmes and continuous professional development (CPD). Emphasise ethical use, impact assessments, and fostering critical thinking about AI-enabled technologies.
2) Promote access for all staff to free, high-quality training on digital and AI tools related to work during regular working hours.
3) Prioritise investments in digital infrastructure and provide ongoing training opportunities for educational and research staff.

c) Safeguarding Fair Working Conditions in the Digital Era

1) Ensure that the integration of digital and AI tools respects the autonomy of researchers and academics.
2) Inform academics about the main features of AI tools used by educational institutions and guarantee compliance with the AI Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689).
3) Prevent AI systems being used to make high-stakes decisions such as performance evaluation or recruitment.
4) Guarantee the respect of intellectual property rights of academics and researchers and their educational activities, such as online classes.
5) Address the physical and mental health impacts of technology, preserve work-life balance, including the right to disconnect from digital platforms.
6) Provide transparency and ethical use of educational data by digital and AI systems, and advocate for accountability in cases of misuse.

d) Promoting Equity and Accessibility

1) Implement measures that bridge the digital divide by providing universal access to digital tools, ensuring equitable opportunities for disadvantaged students and staff.
2) Take action to mitigate biases and discrimination in digital and AI systems, particularly in datasets and decision-making processes.

e) Improving Occupational Health and Safety

1) Encourage the adoption of institutional strategies to mitigate digital-related stress, support mental health and occupational health and safety.
2) Promote environments where digital tools complement rather than replace human interaction and social learning.

f) Fostering Ethical and Transparent Use

1) Encourage dialogue around transparency of the algorithms and data sources used in AI systems, ensuring fairness and accountability, also advocating for relevant legislation.
2) Provide appropriate opportunities for reflection, collegial governance and collaborative leadership, involving management, academics, researchers and students, whether digital or AI tools represent the best and most suitable solution to their needs.
3) Ensure that management, academics, researchers, and students participate in designing and implementing digital and AI systems in education.
4) Establish and promote regular arenas for dialogue between management, academics and researchers, students, and administrators to ensure inclusive decision-making processes.

g) Promoting Awareness and Advocacy Campaigns

1) Promote legal frameworks that help to ensure digital systems respect workers' rights and ethical standards.
2) Inform management, academics and researchers about the potential benefits and risks of digital and AI-enabled technologies, focusing on their responsible use.

h) Supporting Sustainability and Environmental Responsibility

1) Favour the uptake of sustainable digital and AI systems with minimal environmental impact, focusing on energy efficiency and reduced hardware waste.
2) Align technology integration with broader goals of educating students and academic staff about environmental challenges posed by emerging technologies.

i) Developing Research and Evidence-Based Policy

1) Conduct or support the development of studies on the effects of digital and AI-enabled technologies on higher education institutions, academics and researchers' recruitment, workload, autonomy, intellectual property rights, and health. In particular, on the long-term implications of these technologies on pedagogy, innovation, working conditions, and diversity and inclusion.
2) Promote research on digital tools and AI's influence on basic human skills (e.g., critical thinking, creativity) and ethical concerns related to biases in datasets and algorithmic decision-making.

j) Monitoring and Transposition

1) Implement tools to monitor both positive and negative effects of digitalisation on management and working conditions of all staff, and adjust actions based on feedback from management, academics and researchers.
2) Regularly update policies and programmes to foster implementation of innovations and to address risks or challenges posed by technological advancements.

k) Implementation and Follow-Up

1) Develop national action plans to translate these commitments into actionable steps. It is advised to conduct triennial reviews to evaluate progress and address emerging challenges, and publish a report documenting successes, innovations, trends, challenges, and lessons learned.
2) In three years' time since the adoption of this programme of actions, consider updating this text in light of the most relevant developments.