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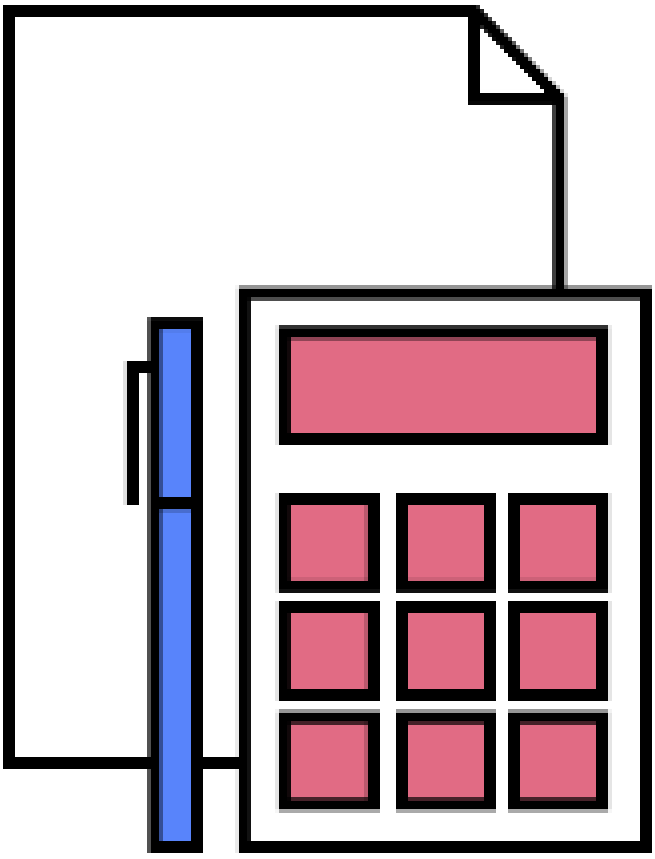

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INDEX

Executive Summary 3
Introduction and Scope 3
Why this matters 5
Four Principles 6
Six priorities for Digital Education across the learning ecosystem 7
Collaborative roles in the learning ecosystem 9
Strategic directions for action 10
Shared responsibility 13
Monitoring, Evaluation and continuous Improvement 13
Background and Evidence 13
How was the OpenEU Innovation Agenda on Digital Education developed? 14

Digital Education for living learning ecosystems

An OpenEU White Paper for Collaborative Innovation Across Education, Training and Lifelong Learning

This document is intended as a practical reference for dialogue, planning and partnership. Readers are invited to identify which priorities are most relevant to their context, where responsibilities intersect, and which actions can be tested, evaluated and shared with other actors in the learning ecosystem.

Executive Summary

Digital transformation is reshaping how people learn, work and participate in society. While much attention has focused on individual sectors, effective digital education requires collaboration across the entire learning ecosystem, including schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education institutions (HEIs), professional training organisations, employers, public authorities and communities.

The OpenEU Innovation Agenda identifies six priorities:

1. Learning and Pedagogical Innovation
2. Digital Infrastructure
3. Empowering Educators, Learners and Other Participants
4. Ethics and Responsible Use of Technology
5. Governance and Leadership
6. Data Security and Digital Systems

The Innovation Agenda identified these thematic areas for European higher education, and here we examine how they may be adapted as lenses for dialogue and action across the wider learning ecosystem. Together, these priorities provide a practical framework for improving learning, strengthening inclusion, supporting innovation and preparing citizens for lifelong learning.

Three starting points for organisations

- Review whether technology investments clearly support learning goals.
- Assess organisational artificial intelligence (AI), digital, data and cybersecurity competence needs.
- Establish clear responsibilities for ethical AI use, data governance and cybersecurity.

Introduction and Scope

The OpenEU Innovation Agenda on Digital Education was developed to guide digital innovation in higher education. This White Paper builds on its evidence-based

recommendations by contextualising their relevance for the wider learning ecosystem - the network of schools, vocational education and training providers, higher education institutions, professional training organisations, employers, public authorities and communities that shape learning throughout life.

By extending this perspective beyond higher education, the White Paper provides a framework to support reflection, dialogue and action among stakeholders committed to lifelong learning and digital education. It recognises that preparing people to learn, work and participate actively in society is a shared responsibility, requiring coordinated action, attention to different local and regional contexts, and collaboration across education, training, employment and public policy.

The OpenEU Innovation Agenda on Digital Education identifies six interdependent priorities that support this shared ambition: pedagogical innovation through digital practices; intelligent digital infrastructure; empowerment of educators and learners; ethics in digital transformation; institutional support and governance; and safeguarding data and modernising systems.

The central message is that effective digital transformation depends on shared conditions for action across the learning ecosystem. Pedagogy, infrastructure, competences, ethics, governance, data, cybersecurity and learner support need to be planned together as part of a coordinated approach.

FROM THE INNOVATION AGENDA	**POLICY AND PARTNERSHIP IMPLICATION**
Pedagogy through digital practices	Use digital tools to strengthen learning processes, feedback, collaboration, inclusion and learner agency - the ability of learners to make informed choices, take responsibility for their learning and participate actively in their learning pathway.
Intelligent digital infrastructure	Build interoperable, accessible, secure and sustainable infrastructures that can support cooperation across providers.
Empowering educators and students	Strengthen the agency, judgement and capabilities of educators, learners and other participants so that they can understand, shape and critically engage with digital education. This includes role-specific AI, data, information and cybersecurity literacy, as well as a rich diversity of soft skills: self- and co-regulation, critical and metacognitive judgement, collaboration and co-design, and the capacity to decide when and how technologies should be used.
Ethics in digital transformation	Make autonomy, transparency, equity, privacy, accountability and contestability operational requirements. In this context, contestability means that learners, educators or staff can question, review or challenge decisions supported by digital systems or AI.
Institutional support and governance	Align strategy with workload, assessment rules, procurement, professional development, quality assurance and long-term investment.
Safeguarding data and modernising systems	Treat privacy, cybersecurity, data governance and legacy-system modernisation as conditions for innovation and trust.

This White Paper translates the Innovation Agenda into strategic orientation for policymakers, school leaders, training providers, municipalities, employers and intermediary organisations. It encourages stakeholders to use the Innovation Agenda as a common reference for dialogue, partnership and decision-making, while adapting its priorities to their own institutional and territorial realities.

Ultimately, this White Paper invites stakeholders to reflect collectively on how digital innovation can strengthen lifelong learning, address the evolving needs of society and the world of work, and foster collaboration across schools, vocational education and training, higher education, professional training providers, employers and public authorities. It aims to support resilient, inclusive and future-oriented learning ecosystems, where knowledge, research and practice continuously inform and strengthen one another.

AUDIENCE GROUP	MAIN REASON TO READ IT
Schools and school leadership	To connect digital education with teacher capacity, safe AI use, learner support, inclusion, assessment and transitions to further learning.
VET and adult learning providers	To align digital provision with authentic tasks, work-based learning, modular pathways, credible assessment and employer engagement.
Professional training companies	To strengthen quality, transparency and evidence in digitally supported training, including AI, data and cybersecurity literacy.
Municipalities and regional structures	To coordinate local access, infrastructure gaps, partnerships, regional skills needs and support for schools, VET, higher education and employers.
Employers, Human Resources departments and industrial networks	To move from signalling skills shortages to co-designing learning contexts, workplace evidence, mentoring and support for worker-learners.
Higher education institutions	To share research-informed digital education expertise, quality assurance experience, lifelong learning pathways, and capacity building with other sectors.
Policymakers and public authorities	To set enabling conditions: funding, regulation, infrastructure, quality, responsible AI, data governance, interoperability and inclusion.
Learner and community representatives	To defend agency, accessibility, contestability, voice and practical usability in digital education decisions.
Intermediary bodies and networks	To translate priorities into standards, peer learning, communities of practice, stakeholder dialogue and evidence sharing.

Why this matters

Different stakeholders face different challenges, but all benefit from stronger cooperation:

- Schools need support for responsible AI use, teacher development and learner inclusion.

- VET providers need stronger links between learning and workplace skills.
- Employers need access to talent with relevant digital and transversal competences.
- Municipalities need coordinated approaches to infrastructure, inclusion and regional development.
- Higher education institutions contribute expertise in research, innovation, and quality assurance.

The six priorities of the OpenEU Innovation Agenda help these stakeholders work together more effectively and create greater social and economic impact.

Four Principles

The six priorities that follow should not be read as leading to separate activities. The OpenEU Innovation Agenda identifies four principles, presented in the table below, that cut across all of them and should guide how each priority is interpreted and applied: cognitive ecosystems, emerging technologies, empowerment of participants and ethics.

When applying any of the six priorities, stakeholders are invited to ask four questions:

- Ecosystem: Who and what participates, how are roles and relationships affected?
- Technology: What educational, organizational, and social aspects are enabled or constrained?
- Empowerment: Whose agency and capacity to act are strengthened or weakened?
- Ethics: What rights, responsibilities, inequalities and accountability mechanisms are involved?

PRINCIPLE	CLARIFICATION
Cognitive ecosystems	Learning emerges through relationships among people, technologies, institutions, practices and contexts. Digital education should therefore consider how these participants interact, how their roles change and how knowledge and decisions are jointly produced.
Emerging technologies	Artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, data analytics, and other developments should be examined in terms of their educational, organisational and social contributions and consequences, rather than treated as ends in themselves.
Empowerment of participants	Digital transformation should increase the capacity of educators, learners and other participants to exercise agency, develop independent judgement, collaborate, co-create and influence the systems and practices in which they participate.
Ethics	Privacy, transparency, accountability, accessibility, equity, auditability, and freedom from technological or economic lock-in should be addressed throughout design, procurement, implementation and evaluation.

Six priorities for Digital Education across the learning ecosystem

The OpenEU Innovation Agenda identifies six interconnected priorities that strengthen the capacity of the wider learning ecosystem to support digital transformation. Together, they provide a shared framework for collaboration across education, training, employment and public policy, with each priority reinforcing the others to build the collective capacity needed for effective, inclusive and sustainable digital education. The non-HEI examples in this section are intended as illustrative pathways for dialogue, building on the primary HEI evidence base.

1- Learning and Pedagogical Innovation

Strengthening learner-centred pedagogies that use digital technologies to enhance learning, foster lifelong learning, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and inclusion, while promoting learner agency and the ethical integration of artificial intelligence. Learner agency refers to the ability of learners to make informed choices, take responsibility for their learning, and participate actively in decisions that affect their educational pathway. Here, human-AI co-learning ecosystems are understood as environments in which human and artificial participants may act as co-agents in learning activities, with their roles and agency varying according to context, while educational purposes, accountability and safeguards remain under human and institutional governance.

Across sectors, digital pedagogy should support learners in planning, practising, receiving feedback, collaborating, evidencing progress and making informed use of AI. In schools, this may mean formative feedback and responsible digital work habits. In vocational education and training (VET) and professional training, it may mean authentic tasks, workplace evidence and practice-rich learning. In higher education, it may mean research-informed digital assessment, open and collaborative learning, micro-credentials and lifelong learning pathways.

2 - Infrastructure: enabling connected, secure and trusted collaboration

Secure, interoperable and inclusive digital infrastructures provide the foundation for connected learning ecosystems that promote equity, trust and collaboration. Supported by shared standards, trusted data governance, and continuity of service, they enable equitable access to digital learning opportunities, the responsible integration of artificial intelligence, flexible learning pathways, and secure data sharing across education, training, and employment.

For regional actors and policymakers, infrastructure means connectivity, accessibility, procurement, interoperability, identity, data governance, and continuity of service. For education and training providers, it means selecting systems that support pedagogy and cooperation rather than locking learning into disconnected platforms.

3 - Empowering people and organisations for digital education

Empowering educators, learners and other participants means more than enabling them to use digital technologies. They must also be able to understand, question and shape how technologies affect learning, work, and participation. It requires development of soft skills for increased agency, independent judgement, self-

regulation and co-regulation, collaboration and meaningful participation in the design and governance of digital education.

Role-specific competences are an essential part of this empowerment. A schoolteacher, VET trainer, HR learning manager, municipal officer, university lecturer, student, adult learner and IT administrator do not need identical preparation. Each needs the knowledge, confidence, authority and support required to make informed decisions, while also being able to discuss opportunities, risks, responsibilities and boundaries across the learning ecosystem. Tool demonstrations are insufficient unless linked to assessment, inclusion, data protection, learning design and professional judgement.

4 - Ethics: ensuring trustworthy and human-centred digital education

Ensuring that digital education is developed and implemented in ways that are trustworthy, transparent, inclusive and human-centred. This includes promoting the ethical and responsible use of artificial intelligence, protecting fundamental rights, ensuring human oversight, safeguarding privacy and data, reducing bias, fostering equity and inclusion, and creating regular opportunities for staff, learners and partners to discuss how digital technologies are used, what risks they may create and how responsibilities are shared.

Ethical digital education requires people to understand what systems do, what data they use, what decisions they influence, and how decisions can be challenged or corrected. Learners and educators should retain meaningful agency. Vulnerable or under-represented groups should be considered from the earliest stages of design, procurement and implementation.

5 - Governance: enabling leadership, collaboration and sustainable transformation

Strengthening governance and leadership to create the conditions for coordinated, sustainable and evidence-informed digital transformation across the learning ecosystem. This requires digital transformation to be approached as an organisational and cultural process, supported by shared strategies, cross-sector partnerships, continuous professional development, assessment and workload policies, and protected opportunities to test new approaches, with time, support, ethical safeguards and clear evaluation criteria. Effective governance also promotes ethically and pedagogically informed decisions about technology, encourages open collaboration and responsible data sharing, and ensures that digital transformation is sustained through long-term planning, evaluation and responsible management.

Governance becomes credible when it reaches timetables, budgets, procurement, workload, recognition, professional development, assessment rules and quality assurance. Schools need leadership time and teacher support. VET providers need alignment between curriculum, workplace learning and assessment. Professional training companies need quality and transparency. HEIs are encouraged to explore ways of recognising digital education work as scholarly and professional labour. Public authorities should support long-term capacity-building, rather than relying mainly on short project cycles.

6 - Data and Digital Systems: ensuring security, resilience and trust

Ensuring that data and digital systems are secure, interoperable, resilient and aligned with educational values to support sustainable digital transformation

across the learning ecosystem. This includes strengthening cybersecurity, promoting responsible and ethical data use, modernising legacy systems, adopting open and interoperable standards, and developing the knowledge, awareness and governance needed to protect learners, institutions and digital services. Together, these capabilities create the trusted conditions needed for innovation, collaboration and lifelong learning to develop safely.

Modernising digital systems means making data flows transparent, clarifying roles and responsibilities, embedding privacy and security by design, strengthening authentication and incident response, ensuring the responsible management of external technology providers, and enabling organisations to explain how data inform decisions that remain subject to human oversight and accountability.

Collaborative roles in the learning ecosystem

Digital innovation in education depends on sustained collaboration between higher education, public authorities, industry and the wider learning ecosystem. Schools, vocational education and training providers, professional training organisations, employers and local communities contribute practical knowledge about educational contexts, workforce needs and societal challenges, ensuring that innovation responds to real needs and opportunities.

Higher education contributes by connecting education, research and innovation through the co-design, experimentation and scientific validation of new approaches, generating evidence that informs policy and supports the continuous improvement of digital education across sectors.

This collaboration strengthens the capacity of the learning ecosystem to develop, implement and evaluate digital innovation, ensuring technological change is driven by educational value, societal needs and evidence-based decision-making.

ACTOR	AREAS OF INFLUENCE	KEY PARTNERS
School leaders and administrators	Teacher development; safe AI guidance; inclusion; assessment expectations; communication with families; data protection routines.	Municipalities, teacher networks, VET, higher education outreach teams, learner support services and data protection specialists.
Teachers	Learning design; feedback; formative assessment; classroom norms for AI; learner agency; early identification of barriers.	School leadership, digital support staff, peers, learner representatives and families or carers where appropriate.
VET and adult-learning providers	Authentic tasks; modular pathways; workplace evidence; assessment credibility; trainer capacity; learner support.	Employers, chambers or sectoral bodies, municipalities, higher education partners and public employment or skills agencies.
Professional training companies	Quality criteria; evidence of learning transfer; transparent use of AI; support for adult learners; data and cybersecurity practices.	Client organisations, human resources departments, sectoral networks, certification bodies and public authorities.

ACTOR	AREAS OF INFLUENCE	KEY PARTNERS
Municipalities and regional structures	Access mapping; local connectivity; coordination of providers; inclusion measures; regional skills intelligence; partnership convening.	Schools, VET, HEIs, employers, civil society, regional/national agencies and city or rural networks.
Employers and human resources departments	Time for learning; workplace problems; mentoring; recognition of learning; skills intelligence; responsible use of employee learning data.	Training providers, VET, HEIs, worker representatives, sectoral networks and public authorities.
Higher education institutions	Research-informed guidance; quality assurance; lifelong learning; micro-credentials; teacher/trainer development; evaluation of pilots.	Schools, VET, employers, municipalities, policy bodies, professional networks and learner representatives.
Policy makers and public authorities	Funding; regulation; interoperability; data governance; responsible AI policy; inclusion requirements; quality frameworks.	Institutional leaders, regional structures, social partners, learner representatives, technical experts and quality assurance bodies.
Learner and community representatives	Voice; identification of barriers; scrutiny of fairness; feedback on usability; defence of agency and contestability.	Institutions, local authorities, employers, support services and advocacy organisations.
Intermediary networks and quality assurance bodies	Guidance; standards; peer learning; communities of practice; evidence sharing; cross-sector translation.	All above actors, especially where smaller institutions lack internal capacity.

Strategic directions for action

The following strategic directions translate the HEI-focused priorities of the Innovation Agenda into an exploratory framework for policy and institutional action. They are intended to support strategic reflection and decision-making across schools, vocational education and training, higher education, professional training organisations, employers and public authorities. They provide common directions while allowing implementation to be adapted to different educational, institutional and regional contexts.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION	WHY THIS MATTERS	WHAT DECISION MAKERS CAN DO
Place pedagogy at the centre of digital innovation by promoting learner agency, lifelong learning and the responsible integration of AI.	Digital technologies create educational value when they improve learning, strengthen inclusion, support feedback and help learners	• Review teaching, learning and assessment policies to ensure that digital tools and AI serve clear educational goals. • Support teachers and trainers in designing activities where AI improves feedback, reflection and learner support. • Encourage schools, VET providers, higher education institutions and training

STRATEGIC DIRECTION	WHY THIS MATTERS	WHAT DECISION MAKERS CAN DO
	participate actively in their own learning.	organisations to share and evaluate pedagogical practices. • Promote learning pathways that help learners move between school, VET, higher education, professional training and work-based learning. • Promote age-appropriate digital well-being practices for primary and secondary education students, including screen-time management, safe online behaviour and balanced use of digital tools in learning activities.
Develop secure, interoperable and accessible digital infrastructures that support collaboration across the learning ecosystem.	Digital infrastructure shapes access, cooperation, learner mobility, data protection and the ability of institutions to work together.	• Include interoperability, sustainability, accessibility, privacy and cybersecurity requirements in procurement and investment decisions. • Avoid digital systems that lock institutions into closed platforms or prevent data and credentials from being shared responsibly. • Coordinate infrastructure planning across schools, VET providers, municipalities, higher education institutions and public authorities. • Plan the gradual modernisation of legacy systems that limit cooperation, transparency or secure data flows.
Empower educators, learners and other participants through agency, independent judgement and role-specific competence development.	Digital transformation depends on participants who can understand, question and shape digital practices within their own learning, professional, and decision-making contexts. Competence development must be accompanied by agency, participation, professional judgement and opportunities to influence practice.	• Involve educators, learners and other workplace participants in the co-design and evaluation of digital practices. • Identify what different groups need to know: school leaders, teachers, trainers, municipal officers, HR staff, learners, IT teams and policy actors. • Integrate AI, data protection, cybersecurity and digital pedagogy into professional development plans. • Develop critical, metacognitive, collaborative and self- and co-regulation capabilities alongside technical literacies. • Ensure that participants have the time, authority and support needed to exercise professional and educational judgement. • Recognise time spent on digital course design, assessment redesign and learner support as part of professional work. • Review whether digital systems expand or constrain participants' agency,

STRATEGIC DIRECTION	WHY THIS MATTERS	WHAT DECISION MAKERS CAN DO
		including their capacity to question, adapt or decline. • Create cross-sector learning opportunities involving schools, VET, higher education, employers and public authorities.
Embed ethics, transparency and human oversight into the governance and use of digital technologies.	Trustworthy digital education depends on protecting rights, promoting equity and ensuring that people remain responsible for decisions supported by digital systems or AI.	• Establish clear procedures to assess ethical risks before introducing AI or data-intensive systems. • Require transparency, accessibility, human oversight and accountability in technology procurement and implementation. • Define who is responsible when AI-supported tools influence assessment, learner support, progression or workplace learning. • Create mechanisms that allow learners, educators and staff to question or challenge automated or AI-supported decisions.
Strengthen leadership, governance and partnerships to sustain digital transformation over time.	Digital transformation is an organisational and cultural process. It requires leadership, resources, staff development, partnerships and continuous improvement.	• Align digital education strategies with budgets, staffing, workload, quality assurance and institutional planning. • Build partnerships between schools, VET providers, higher education institutions, municipalities, employers and community organisations. • Create protected opportunities to test new approaches, with time, support, safeguards and evaluation criteria. • Use evidence from pilots, outreach activities, local partnerships and cross-sector Communities of Practice (CoPs) to inform future policy and institutional decisions, empowering teachers and trainers to share grassroots digital practices and build a self-sustaining culture of innovation.
Ensure secure, resilient and well-governed data and digital systems as foundations for trustworthy digital education.	Secure and well-governed data systems are essential for trust, continuity, interoperability, privacy and responsible innovation.	• Establish clear responsibilities for data governance, cybersecurity and incident response across the organisation or territory. • Make data flows transparent, including what data are collected, who has access and how they inform decisions. • Promote privacy and security from the start when digital services are designed, purchased or implemented.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION	WHY THIS MATTERS	WHAT DECISION MAKERS CAN DO
		• Strengthen the responsible management of external technology providers, including contractual requirements, monitoring and accountability.

Shared responsibility

Innovation is strengthened when research, policy and practice are co-created, continuously evaluated and shared across the learning ecosystem.

Sustainable progress depends on collaboration between educators, learners, institutions, employers, policymakers and communities. The most successful initiatives are often those that begin with small, practical actions, are evaluated carefully and are then strengthened through partnership and shared learning. By taking action within their own sphere of influence while working together across the learning ecosystem, stakeholders can contribute to more inclusive, resilient and future-oriented digital education for all.

Monitoring, Evaluation and continuous Improvement

Sustainable digital transformation requires continuous monitoring, evaluation and organisational learning. Organisations should look beyond the adoption of digital technologies and assess whether these initiatives improve learning, inclusion, teaching and training practices, staff capacity and institutional resilience. Using data and evidence to monitor progress, identify challenges and refine strategies helps digital education respond to changing learner needs, technological developments and societal expectations.

Background and Evidence

OpenEU is the first pan-European alliance of open and distance universities, established under the European Universities Initiative to strengthen cooperation in digital, open and inclusive higher education across Europe. Bringing together universities, research institutions and associated partners, the Alliance aims to widen access to high-quality higher education, promote lifelong learning, and foster innovation in teaching, learning and research through digital transformation.

Building on the complementary expertise of its partner institutions, OpenEU provides a collaborative ecosystem where education, research and innovation are developed jointly to address the evolving needs of learners, society and the labour market. Through this shared commitment, the Alliance contributes to shaping a more connected, resilient and inclusive European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

It should be noted that, while the empirical evidence base of the OpenEU Innovation Agenda derives primarily from higher education institutions, the applications to other educational sectors discussed in this White Paper are presented as conceptual extensions intended to encourage broader ecosystem dialogue.

How was the OpenEU Innovation Agenda on Digital Education developed?

To identify the strategic priorities for innovation and digital transformation in European higher education, the OpenEU Alliance established the Think and Do Tank (TaDT), an international panel bringing together 82 experts from across Europe and beyond. The panel included researchers, higher education educators, institutional leaders, representatives from the business sector and other organisations, as well as higher education students. This international panel conducted a consultation process: an initial round invited all the experts to contributed, followed by further rounds with a 30-member core group. Participants contributed at different stages through a structured, evidence-informed process designed to identify and assess emerging strategic priorities for the future of digital education.

The Innovation Agenda was developed using a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first phase was exploratory, by combining structured and open-ended questions, drawing on 53 valid participant responses to identify the main opportunities, challenges and emerging trends shaping digital education. Participants were invited to share their perspectives openly, allowing an initial set of priority themes to emerge. These contributions were then organised into thematic categories, providing the foundation for the second phase of the study.

Subsequent phases applied the Delphi method, a well-established methodology for supporting decision-making in complex contexts through cycle of expert consultation and identification of priorities. Over successive consultation rounds, participants proposed priorities, refined the panel's aggregated responses, and assessed them through a structured prioritisation round. This iterative process helped clarify and organize contributions, refine priorities, and identify the issues considered most relevant by the expert community. In the final round, 16 of the core participants evaluated the remaining 49 proposals. Only twenty-six priorities reached a predefined consensus threshold of 70%, and thus were included in the Innovation Agenda, ensuring that the final recommendations reflect broadly shared expert perspectives rather than individual opinions.

In parallel, participants' contributions were examined through qualitative analysis to understand not only which priorities emerged, but also the reasoning underpinning them. These findings were complemented by quantitative analysis, used to measure the level of agreement achieved for each priority.

Finally, the findings were systematically examined against relevant European and international policy and competence frameworks for digital education, including the European Digital Education Action Plan, the DigComp, DigCompEdu and DigCompOrg frameworks, and European ethical and regulatory frameworks, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This process of bringing consultation evidence, analysing expert consensus and the European policy frameworks, supports the strategic relevance and credibility of the recommendations presented.