EAEA Statement on the European Year for Digital Citizenship Education 2025

For Information

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS (EAEA)

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Key Recommendations

For digital citizenship education (DCE) to truly serve democratic, inclusive, and lifelong learning principles, it must:
- Acknowledge adult and lifelong learning as integral to DCE, rather than an afterthought
- Ensure democratic ownership of digital education, reducing the reliance on corporate platforms and commercialized digital literacy initiatives, including AI
- Critically evaluate digital education policies
- Create real participatory spaces for civil society and non-formal educators in shaping the implementation of EYDCE 2025 and its legacy.

EAEA welcomes the launch of the European Year for Digital Citizenship Education (EYDCE) 2025, recognizing the importance of fostering critical engagement in digital spaces, democratic participation, and literacy beyond technical skills. However, we remain concerned that the initiative continues to reflect a limited, formal education-centered approach, sidelining the role of lifelong learning and non-formal education in shaping active, critical, and responsible digital citizens.

While EYDCE highlights the urgency of digital literacy, media education, and civic participation, it risks becoming another top-down policy effort unless it actively integrates community- driven, democratic approaches to digital education and moves beyond resilience-based narratives toward a call for structural change.

Digital Citizenship is Not Neutral: Who Owns the Digital Space?

Throughout the EYDCE 2025 launch discussions, speakers acknowledged that digital citizenship education is not merely about technical skills—it is about power, participation, and agency in digital spaces.

However, what remains unspoken is who gets to define these spaces and whose interests they serve. EAEA's working group on digitalisation and democracy concluded in its context paper published in 2021 that if digital citizenship is truly about democracy, then it must address the structures that shape our digital environment: corporate monopolies, algorithmic control, surveillance capitalism, and data commodification.

"We are not equal at all the other stages of life, how can we believe that we will easily be in the digital world? [...] DCE is not a noun, it is a verb, it is a work in progress, it is a lifelong learning commitment"
- Patrick Pencixs

The current approach largely assumes a neutral digital environment, ignoring the economic and political forces shaping digital participation. As it goes, although political context is, at least in part, recognised, there is little discussion about who sets the rules of engagement in digital citizenship. The risk is that DCE becomes another layer of passive compliance rather than a framework for active digital democracy.

If the European Year for Digital Citizenship Education is to be more than symbolic, it must question and dismantle the commercial and institutional structures that dictate access, control, and visibility online.

Yet, the Council of Europe's framework for DCE remains largely focused on individual responsibility rather than systemic accountability. The risk here is that digital citizenship is framed not as a process of reclaiming control over our digital lives but as an effort to mold individuals into "responsible users" who comply with pre-existing digital norms. This lack of political clarity is evident in the absence of discussions on how digital citizenship intersects with issues of class, migration, accessibility, and digital labour. If digital citizenship is to be meaningful, it must be contextualized within broader struggles for social justice and democratic participation, rather than reduced to a set of generic competencies or school-based curricula.

Lifelong Learning is Non-Negotiable: The Digital Divide is Not Just Generational

One of the most glaring weaknesses in the launch of EYDCE 2025 was the very minimal representation of the role of adult learning and non-formal education in digital citizenship. Despite occasional mentions of lifelong learning, the discussions overwhelmingly focused on primary and secondary education, reinforcing the assumption that digital literacy is something to be "taught" to children rather than something that must be continually re-learned, adapted, and critically examined across one's lifetime.

EAEA strongly believes that digital literacy and citizenship should not be left to school curricula alone. The current digital skills gap is not just a generational issue; it is a structural failure that disproportionately affects older learners, marginalized communities, and individuals with limited access to formal education.

Growing concerns about the increasing digitalisation and the simultaneous reduction of non-digital services, leading to the exclusion of many groups of people from social life, bank transactions, the use of public transport, and other spheres of life and public services, have been expressed in the major EU-wide campaign "Right to Offline", led by EAEA member Lire et Ecrire (Belgium). The OECD's 2023 report on digital skills and inclusion highlights that formal education alone cannot bridge the digital divide— yet, non-formal and community-based learning remain underfunded and politically marginalized in discussions of DCE.

> **We cannot afford to wait another generation for digital citizenship education to take root. The people most excluded from digital participation today are not future students—they are adults already navigating exclusion from essential services, democratic participation, and economic opportunities.**

If EYDCE 2025 is to have real impact, it must prioritize accessible, community-based, and lifelong approaches to digital citizenship education. The failure to properly integrate non-formal and adult learning into digital education policies is not a minor oversight—it is a fundamental flaw in the approach to democratic participation. While the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture is a useful tool, it remains insufficient if not explicitly connected to the lived experiences of adult learners navigating digitalization.

The Danger of Resilience Without Structural Change

Framing digital citizenship as "learning to navigate existing structures" without challenging why those structures exist in the first place risks reinforcing digital inequalities rather than dismantling them. A shift is necessary—from passive adaptation to active transformation.

A recurring theme in EYDCE 2025 discussions was "resilience"—a term often used in digital education policy to encourage individuals to "cope" with digital challenges rather than change them. This framing is deeply problematic. Resilience, in its current policy usage, places the burden on individuals to navigate flawed digital systems, rather than questioning why those systems remain unaccountable, exclusionary, and exploitative. This perspective risks reinforcing power imbalances rather than addressing them.

As Julian McDougal supported, it is important that we create an honest policy space that realises we need to act now and move away from the concept of resilience just for the shake of it. We need to make change happen.

This means fostering not only digital literacy but digital democracy, ensuring that learners—young and adult—are empowered to challenge corporate and state control over digital spaces. The rise of Artificial Intelligence further complicates the dynamics of digital citizenship. If left unchecked, AI risks deepening existing inequalities—privileging the voices, languages, and worldviews of the most powerful actors while marginalizing others.

This context makes it all the more urgent that digital citizenship is framed not only as a technical competence but as a lifelong civic right. All citizens—regardless of age, background, or digital fluency—must have opportunities to understand, engage with, and shape AI systems. This includes the capacity to critically challenge how AI influences their lives, but also the practical ability to "train" AI through daily use, ensuring these systems reflect the richness and diversity of human experience

A Call for Structural Reforms in Digital Citizenship Education

While EAEA acknowledges the Council of Europe's commitment to digital citizenship education, we call for immediate reforms to ensure that the EYDCE 2025 does not reinforce existing digital inequalities. We must move away from a tokenistic celebration of digital literacy and towards a genuine redistribution of power in digital education.

To do so the Council of Europe's planned Action Plan on Digital Citizenship Education should reflect:

- Integration of non-formal and adult education as a core pillar of DCE, not an afterthought.
- Critical engagement with digital power structures, ensuring that DCE does not become a tool for passive compliance.
- A rejection of the commodification of digital literacy, reducing reliance on corporate-controlled platforms and AI.
- A participatory governance model that gives real decision- making power to learners, educators, and civil society.
- An explicit intersectional approach that recognizes how digital exclusion intersects with class, race, gender, migration, and disability.

Digital citizenship cannot be defined by those who already hold digital power—it must be co-created by the communities it seeks to serve.

The European Year for Digital Citizenship Education 2025 must not only highlight the urgency of digital participation but also commit to shifting power dynamics in digital spaces.

EAEA stands firmly in its commitment to a just, democratic, and lifelong learning approach to digital citizenship education. We call on policymakers to move beyond rhetoric and commit to concrete actions that redistribute digital power, challenge inequalities, and create truly inclusive and participatory digital spaces. Digital citizenship must not be a concept that is dictated to learners—it must be shaped by them. If the European Year for Digital Citizenship Education 2025 is to leave a meaningful legacy, it must do more than acknowledge digital challenges; it must actively address the barriers that sustain them.

About us

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 126 member organisations in 44 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.

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