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Policy Report

WIDE - Wellness in Digital Education



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Project

Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries across all continents. While everybody had to switch to digital learning in many countries, education providers were struggling to integrate digital learning in their curricula. Schools were challenged with the technical requirements of digital learning systems and tools: how to exploit these and integrate them into the curricular activity (i.e., blended learning) along with the required skills and competences teachers and learners should have, and to use these new tools in the best possible way. The lockdown further demonstrated that teachers had to change their approach to learning and teaching, to also consider the physical and mental well-being of students.

Moreover, the lockdown showed how the prolonged use of the internet could be very tiring for both teachers and students both physically and psychologically. Digital learning thus implies not only the need for coping and adopting a so-called “digital mindset”, but also the wellness of each involved person (trainer/teacher, learner). Wellness plays an essential role in the design and development of inclusive digital/blended learning programs and delivery systems.

The WIDE project investigated the physical and mental health aspects of online learning and developed a methodology on teaching for teachers that ensures not only the learning aspect of digital education but also gave equal importance to the well-being of students. Additionally, the WIDE project addressed the European concern for effective digital transformation and innovative practices in VET education. The Covid lockdown and post-Covid conditions have required the increased digital and blended learning of learners, making the products of the WIDE project continuously relevant. The WIDE project has demonstrated that wellness of teachers and students are important in both online and offline learning environments, now in the post-Covid environment.

Project's

Objectives

The main objective of the WIDE project is to take care of the personal and professional well-being of the educational process related to online/blended training.

The aim was to tackle the challenges seen in digital learning with the following objectives:

- Contribute to the reinforcement of inclusiveness of education systems in digital era;
- Develop innovation for education policies;
- Foster participatory and multi-stakeholder approaches to innovation in education; and
- Integrate the dimension of wellbeing as a crucial one, evaluating the quality and the responsiveness of education systems, as well as the resilience of students and teachers.

Project

Methodology

The WIDE project conducted surveys, created a new framework, along with guidelines for teachers and designed an e-learning path.

At the start of the project, a website and a learning platform (<https://wide-project.eu>) have been created to keep all interested people posted on the project activities. The website was updated on a regular basis. The final tools produced were uploaded to the website to ensure extensive outreach and allow for continued use of the materials later in the lifespan of the project. All products produced are easily accessible online. The website also features a news section with information on the upcoming events e.g. the teacher training and the multiplier events to attract individuals to the events.

The WIDE project has produced the following project results:



● R1) Wellbeing in online/blended education analysis

The WIDE project conducted surveys in all partner countries to collect data on the needs and perceptions experienced by learners, teachers, and parents during distance learning. The surveys were structured online through a Google form to guarantee maximum accessibility. (For the full report, please scan the QR code).



● R2) The WIDE Methodological Framework

This is a customized model that was tested in schools through a set of pilots involving all partner countries. It introduces the “Human Set Essentials” and an interweaving of all four sets (Toolset, Skillset, Mindset, Heart-set) to guarantee optimal understanding, increased responsibility and an engaging implementation by all beneficiaries.

This has enabled the teacher learner to best incorporate the online/blended model into their everyday teaching, which uses the “Lov-e & Car-e-osity model”-- a participatory, engagement model for e-learning. This is a process of joining in with people’s lives in their online journey and supporting them to co-create new pathways of learning.

When the framework was defined, it was shared between partner countries for feedback and validated through stakeholder validation meetings. After feedback and validation, the framework was tested at local level. (For the full report, please scan the QR code).



R3) Wellbeing guidelines for inclusive digital education in e-learning pathways

The guidelines are strategies and suggestions for the design and development of inclusive digital- and blended learning environment, assuming well-being as the fundamental dimension of the project. The guidelines are intended for VET professionals, teachers and trainers, and VET managers. The guidelines provide suggestions and hints on how to create inclusive learning environments for digital- and blended learning.

Greta du Velay, in collaboration with T-Hap experts, were responsible for the development of the guidelines. Partners provided supporting materials for the guidelines as well, i.e. best success stories and case studies from the partner countries. The first release was discussed among partners and invited stakeholders for further improvements during the meeting in Croatia. At the validation meeting, the first finalised version of the guidelines was ready and shared during local pilot activities. The final result was translated into all partners’ languages and made available and free to download via the project website. (For the full report, please scan the QR code).



● R4) WIDE e-learning path.

The e-learning course for teachers, trainers, and educators is thought as a resource being able to guarantee upskilling of all professionals involved. Once the framework and guidelines were made freely accessible on the website, the course was tested by a pilot group consisting of at least 10 teachers from the partner organizations and at least 50 teachers outside the partner organizations.

Feedback was collected through questionnaires and interviews to improve the course. All partners then translated all the material content from English into their partners' languages. (For the full report, please scan the QR code).

An added feature of the e-learning course for teachers are the E-badges. While this is not part of the original project outputs, the partners felt that it would be advantageous to teachers to have the European E-badges as proof that they have undergone the course on well-being in digital learning. The use of digital badges in education becoming increasingly popular. Digital badges are an electronic representation of certification that is visual, available online and embedded with metadata that provides context, meaning and the result of an activity. They are easy to manage, verify and share online. Digital badges provide employers evidence of what you have done and why it is important.

T-HAP has categorised the skills and competencies acquired through the WIDE training path using the ESCO categorisation (<https://esco.ec.europa.eu>) to identify the capacities to be certified. Following, e-badges have been issued to all those who have completed the path and addressed the assessment tool of WIDE.

A micro-credential is a certification of assessed learning that is additional, alternative, complementary to or a component of a formal qualification (Oliver, 2019). They verify achievement in a specific area of study or professional development in a form that is shareable with peers, employers and educational providers.

● R5) Policy Recommendations

A report which includes all relevant objectives, methodologies, and activities in order to collect project partners' and stakeholders' contributions on the project. This report aims at informing all relevant stakeholders about the project opportunities linked to well-being in online/blended education.

The Policy Recommendation collected contributions from each multistakeholder table, including key recommendations to overcome specific challenges emerged during the pilots. The final version of the policy report was edited and provided in English. Partners translated the document in national languages for maximising the dissemination effect.

Project's

Impact

WIDE impacts on both a physical and psychological level on all considered target audiences. It highlighted the pressing need to establish and develop new methods and tools that promote well-being in classrooms.

Principals, teachers/trainers have gained increased awareness on the importance of wellbeing as a crucial dimension to consider in attending digital- and blended education, not just for their students but for themselves as well, as they navigate new challenges in digital and blended classrooms. They were able to address online didactics with students with reduction of boredom and increase motivation in teaching. Teachers were identified as needing additional support, especially when planning for online and blended learning environments. They were upskilled, which led to cooperation among teachers and trainers. Additionally, teachers were able to increase their digital skills and soft skills. (i.e., in organising activities, homework, managing a mediated relational system, etc.). They would continuously get regular student feedback to help them refine and adapt their methods.

In relation to the benefits of the Digital Badges, institutions had the flexibility to craft and manage their catalogue of digital badges, aligned with their organisation's strategic initiatives. The Digital Badges enabled institutions to easily award badges to their learners, including the ability for bulk awarding and revocation as required.

Learners/trainees/students were the beneficiaries of the programme and functioned as co-creators of the inclusive learning environment. They gained increased awareness on the importance of well-being in online learning environments thus, equipping students with the skills and understanding to succeed in an online environment. Furthermore, making the online educational experience positive and fruitful has led to a higher impact and effectiveness, and a shared motivation between the teacher and student. By maximising distance learning, students are able to take full advantage of the opportunities and flexibility offered by online education.

Parents and Families also benefitted from increased awareness on the importance of well-being as a crucial dimension to consider in attending digital- and blended education. They have accepted a co-responsibility pact with the school to guarantee inclusive and high-quality training of all youngsters. Overall, parents have acquired a better understanding and appreciation of online tools for learning.

Participating organisations got involved in the innovation in teaching and training approaches and methods in digital- and blended learning. Additionally, they increase the sustainability and responsiveness of integrated blended learning delivery systems by co-designing the training systems. They have widened their network on the Digital Transformation of Learning (DTL), involving VET providers active in different educational levels. Overall, the organisations have contributed to the diffusion of a European culture on inclusiveness of education systems in a digital era.

Associated stakeholders, local, regional, national, and international, private and public, increased their awareness on the importance of well-being as a key dimension in the design and development, and delivery of training programmes, especially in case of digital- and blended learning. Thus, they have committed to disseminate the tested WIDE framework and linked resources to foster large scale application of the framework itself.

Lessons Learned

The focus on well-being is a necessity for effective digital learning. During and following the COVID-19 pandemic, schools all over the world had to switch to digital teaching -and learning methods. This has demonstrated the extent to which digital learning could affect both the physical and psychological health of not only students, but teachers and parents as well. The WIDE project learned that having to study in front of the PC for 5-6 hours a day was too tiring. Students expressed that their effectiveness was lower than normal, and it was easier to get distracted by other things at home. In some partner countries the focus was lacking in online classes and some students also felt more lonely, missing social activities associated with getting an education. The WIDE project also found that some teachers expressed that they could have thought of a more interactive teaching strategy to avoid boredom, as they were teaching the same way they would in face-to-face classes.

It is therefore necessary to adapt methodologies that will consider both the actual learning and the well-being of learners in education. An inescapable fact today is that education uses a combination of face-to-face and digital learning. In this regard, the WIDE project has contributed to a better understanding of this issue and has offered a methodology that ensures the learning and the well-being of students and learners.

The WIDE framework and e-learning have discussed and constructed a new methodology for securing the wellbeing of both students and teachers in online learning, but also face-to-face and blended learning. WIDE found out that simply focusing on the development of an essential combination of a toolset and a skillset for e-learning is not enough. Learning has to integrate the well-being of students.

The “Human Set Essentials (HSE)” model has been integrated in the WIDE framework. The HSE model has been tested in one of the biggest cities in Canada in 2020, and showed that only after 8 weeks, 35% of the employees reported better quality and well-being.

For distance learning, it was necessary to deviate from face-to-face teaching/learning. This means using more engaging approaches such as storytelling or micro-teaching to make students more involved (e.g., with the use of suggestion boxes) or to activate a different involvement (thanks to breaks and the possibility of individualization and customisation of courses). Furthermore, through webinars, interactive classroom activities and professional development workshops, the WIDE project have experienced a significant improvement in social-emotional learning, communication skills, and overall well-being. The positive feedback from both teachers and students confirms the effectiveness of these methods, and they have committed to continuing this work in the future to further strengthen educational outcomes and emotional well-being in the classroom.

Through surveys, collecting data from students/trainees, teacher/trainers, and parents, the WIDE project was able to profile how wellness was considered a valuable dimension in the design of digital learning environments. Focusing on wellness improves the quality of online learning. The WIDE project also tapped into the participatory engagement model for e-learning, “The Lov-e & Car-e-osity” model. Data generated from partner countries may differ from each other and therefore one of the benefits of this model is that it is not a “one-fits-all” but a dynamic one. Thus, making it very applicable to the new WIDE methodological framework which is also dynamic. The WIDE surveys showed that maintaining the well-being of teachers themselves, as they navigate new challenges in digital and hybrid classrooms, is equally important to their students’ well-being.

The WIDE training event in Modena in 2022 enabled teachers said to share difficulties and frustrations with online teaching. They reflected on their own online teaching methods. After the Modena training event, teachers have put equal importance to the digital well-being of learners, as this could help minimize some of the difficulties they found in online teaching.

This has also made them realise that **if we do not take actions, the online learning approach can result in negative outcome and lack of learning.** A key component learned and discovered by the participants at the Modena event was the communication and relationship aspect in education, which can be challenged during online learning. The primary focus was on encouraging all participants to engage in active speaking and listening. The solution in addressing well-being in the distance conditions is the care for the relationship between the teacher and student.

Care for expressing oneself in communication or via tools such as storytelling can make the difference. Open communication helped foster stronger connections among individuals and ultimately helped participants overcome the fear of public speaking (also in a digital environment) and additionally enhance individuals' listening skills, fostering a greater sense of empathy. Through careful listening and understanding, participants learned to place themselves in others' shoes, which deepened their interpersonal understanding and built a more inclusive environment. By emphasising the development of interpersonal skills, learning motivation, and teacher support, these programmes offer valuable strategies for improving the overall educational experience. The initiative of promoting well-being in education revealed important insights into how individuals can improve their communication abilities, as well as how educational institutions can support both students and teachers in an evolving learning environment.

In conclusion, in spite of the pandemic being over, the WIDE project still has a lot of value. As discussed above, the results from the implementation have demonstrated that the WIDE methodological tools that were analysed and developed are valuable resources for online learning, which can be used by education professionals in digital, blended and/or face-to-face learning.

Project Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic created a dramatic shift in our approach to education. Teachers and students had to adjust to a new way of life in the digital world. Following this change and as highlighted above, being aware of the importance of mental -and physical well-being of the teachers and students being integrated as a core value is therefore essential for healthy online education. The WIDE project has 9 recommendations for policy makers in the educational sector:

1. Enhance Teacher Training in Digital Emotional Intelligence

The importance of high-quality training for teachers is a driving mechanism for the overall goal to ensure a healthy online education. It is therefore important to invest and prioritize training programmes for teachers to be well equipped for digital approaches. To further support teachers in hybrid and digital learning environments, it is crucial to implement a continuous professional development programme focused on emotional intelligence in digital settings. This training would not only build on existing practices but also equip teachers with the ability to manage student emotions effectively in virtual classrooms. It could cover areas like detecting emotional distress online, creating safe digital spaces, and applying “Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)” principles in remote settings.

These aspects shall be included and mandatory in the training curriculum that prepare teachers and trainers to be admitted to organisational positions (both in the public and private sectors). Thus, underlining how the “digital mindset” should not only be technical but also include well-being, having a healthy online education methodology.

2. Integrate Well-Being Metrics into Curriculum Planning

The success of the WIDE project shows that well-being is essential for both students and teachers. A formal policy could integrate specific well-being metrics into the educational system’s curriculum planning process. These metrics would assess emotional health, engagement levels, and stress management to ensure that both the digital and physical classrooms prioritize mental health and well-being alongside academic outcomes.

In line with this, an updated course for teaching and training personnel shall provide a training path (such as WIDE) and be mandatory every other year. For the examination and accreditation of teachers and trainers (tenure), a specific part of the examination shall address the ability and care for well-being in the educational action. Teachers and trainers should be asked to show/report their abilities and ability in conveying care for wellness in education as it refers to learners (of any age) and to themselves at the same time, along with regular assessment meetings which shall be organised in schools to monitor the aspect and take decision on actions for improvements.

3. Develop a National Hybrid Learning Framework with SEL Integration

Given the shift to hybrid and online learning, it is vital to have a standardized national framework that incorporates “Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)” this framework would provide guidelines for schools to blend traditional and digital learning environments effectively, ensuring consistent application of “SEL” strategies across different educational platforms.

4. Using Diverse Pedagogical Approaches

Additionally, in extension to the recommendation above, to ensure the well-being of learners in distance education, it is also essential to diversify the modalities and types of pedagogical activities. By offering a variety of methods, such as interactive quizzes, case studies, stimulations, and group projects, educators can better meet the individual needs of students. The approach helps maintain their motivation and prevent mental exhaustion. Furthermore, by adapting activities to different learning styles, institutions can create a more dynamic and stimulating environment thus, promoting overall well-being and better knowledge retention.

5. Establish Well-being Ambassadors/Coordinators in Schools

The WIDE project recommends that in each school, it should be demanded to create a small team of teachers explicitly in charge of care of well-being in education.

The teams shall be promoting initiative to keep the attention alert on the matter to provide information, tools, readings, and most recent educational approaches on the topic and support the ongoing care of the teacher councils and class councils. These ambassadors/coordinators would also lead initiatives and could mentor those newer to hybrid teaching, helping them to navigate both the technical and emotional aspects of their work environments.

6. Universities Shall be Asked to Structurally Plan Research Actions over the Topic

Regular feedback to educational staff as well as other stakeholders shall be reported to understand the accomplishments and achievements in well-being in education while addressing the new challenges that education (digital education) brings. They can also involve schools and VET training centres on where to collect data.

7. Importance of Partnerships for Development and Exchange of Good Practice

Expanding the number of schools and students to whom the project is proposed is important, if not crucial, for the sustainability of the project. As discussed in the WIDE Framework and data, even the participating countries differ from each other. However, this also works as an advantage. Strong partnerships play a key role: In addition to those already established (relationships among and with the teachers of the Consortium schools and beyond – a strong participation from Comprehensive Institutes was seen in Genoa, where they also found the project highly interesting), we are committed to expanding and consolidating new a broader networks of collaboration, for example, other Regional Schools Offices, the National Research Council (CNR), Higher Technical Institutes (ITS), Academies, Vocational Training Institutes, and more. Thus, partnerships and sparring will only further benefit the project.

8. Need for Continuous Support for Research and Development for Well-Being-Based (digital) education

Well-being in the WIDE framework is **not** seen as an outcome **but** as a process and through continuous support, educators can **uphold the sustainability of the well-being of humans** by then practicing well-being in both digital and analogue spaces continuously. It is therefore also important that each level of the chain (financers, managers, technicians, content providers, teachers and trainers) must think and act on well-being.

9. Sustainability of the Project

For the sustainability of the project, the experimentation carried out and the results obtained, the Italian partner, Consorzio degli Istituti Professionali (as a network of schools consisting of over sixty state vocational and technical schools throughout Italy) intends and aims to continue disseminating the project but, above all, proposes to organize specific training courses for teachers on the WIDE methodology.

In conclusion to our recommendations, it is through investment, prioritizing training programmes, assessment of curricular, support for further research and development, ambassadors, as well as sparring, that the policy makers, local -and international stakeholders can help to make sure in which the WIDE framework and guidelines can be implemented. The WIDE project would like to highlight is that a great part of the support will come from the investment and continuous support of the training of teachers to help realize our goals for well-being online as well as offline and keep making it a priority in the future.



<https://www.wide-project.eu/>



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