



ENABLING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: The Role of NFIL in Building Citizenship and Basic Digital Competences | Policy Knowledge Exchange

Tuesday, 21 of April 2026, European Parliament

Welcoming Remarks

The Roundtable opened with welcoming remarks by Elisa Gambardella, Director and Education & Lifelong Learning Policy Coordinator at **SOLIDAR+**. She emphasised the **collaborative nature of the event** and its purpose: to gather input from relevant stakeholders **to inform the development of the upcoming Policy Paper** focusing on the **role of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) in developing the citizenship and digital competences needed for civic and democratic engagement in society.**

She highlighted that the topic responds to the **increased acknowledgment by European institutions of the important contribution of NFIL to the development of key basic competences**, but the **lack of adequate recognition with funding, data collection and stakeholders' involvement.** She then introduced the Vice-President of the European Parliament, [Victor Negrescu](#).

Opening Remarks by Vice-President of the European Parliament Victor Negrescu, S&D Group

Vice-President Victor Negrescu (S&D) opened by expressing his appreciation for the invitation and reflected on the importance of investing in **education, skills, and competences as key drivers of a sense of belonging to the European project, active participation, and adaptability to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.**

He emphasised the need to **strengthen networks and coalitions**, noting that **European-level cooperation** can add significant value to existing initiatives while also underlining that the EU should take a more active role in these areas. Negrescu stressed the importance of identifying and scaling good practices across Europe through EU support.

Addressing current challenges, he pointed to the persistent uncertainty surrounding the **competences required to respond effectively to rapidly evolving technologies such as artificial intelligence**, noting that these are not yet sufficiently developed among citizens. He also stressed the need to better equip citizens with the competences necessary to critically navigate and counter disinformation.

In this context, he highlighted the ongoing **efforts of the S&D Group to advocate for stronger prioritisation and increased investment in education, training and skills within**

the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), including through programmes supporting lifelong learning. This includes calls for a **cross-sectoral approach** to education and skills, which, while considered ambitious and not yet widely supported across political groups, reflects the need for a more integrated policy response. He concluded by underlining that lifelong learning and education remain insufficiently recognised as key priorities at EU level, a gap that the S&D Group is seeking to address.

Discussion of the Preliminary Research Question SOLIDAR+ 2026 Position Paper by Luisa López López, Consultant & Researcher in Global Citizenship Education

Luisa López López presented the context, methodology, and expected outcomes of the forthcoming research. She outlined two key challenges shaping the study: gaps and inequalities in civic participation and ongoing digital transformation, both of which require **strengthened citizenship and digital competences**. She emphasised that such competences are developed not only in formal education but also significantly through non-formal and informal learning environments.

The research is guided by **three main objectives**: identifying the characteristics of enabling learning environments; analysing the role of NFIL providers in creating and sustaining such environments; and exploring how these environments support the development of citizenship and digital competences.

López López explained that the research will build on existing policy frameworks while establishing links to their implementation in practice. The methodology will follow a **qualitative and participatory approach**, beginning with desk research on relevant policy frameworks and literature, followed by focus groups involving SOLIDAR+ members and other stakeholders. The final stage will consist of a thematic analysis connecting policy insights with practical experiences.

The research is structured around five **guiding questions**, addressing the defining features of enabling environments, the role of NFIL providers, the development of competences in practice, the extent to which these environments address inequalities, and the policy and structural conditions required to strengthen them. She concluded by noting that the research aims to deepen understanding of **how non-formal and informal learning contribute to enabling learning environments that foster active participation in contemporary societies**.

Discussion on the Role of Non-Formal and Informal Learning in Building Citizenship and Basic Digital Competences

Chair: Elisa Gambardella

The discussion started with interventions focused on the **role of non-formal and informal learning in fostering citizenship and digital competences**, with particular attention to **existing policy frameworks, measurement challenges, and current gaps in formal education systems**.

- **Daniele Vidoni** (Policy Coordinator, DG EAC) presented ongoing work within the European Commission on citizenship and digital education, particularly regarding the development and measurement of relevant skills and competences. He noted that **current approaches to measuring citizenship education remain largely knowledge-based**, while discussions with countries increasingly point to the need for broader and more comprehensive frameworks, moving towards dashboards of indicators rather than relying only on individual measures of knowledge and skills.

He outlined a proposed framework for **indicators encompassing three dimensions: system-level characteristics, learning practices, and competences (including knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes)**. He stressed that reliable and structured data, much of which is drawn from ICCS, remains essential for building effective measurement tools.

- **Maria Magdalena Isac** (International Director [ICCS](#) & Senior Research Associate, University of Bath) presented the work of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), emphasising its relevance for European policy development. **ICCS assesses citizenship competences across knowledge, attitudes, and engagement**, focusing primarily on formal education while also capturing aspects of non-formal and informal learning environments.

She highlighted digital citizenship as a growing area of focus, noting that from 2027 greater emphasis will be placed on **critical digital citizenship**. This includes **examining how young people engage with disinformation, critically assess online content, and how digital environments shape political participation**. She noted that ICCS 2027 moves beyond a narrow focus on online participation toward a broader understanding of responsible and critical digital citizenship, including how young people verify information, understand the role of algorithms and AI in shaping online content, recognize manipulation and emotional framing, and engage respectfully in digital environments. She also underlined the importance of assessing teacher support in fostering these competences. In this context, she indicated that the new developments in ICCS are informed by broader research developments on digital citizenship and pointed to potentially relevant resources for

the development of the SOLIDAR+ position paper, including: Choi, M. (2016). A Concept Analysis of Digital Citizenship for Democratic Citizenship Education in the Internet Age. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 44(4), 565–607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2016.1210549>

- **Raffaella Kihrer** (Secretary General, [EAEA](#)) reflected on the **role of non-formal and informal learning in citizenship education**, noting a **discrepancy between policy recognition and practical support**.

She emphasised the **growing importance of citizenship education, particularly Global Citizenship Education (GCE)**, which is increasingly recognised as a core competence. She warned, however, that the **shrinking space for civil society directly undermines opportunities for its delivery**, as civil society organisations, which are among the primary providers of such education, face increasing constraints. In more autocratic contexts, this trend is particularly pronounced, as citizenship education, which plays a fundamental role in raising awareness and fostering critical thinking, is often perceived as threatening.

Kihrer further highlighted the **central role of adult learning in fostering citizenship competences**. While acknowledged at policy level, **non-formal adult learning is often insufficiently integrated into national lifelong learning strategies and lacks adequate funding and structural support**. She also referred to ongoing discussions around the definition of adult learning within the Erasmus+ programme, stressing the importance of ensuring that citizenship education continues to be recognised as an integral component, particularly in the context of **negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**.

- **David Mekkaoui** (CEO, [All Digital](#)) focused on **effective strategies within non-formal learning for developing digital citizenship competences**. He highlighted **flexibility as a defining strength of non-formal education**, emphasising that it enables **learning by doing** rather than focusing solely on theory, and supports **peer learning** as an alternative to authority-led teaching. He also pointed to **online learning** as an additional dimension of this flexibility. While recognising that formal education can adopt some of these characteristics, he argued that it cannot fully replicate the adaptable nature of non-formal learning environments.

He stressed that **non-formal education is particularly well-suited to addressing digital inclusion challenges**, noting that a significant proportion of Europeans (around 40%) still lack basic digital skills.

Mekkaoui also underscored the **need for balanced investment across formal, non-formal, and informal education sectors.**

The second round of interventions explored **practical approaches and challenges in developing citizenship and digital competences**, including issues related to digital inclusion, learner engagement, and the structural conditions needed to strengthen enabling learning environments.

- **Daniele Vidoni** (DG EAC) further highlighted that current data continue to show that **the digital dimension of education remains complex and unevenly developed across education systems.** Evidence from ICILS indicates that around 43% of EU students do not reach basic levels of digital competences, which remains far from the EU target of reducing underachievement in digital skills below 15%. He noted that teachers themselves frequently report limited learning opportunities and raise concerns regarding their preparedness to deliver digital education effectively. He noted that existing frameworks provide **limited insight into motivational factors and the processes that support sustained learner engagement**, underlining the **need for more qualitative data** to better understand these dimensions. He noted that current efforts focus on basic and functional ICT skills, which remain important and should continue to be measured, while broader dimensions such as responsible digital participation, collaboration, and critical engagement with digital environments remain more difficult to capture. He also referred to **learners' ability to move across different learning environments**, suggesting that micro-credentials and improved validation mechanisms could help make competences acquired in non-formal settings more visible and transferable, particularly as many digital competences are increasingly developed outside formal education through online environments, peer learning, and youth activities.
- **Maria Magdalena Isac** (ICCS) addressed questions on **expanding ICCS beyond its current focus on 14-year-olds**, explaining that adolescence is a critical stage for the development of civic attitudes and engagement. She noted that ICCS provides a particularly valuable snapshot at a stage when most young people are still in formal education and educational systems can still effectively address inequalities in citizenship competences and learning opportunities. She also highlighted that ICCS 2027 is expanding this perspective through a new Grade 11 module, including vocational education and training (VET) pathways, to better capture later stages of adolescence and transitions to adulthood. She acknowledged **ongoing discussions** about extending the age range, while noting **challenges related to funding and the**

feasibility of longitudinal tracking. At the same time, she noted that longitudinal approaches could provide important added value for understanding how civic and digital citizenship competences develop over time across formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments.

- **Raffaella Kihrer (EAEA)** drew attention to the **gap between widespread internet use and limited digital competences**, noting that while around 90% of adults in Europe use the internet, a significant proportion still lacks the basic skills needed to critically engage with complex digital information, with around 40% of Europeans not having basic digital competences. She highlighted the **link between digital competences and civic engagement**, stressing that this **gap translates into lower levels of political participation and reduced trust in public institutions**. This discrepancy between existing digital skills and the competences required for active citizenship points to the **need for better data on how citizenship education and digital competences interact**, as well as **on the broader benefits this connection can have for civic engagement and democratic participation**.

She pointed to examples such as Nordic folk schools and Slovenian study circles as models of non-formal learning fostering active citizenship.

- **David Mekkaoui (All Digital)** concluded by noting that around **95% of jobs in Europe require basic digital skills** and that **rapid technological change is rendering existing policy frameworks outdated**. He emphasised the importance of both systemic responses, such as **regulating algorithmic amplification of information**, and education and training measures aimed at **strengthening individuals' ability to critically engage with online content**, for example by promoting practices such as verifying information with trusted sources, questioning the reliability of content, and engaging proactively in digital spaces.

Concluding Remarks

Elisa Gambardella (SOLIDAR+) closed the session by underlining that the discussion marks the first step in a broader process aimed at informing the forthcoming Policy Paper on enabling learning environments. She thanked participants for their contributions, which highlighted the central role of non-formal and informal learning in strengthening citizenship and digital competences, as well as persistent gaps in recognition, data collection, and funding. She noted that the next phase will involve drafting the Policy Paper, which is expected to be presented in November at the European Parliament.