

Call for papers – Special issue

Digital Competences – The Role these “Future Skills” play in Higher Education: Definition and Relevance, Assessment and Promotion

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To the main topic

Digitization and digital skills are buzzwords that now play a crucial role in (almost) all areas of life. For example, in its *future skills paper* published in 2021, the STIFTERVERBAND FÜR DIE DEUTSCHE WISSENSCHAFT e.V. identified 21 skills in four categories: “Classic Skills,” “Key Digital Skills,” “Technological Skills,” and “Transformative Skills” (p. 2). From this perspective, digital competences are therefore a central part of the so-called *future skills*. In this regard, it is explained that “digital key competences (for example, digital literacy) [...] also remain enormously important and will become even more important in the next five years.” (ibid., p. 2). This raises the question of how relevant this is for teaching and learning in higher education (cf. ibid., p. 3), both in relation to students and to teachers as well as the other university staff (supporting teaching and learning).

Trade-off between primary and secondary versus higher education

In Germany, the National Education Report 2022 referred primarily to the fact that digital competences were mostly of little importance in teacher training and continuing education before the onset of the Corona pandemic (p. 124). In continuing education, however, they are playing an increasingly important role (AUTOR:INNENGRUPPE BILDUNGSBERICHTERSTATTUNG, 2022, S. 294). While – according to this report – specific reference to the responsibility of higher education institutions has not been made so far, employers provide a wide range of training on digital competences (ibid.). However, the STÄNDIGE WISSENSCHAFTLICHE KOMMISSION DER KULTUSMINISTERKONFERENZ (2022) has named recommendations for the promotion of digital competences for the higher education sector.

In Austria, the subject of digital literacy was introduced as a compulsory subject in secondary education in the 2022/2023, and the curriculum also includes “digital competence, media competence and political competence” (BGBl. II Nr. 71/2018) as mandatory competences. The Austrian National Education Report contains recommendations in this regard, too (KAYALI et al., 2021, p. 337ff.). In addition, according to the Austrian HOCHSCHULKONFERENZ-ARBEITSGRUPPE „DIGITALES LEHREN, LERNEN UND PRÜFEN“ (2021, p. 25), digital skills of the students are key for the successful implementation of digital teaching. Furthermore it is pointed out that higher education institutions are responsible for stimulating critical thinking and reflection when acting in the digital context (ibid.).

In Switzerland, following the “HarmoS Konkordat” of 2007, comprehensive curricula were introduced: “Plan d’Etudes Romand” in Western Switzerland, “piano di studio” in Tessin and “Lehrplan 21” in the German-speaking cantons. With the latter introduction of the module “Medien und Informatik (MI)” in 2014, competences for computer science were formulated for the first time in Switzerland from kindergarten to the 9th grade. It is therefore not surprising that the topic of digitization and, as a consequence, the need for digital competences is also much discussed in the higher education context (EBNER et al., 2022). In a number of disciplines, time has witnessed an increasing amount of corresponding (research) activities under various headings (EDELSBRUNNER et al., 2022). However, the definitions of digital competences (future skills, 21st century skills, etc.) differ and various attempts have been made to assess digital competences. Meanwhile, the disciplines that are taking part in higher education research and development only partially take note of each other. In addition, so far little is known, about whether, and if so, how digital competences are related to, for instance, academic and professional success and to acting as a “responsible citizen”. This comes to the forefront time and again in surveys for example, among first-year students (MAIR et al., 2021; SPIELER et al., 2022).

Relevance of digital competences in the higher education context

Higher education institutions are faced with the challenge of keeping pace with the ongoing societal transformation in the course of digitization (PETRI & KREMPKOW, in print). On the one hand, as organizations they have to transform their structures – where necessary – and digitize processes such as digitize teaching and learning (ZAWACKI-RICHTER, 2020; EBNER et al., 2021) as well as crosslinking data. On the other hand, in addition to teaching subject-specific content, they also have a more general educational task: to prepare students for the world of work after graduation and to contribute to their development as members of the society (see also WISSENSCHAFTSRAT, 2022; AKTIONSRAT BILDUNG, 2018). The importance of digital skills for social participation is becoming increasingly clear. Consequently, the promotion of digital competences must also be discussed in the context of educational equity.

Definition: What is meant by the term digital competences?

Basic digital skills [...] are according to the STIFTERVERBAND FÜR DIE DEUTSCHE WISSENSCHAFT, 2018, p. 5) “Fähigkeiten, durch die Menschen in der Lage sind, sich in einer digitalisierten Umwelt zurechtzufinden und aktiv an ihr teilzunehmen. [...] Wer diese Fähigkeiten beherrscht, kann in einer immer stärker digital geprägten Welt kooperativ und agil arbeiten, wirkungsvoll interagieren und kritische Entscheidungen treffen.” These competences are already required in the higher education context and are consequently also expected from graduates to a particular extent.

In addition, there are various other definitions of digital competences, as well as concepts that partly overlap with these, such as (digital) media competences, information competences or (digital) data competences, or internationally also: Digital Literacy, eLiteracy, e-Skills,

eCompetence, ICT Skills (Information and Communication Technologies), Future Skills (cf. e.g. TIDA – TEACHING IN THE DIGITAL AGE, 2023; BRANDHOFER et al., 2019). Taken together, a certain tendency can be identified in that the definition provided by the European Commission (EU) is frequently adopted:

“Digital Competence is the set of knowledge, skills, attitudes (thus including abilities, strategies, values and awareness) that are required when using ICT and digital media to perform tasks; solve problems; communicate; manage information; collaborate; create and share content; and build knowledge effectively, efficiently, appropriately, critically, creatively, autonomously, flexibly, ethically, reflectively for work, leisure, participation, learning, socialising, consuming, and empowerment” (FERRARI, 2012, p. 3–4).

This definition goes hand in hand with the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp, FERRARI, 2013), which was first published in 2013 and has been updated several times since then (VUORIKARI et al., 2016; CARRETERO et al., 2017). Furthermore, this definition was expanded as well as enriched with concrete examples (VUORIKARI et al., 2022). Hereby, the umbrella term digital competences is broken down into five dimensions, each of which is differentiated into eight competency levels: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, problem solving.

Based on this broad definition, it stands to reason that digital competences are also and especially important in the context of higher education. But: What does this mean for scientific education in general and traditionally discipline-oriented courses of study? A closer look reveals that the question of what is required (in the various dimensions) from whom and in which areas in the higher education context is not trivial. Context- and group-specific requirement analyses (MICHAELIS et al., 2013) could help to answer these questions (What is the target state?). Among other things, a differentiation should be made between the higher education areas of research and teaching versus administration and science management/higher education development, possibly also for different disciplines. In addition, what is about the requirements for students: What is needed to successfully complete the degree program? And what skills are expected of future graduates that they should consequently acquire during their studies? In particular, the combination of the latter two areas is interesting in two respects: On the one hand, the question arises as to what extent there are requirements for digital competences in order to design contemporary and good teaching. On the other hand, it needs to be clarified which digital competences should be promoted during the course of studies and how.

Based on the trade-off outlined above, it should also be discussed to what extent education in the area of digital competences falls under the higher education institutions' responsibility or to what extent higher education institutions can expect a certain entry level in the area of digital competences from students.

In addition to the question of requirements, the actual current state should be explored. To what extent are digital competences developed in different groups? Where are potential deficits to be identified? To date, only a small number of empirical studies is available on this topic, although they consistently indicate that there are e.g., significant subject-specific differences among students (JANSCHITZ et al., 2021; KREMPKOW, 2019; KREMPKOW & PETRI, 2022;

KREMPKOW, 2021; PETRI, 2022; SENKBEIL et al., 2019). A few studies have focused on other groups, such as individuals involved in science management (e.g., KREMPKOW, 2022; RATHKE et al., in press).

How to assess digital competences?

In this context, the question of assessment (How to measure digital competences?) is important, too. Basically, three classes of procedures can be distinguished that are mainly used for this purpose: Self-report questionnaires (KREMPKOW, 2022; SCHAUFFEL et al., 2021), knowledge tests (e.g., SPEIER, 2022; EBNER & HOHLA, 2021) and simulation tasks. The aforementioned are thereby sorted in ascending order with regard to the time resources required, both in terms of instrument development and administration of the respective procedures: self-report questionnaires are the most economical variant, as they can be used on a large scale with comparatively little time expenditure. Knowledge tests are less common in German-speaking countries. The least frequently encountered class of procedures are simulation tasks. These are very demanding in terms of instrument development and especially in terms of technical implementation. At the EU level, there is now an online self-assessment on the topic of digital competences that combines various procedure classes and enables direct feedback concerning the individual results (EUROPEAN UNION, n.d.). The extent to which the three classes of procedures lead to similar or even divergent assessments of a person's digital competences has not yet been comprehensively investigated.

How to promote digital competences?

The aspect of requirement analysis (target state) and assessment (actual current state), are followed by the question about possible support/interventions/promotions if there is a discrepancy between the first two. Some higher education institutions already offer online self-study modules: Among them, there are cross-disciplinary Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC, e.g. EBNER & HOHLA, 2021; KLÄRE & JUNG, 2019) as well as subject-specific projects (GERHOLZ et al., 2021) and smaller self-learning environments (e.g. TIDA – TEACHING IN THE DIGITAL AGE, 2023). To the best of our knowledge, evaluation studies that shed light on the effectiveness of such promotion approaches are not yet available for German-speaking countries.

In that sense, we would like to call for contributions in the area of digital competences in higher education, shedding light on the following aspects: definition and relevance as well as assessment and promotion. We would explicitly like to welcome contributions from different disciplines and especially best practice examples. Possible aspects and questions that could be explored in more detail are:

- Comparisons of models and concepts of digital competences, and/or their empirical validation: Do the existing models of digital competences fit for the higher education

context? Which aspects, if any, play a crucial role in the higher education context? Are there differences between disciplines in this regard?

- Comparisons of different procedures for assessing digital competences (in the higher education context)
- Requirements analyses systematically differentiating between fields of study or target groups (students, teaching staff, administration, science management), potentially presenting differentiated requirement profiles
- Which technologies are particularly important for the development of digital competences in the higher education context (e.g., both artificial intelligence [AI] as a technology, and technologies for promoting digital competences)?
- How can learning platforms, online tools and other digital resources be used to promote digital competences?
- How can digital technologies help to reduce access barriers and promote educational and gender equality?
- Analyses of the relevance of digital competences for academic success and for career entry after graduation
- Documentation of the development, implementation and evaluation of (new) interventions to promote digital competences

The contributions can take up one or more of the aspects mentioned above and additionally set further foci. Furthermore, all three types of contributions that can be published in the ZfHE are explicitly welcome: Research contributions, Research-driven development contributions, and Development contributions (for details, see the review guidelines):

https://zfhe.at/userupload/ZFHE_Review%20guidelines_redesign-en

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Guidelines regarding the journal

The ZFHE is a peer-reviewed online journal that publishes scientific contributions of practical relevance concerning current higher education development issues. The focus is on didactical, structural, and cultural developments in teaching and learning. Topics that are innovative and still regarded as open in respect of their design options are preferred.

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Submission information

German or English contributions may be submitted in two possible formats:

Research contributions should meet the following criteria. The paper:

- addresses a systemic question in transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary or subject-specific contexts;
- has a research gap as its starting point;
- is extensively embedded in current scholarly discourse;
- has a robust methodological approach;
- includes reflection on the author's own work;
- explains the research methodology;
- employs a method that is suitable for answering the research question;
- presents the scientific discourse in a reflective manner;
- makes a clearly recognizable contribution to answering the research question or to the research discussion;
- consistently follows relevant citation rules (APA style, current edition);
- comprises between 20,000 and 33,000 characters (with spaces, including cover page, bibliography and author information).

Research-driven development contributions should meet the following criteria. The paper:

- features a higher education development perspective with a sound research base;
- discusses and differentiates a systemic problem in teaching development;
- is an academically grounded "institutional research" contribution;
- is supported by a literature review;
- meaningfully addresses the interaction between science and praxis and/or the link between the two poles of "research and development"
- consistently follows pertinent citation rules (APA style, current edition);
- comprises between 20,000 and 33,000 characters (with spaces, including cover page, bibliography and author information).

Development contributions should meet the following criteria. The paper:

- deals with a concrete problem in higher education development in the (author's) higher education institution;
- addresses a practical need;
- is embedded in the scientific discussion and literature (without claiming to provide an overview of the literature);
- offers suggestions for teaching and university development, with recommendations for action (if applicable);
- offers a systematic and transparent discussion (e.g. no incomprehensible references to specifics or details in a field of practice);
- elaborates on generalisable aspects relevant to theoretical development;
- addresses considerations related to the transfer to practice;
- mentions possibilities for further research;
- consistently follows relevant citation rules (APA style, current edition);
- comprises between 20,000 and 33,000 characters (with spaces, including cover page, bibliography and author information).

Submission and review schedule

October 27, 2023 – Submission deadline for complete articles: Please upload your contribution(s) to the ZFHE journal system (<https://www.zfhe.at>) in the corresponding section (research contributions, research-driven development contributions, development contributions) of ZFHE 19/1 issue in anonymous format. To do so, you must first register as an author in the system.

until January 8, 2024 – Feedback/Reviews: Scientific contributions and workshop reports are evaluated in a double-blind process (see below).

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March 2024 – Online publication: In March 2024, the finalized contributions are published under <https://www.zfhe.at> and also made available in print.

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All submitted contributions will be examined in a double-blind peer review process to guarantee scientific quality. The editors of the current issue propose the reviewers for the respective theme and allocate individual contributions to the reviewers; they also determine which contributions will be accepted. The selection of reviewers and the review process for each thematic issue are always supervised by a member of the editorial board.

Formatting and submission

In order to save valuable time with the formatting of the contributions, we kindly ask that all authors work with the template from the beginning. The template can be downloaded from the ZFHE website under the following links:

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Questions?

If you have any questions regarding the content of the issue, please contact Pascale Stephanie Petri (Pascale.S.Petri@psychol.uni-giessen.de), René Krempkow (Rene.Krempkow@HTW-Berlin.de), Martin Ebner (martin.ebner@tugraz.at), Bernadette Spieler (bernadette.spieler@phzh.ch) oder Barbara Getto (barbara.getto@phzh.ch). For technical and organizational questions, please contact Elisabeth Stadler (office@zfhe.at).

We look forward to your submissions!

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