HARNESSING TALENT IN EUROPE'S REGIONS

HTP Working Groups

Strategic Roadmap

Digital Working Group

19/02/2025

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1. Introduction

Europe's talent needs to be nurtured, especially as the EU is going through important demographic transition. This is even more needed in regions that suffer from a shrinking labour force and a low share of persons with a tertiary education, and in regions hit by the departure of young people. Ensuring that regions facing a talent development trap become more resilient and attractive is crucial in the EU's commitment of leaving nobody and no place behind. This is why the European Commission has launched the 'Talent Booster Mechanism (TBM)'[1], which is supporting EU regions affected by the accelerated decline of their working age population to train, retain and attract the people, and develop the skills and the competences needed to address the impact of the demographic transition.

As part of Pillar 7[2] of the Talent Booster Mechanism (TBM), under the Harnessing Talent Platform (HTP), four Working Groups (WGs)[3] have been set up in November 2023.

Among these, the Digital WG has been established with the purpose of helping regions address specific professional or territorial challenges which influence a region's ability to be competitive and attractive for young and highly skilled workforce. The members from the Digital WG are experts from local, regional or national administrations, para-public agencies, research and academic institutes, collaborative networks, R&I associations, businesses, and industry associations[4].

The main objectives[5] of the Digital WG are to:

1) Bring relevant digital actors together and enhance dialogue, exchange of experiences and knowledge building between them;

2) Identify opportunities and approaches to help mitigate challenges associated with population decline of tertiary educated population and how to harness talent in the digital sector.

The WG also has the ambition to increase the analytical knowledge on digital skills and/or capabilities, in order to support evidence-based policies on regional development and migration and facilitate policy making from EU regional authorities (in particularly those at risk/in a talent development trap).

With more than a year since its first meeting, the Digital WG has advanced from an incubation phase, which was mainly centred around researching and articulating the main challenges[6], to the delivery phase, in which the focus is on developing meaningful contributions to ongoing policy dialogues[7] and to present possible answers to pressing questions and problems linked to the targeted areas of work[8].

This strategic roadmap sets out to refocus the challenges that the Digital WG presented in three issue papers published in August 2024, in order to reiterate their importance and to align them with the framework of the latest political agenda of the European Union and its new Commission. This roadmap also aims to frame the activities of the WG that are to be carried out in 2025 and 2026, presenting details on expected intermediary and final outputs, and providing a clear timeframe for the work to be conducted.

Against this background, the scope of work of the Digital WG has become even more prominent. High-quality digital infrastructure and digital public services at the regional level act as significant factors for attracting and retaining talent. Given the rapid pace of digitalisation and the twin challenges of demographic shifts and the green transition, ensuring equitable and timely access to digital tools and services, even in remote areas, has become increasingly important. This calls for the exploration of innovative digital solutions and service delivery models that increase coverage while addressing disparities in digital access and improving working conditions. It also calls for a reassessment of skills' requirements in sectors heavily impacted by these transitions, ensuring a workforce equipped to

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[1] Communication "Harnessing talent in Europe's regions" (COM(2023)32 final) of 17.01.2023.
[2] Pillar 7 defines that experiences have to be exchanged and good practices to be disseminated and that regions will have the possibility to set up thematic and regional Working Groups to address specific professional or territorial challenges.
[3] The four Working Groups are the Territorial WG, Digital WG, Health WG, and the Research & Innovation WG.
[4] The list of organisations that are represented in each of the four Working Groups can be found in the WG dedicated webpage.
[5] See: "Working Group Concept Note – Digital sector"
[6] Please see the three issue papers of the Digital WG.
[7] Further described in the EU context section.
[8] The discussion questions specifically addressed by each WG are outlined in the issue papers: See section 2.3. Discussion questions of https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communities-and-networks/harnessing-talent-platform/open-calls/working-groups_en#inline-nav-1

navigate the evolving digital and green landscape. The Digital WG has therefore dedicated its work to addressing the following issues:

1) **Digital inclusion and accessibility**: Ensuring access to affordable and high-speed digital connectivity and to key digital public services for all, regardless of age, socioeconomic status, or physical abilities, in order to create a more diverse and talented workforce.
2) **Digital innovation ecosystems:** Promoting the development of digital technologies and digital innovation ecosystems, in order to foster digital innovation and entrepreneurship.
3) **Education and training (E&T) and digital skills**: Ensuring that everyone can acquire the education and skills necessary to enjoy the benefits of digital technology, in order to tackle the digital skills gap and skills mismatch.

Updates of the strategic roadmap may be published to reflect any evolution in the framing of focus areas and/or their translation into planned consolidated contributions during the delivery phase. The present strategic roadmap:

1) **Consolidates** the Digital WG's scope of action into a cohesive framework, building on the already published issue papers (see Section 2).
2) **Identifies** cross-cutting themes for joint efforts with other WGs and other initiatives tackling demographic change and/or talent attraction and retention within the European landscape, to enhance synergies and avoid duplications or overlaps (see Section 2).
3) **Details and structures** intermediary and final outputs, positioning them as interconnected milestones aligned with the HTP's objectives (see Section 3).
4) **Clarifies** governance arrangements and collaboration mechanisms, defining the roles and responsibilities of WG members and the HTP Secretariat as well as potential external partners (see Section 4).
5) **Presents** an indicative workplan, including key milestones and timelines up to mid-2026 (see Section 5).

2. Scope of action

Description of the main challenges in focus

The Digital WG addresses the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation, focusing on leveraging talent to achieve the EU's economic, social, and environmental goals. Digitalisation entails integrating digital technologies across sectors to drive innovation, connectivity, and skill development, supporting the EU's green and digital transitions. Thanks to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)[9] and the Digital Decade Report[10], the progress of Member States in digitalisation can be monitored, offering a clearer picture of regional disparities and areas for improvement.

Talent harnessing involves equipping people with **digital skills**, **ensuring equitable tool access**, and **fostering innovation ecosystems**. Despite these efforts, 44.4% of the EU workforce lacks basic digital skills, and women represent only 19.4% of ICT specialists[11]. The Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030 targets increasing adults with basic digital skills to 80% and ICT specialists to 20 million, with greater gender balance[12]. Education systems play a crucial role, guided by frameworks like DigComp and the European e-Competence Framework (e-CF) for ICT professionals, though mismatches between curricula and market needs persist, evidenced by the unemployment of 200,000 ICT-trained individuals in 2022[13]. At the regional level, a major challenge remains the need to strengthen widespread digital skills to encourage the autonomous, conscious, and responsible use of new technologies, promote the right to active digital citizenship for all, and facilitate the use of online services by individuals, enterprises and public administrations, simplifying interactions between citizens, enterprises and government.

Local and regional authori*t*es play a key role in fostering digital inclusion, yet disparities persist, particularly among older adults, rural populations, and small enterprises. For instance, 46% of rural residents lack basic digital skills[14], and only 22.4% of enterprises provide ICT training[15]. Addressing these gaps is vital for social cohesion, economic growth, and sustainability, as highlighted in the Digital Education Action Plan[16] and Cohesion Policy. The Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion of 2024 identified a persistent skills gap across the EU, which it concluded poses a risk to cohesion. This gap is particularly pronounced in rural and remote areas where the capacity to adopt and utilise digital technologies is lower compared to urban regions. As outlines in the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP), boosting Europe's technological leadership and resilience in critical sectors requires urgent investment in digital upskilling and innovation diffusion, particularly for SMEs and start-ups. To address these gaps, local and regional authorities should develop and coordinate digital services and innovation projects across administrations, enterprises, and citizens. They should also implement and manage digital infrastructure development, particularly for regional connectivity; and should encourage and support local public administrations in offering innovative digital services.

The WG also explores **digital technologies' role in advancing innovation ecosystems**. While deep-tech start-ups grow in the EU, regional disparities in digital transformation remain, especially in newer Member States. Investments in infrastructure, collaboration, and public administration reforms are needed to address barriers such as funding limitations and technical capacity gaps in municipalities[17].

Digitalisation also supports sustainability, aiding the European Green Deal through smart technologies in energy, agriculture, and manufacturing. Skills like data analysis and systems thinking

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[9] European Commission (n.d.). The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi

[10] European Commission (2024), 2030 Digital Decade – Report on the state of the Digital Decade 2024, ISBN: 978-92-68-18709-8 , DOI: 10.2759/922, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/report-state-digital-decade-2024

[11] Ibid

[12] European Commission (2020). *Europe's Digital Decade: digital targets for 2030, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en*

[13] European Labour Authority (2021), Report on Labour Shortages and Surpluses, https://www.ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-12/2021%20Labour%20shortages%20%20surpluses%20report.pdf

[14] Eurostat (n.d.), Individuals' level of digital skills (from 2021 onwards), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/isoc_sk_dskl_i21_esmsip2.htm

[15] Eurostat (2023), Enterprises that provided training to develop/upgrade ICT skills of their personnel by NACE Rev.2 Activity, Online data code: isoc_ske_ittn2. DOI: 10.2908/isoc_ske_ittn2, https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/mj5wexceg4ucrf3stl29dg?locale=en

[16] European Commission. (n.d.), Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan

[17] European Investment Bank (2023), Digitalisation in Europe 2022–2023, https://www.eib.org/attachments/lucalli/20230112_digitalisation_in_europe_2022_2023_en.pdf

are crucial for implementing green solutions[18], enabling enterprises to adopt sustainable practices and contribute to climate neutrality[19].

By fostering dialogue, sharing best practices, and supporting interventions, the Digital WG aims to reduce digital inequalities, enhance ICT education, and build inclusive innovation ecosystems.

Description of the problem drivers

The Digital WG concentrates on focus areas described in the previous section and is committed to identifying and promoting effective and replicable solutions to addressing the root causes identified as part of the WG activities. The WG is also tasked with providing a regional and cross-sectoral perspective on the solutions identified.

The issues explored by the Digital WG are influenced by several cross-cutting drivers that span systemic, socioeconomic, and technological dimensions.

One of the most prominent cross-cutting drivers is the **fragmented approach to digital skills provision across sectors and levels of education and training**. Education systems often lack clear, progressive pathways for digital skills development, from early childhood through higher education and vocational training to lifelong learning opportunities.[20] Furthermore, coordination between national and regional levels remains **insufficient**, leading to scattered initiatives that fail to provide a comprehensive overview of available options for learners and educators.[21] This systemic fragmentation is compounded by the **absence of agile plans to address emerging skills needs** and adapt to the fast-changing technological landscape.[22] Furthermore, micro enterprises, which make up a substantial portion of the SME sector, often **lack the resources to invest in comprehensive ICT training**. This gap can hinder the widespread adoption of green technologies and sustainable practices, particularly in regions where SMEs are the backbone of the economy[23].

Insufficient infrastructure and a pervasive **lack of digital readiness across educational institutions and regions** is also a critical challenge. While the digital divide has been substantially reduced over the last decade in Europe from a connectivity perspective, the gap remains far from closed. According to the 2015 European Commission's Digital Agenda Scoreboard, there is a danger that targets related to fast and ultra-fast speed broadband will be missed, especially in rural areas. In addition, access and use of digital public services or eGovernment, which can bring many opportunities to citizens and businesses and improve the quality of life of people in rural and remote regions, is unequal. Around 54% of EU internet users interacted with public authorities in 2023.[24]

Various factors, including the **high cost of some infrastructure and technology, investment priorities, and the lack of funding,** can cause the lack of digital infrastructure in some countries and regions. The inadequate investment in educational infrastructure, including technology-enhanced learning tools and laboratories, poses another difficulty. Insufficient resources for educational institutions hinder their ability to provide hands-on experiences and practical training essential for building digital competencies[25,26]. However, as indicated in literature, 'it is not whether technology is used (or not) which makes the difference, but how well the technology is used to support teaching and learning'[27]. Recent research[28] shows that even when infrastructural improvements are made, they are not always integrated

[18] OECD Projections on Skills Demand (2019–2030).
[19] European Commission (2022). *Integration of ICT and Green Competences in Enterprise Training*.
[20] Council of the EU (2018), Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning, Official Journal of the European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)
[21] European Commission. (n.d.), Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan
[22] European Commission (2023), 2030 Digital Decade – Report on the state of the Digital Decade 2023, ISBN: 978-92-68-07817-4, DOI: 10.2759/318547, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2023-report-state-digital-decade
[23] OECD (2023), Digital technologies for the green transition of SMEs, Session 3: Digital technologies for the green transition of SMEs (oecd-events.org)
[24]Eurostat (2023), Digital economy and society statistics - households and individuals, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals#Internet_access_of_households.2C_2010_and_2023
[25] Barrett (2019), The Impact of School Infrastructure on Learning, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/853821543501252792/pdf/132579-PUB-Impact-of-School.pdf
[26] The Digital Europe programme of DG CONNECT foresees the creation of legislative provisions catering for Tech Experimentation Sandboxes like Digital Innovation Hubs do.
[27] Låg, T., & Sæle, R. G. (2019). Does the flipped classroom improve student learning and satisfaction? A systematic review
[28] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019), Digital Education at School in Europe. Eurydice Report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, Digital Education at School in Europe (europa.eu)

and pedagogically used either in schools or higher education institutions, although the latter have generally a more advanced digital infrastructure compared to that of other sectors of education[29].

Demographic and socioeconomic factors also play a significant role in perpetuating disparities in digital skills acquisition. Hard-to-reach groups, including those in rural areas, low-income households, and marginalised communities, face systemic barriers to participating in digital skills initiatives. Cultural and structural barriers also hinder the participation of women and girls in ICT-related fields: despite the increase of the share of female ICT specialists during the period 2012-2023 in 18 EU Member States, the vast majority of ICT specialists in the EU are men (80.6%), against 19.4% of women   .[30] Moreover, marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, encounter systemic obstacles that prevent them from accessing or benefiting from digital initiatives: many technologies are not accessible to all users and people with disabilities may not have the required skills[31].

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, **data availability at the regional and local levels**, as well as effective **data governance**, play a critical role in ensuring that digital services can thrive. A recent study by the European Commission assessed the accessibility of high-value datasets across Member States and found that while most datasets are generally accessible, there are notable inconsistencies in metadata clarity and language. For instance, 6 out of 24 datasets were published only in national languages, creating translation difficulties for international users[32]. Additionally, eight of the datasets lacked references to relevant regulations, complicating efforts to verify compliance.

EU context

The Digital WG operates within a comprehensive EU legislative and policy framework aimed at fostering the twin transitions—digital and green—while addressing regional disparities and promoting inclusivity. This context is shaped by a range of legislative initiatives, funding mechanisms, and strategic policies designed to enhance education, training, and innovation ecosystems across Member States.

At the heart of this EU's legislative framework is the **Cohesion Policy**, which seeks to reduce regional disparities, foster economic, social, and territorial cohesion, and enable all regions to participate in the twin transition. The **Ninth Cohesion Report[33]** emphasises the importance of investing in digital skills and education to enable regions, especially less-developed ones, to adapt to economic shifts and participate in green and digital transformations. For instance, it highlights that regions benefiting from Cohesion Policy funding have demonstrated improved access to digital education and training, facilitating local economic development and progress toward environmental goals. The Cohesion Policy provides funding through instruments such as the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** Cohesion Fund, Interreg and **Just Transition Fund (JTF)**. These funds are partly directed toward enhancing digital education infrastructure, supporting skills development, and promoting sustainable economic practices. For instance, EUR 2.3 billion are planned to be mobilised under the Cohesion policy programmes 2021-2027 to digitalise up to 22,500 public administrations and to develop high-speed mobile networks and fixed digital infrastructure connecting 3.1 million dwellings and 356,000 enterprises[34].

Education and training systems are central to the EU's vision for equipping its workforce with the skills needed for the digital and green transitions. The **Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)[35]** sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age. Additionally, the **EU Pact for Skills Partnership**[36] aims to address challenges in the digital ecosystem,

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[29] OECD (2023), Shaping the future of digital education: enabling factors for quality, equity, and efficiency, Paris: OECD, Shaping Digital Education: Enabling Factors for Quality, Equity and Efficiency | READ online (oecd-ilibrary.org)
[30] Eurostat (2023), Persons with ICT education by labour status, Online data code: isoc_ski_itemp. DOI: 10.2908/isoc_ski_itemp, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=ICT_specialists_in_employment
[31] Fundación ONCE (2021), ILO Global Business and Disability Network. An inclusive digital economy for people with disabilities, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_769852.pdf
[32] European Commission (2024), An assessment of high-value datasets: How accessible are these datasets across Europe?, https://data.europa.eu/en/news-events/news/assessment-high-value-datasets-how-accessible-are-these-datasets-across-europe
[33] European Commission (2024), Ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en
[34] European Commission (n.d.). Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 outcome of programming, Outcome of 2021-2027 programming - cohesion policy | Cohesion Open Data
[35] European Commission (2028), Digital Education Action Plan, https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan
[36]European Commission (n.d.), Pact for Skills - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1517&langId=en#:~:text=The%20European%20Commission%20has%20launched%20the%20Pact%20for,services%20all%20have%20a%20key%20role%20to%20play

including shortages of ICT specialists, lack of work-life balance, and gender disparities. Complementing this, the **GreenComp framework**[37] provides guidelines for integrating sustainability competencies into education systems, aligning digital skills development with environmental objectives.

The **Digital Decade Policy Programme**[38] sets ambitious targets for the EU, including ensuring that 80% of adults have basic digital skills and increasing the number of employed ICT specialists to 20 million by 2030.

The EU also recognises the importance of creating robust innovation ecosystems to support the twin transitions. Policies like the **Horizon Europe**[39] programme fund research and development in green technologies and digital solutions, while initiatives such as **Digital Innovation Hubs**[40] provide SMEs with resources to innovate and adopt digital technologies.

To ensure that no one is left behind, the EU has introduced measures to improve digital inclusion and accessibility. The **Web Accessibility Directive**[41] mandates that public sector websites and applications are accessible to people with disabilities, while the **EU Rural Action Plan**[42] proposes a block of actions for connected rural areas to boost sustainable transport links and digitalisation through investments in infrastructure, technology development and skills enhancement activities.

Finally, ensuring the 'right to stay' is one of the main priorities set out in the recent Political Guidelines for the European Commission 2024-2029. Achieving this will require all EU regions to become (or remain) attractive places to live and work and comes with the need for reforms and investments to support professional development opportunities, access to essential services and quality of life, and physical and digital connectivity.

Cross-cutting themes

Demographic change and talent management have multi-dimensional characteristics which go beyond access to digital infrastructure and services and the development of digital skills. These issues encompass a range of challenges, such as ensuring regional economic prosperity through innovation potential, excellence in education, the availability of high-skilled job opportunities, healthcare infrastructure, access to essential services and other factors contributing to the quality of life such as the availability of affordable housing. Key cross-cutting themes include: **skills, innovation, inclusion, and essential services and quality of life**.

1) **Skills:** According to the European Commission, in 2024 only 55.6% of the EU's population had at least some basic digital skills[43]. As basic digital skills are a precondition for inclusion and participation in the labour market and society, **upskilling the workforce** is a topic that is extremely relevant first of all for Digital WG, but also for other WGs. The Health WG highlights the importance of skills promotion for the healthcare sector. At the same time, the R&I Working Group highlights the importance of developing human capital as a fundamental aspect of the smart specialisation process, which is crucial for the sustainability of regional innovation ecosystems. It is therefore vital that recommendations for the introduction and/or further enhancement of up and reskilling programmes are developed in collaboration across the Working Groups, to highlight the commonalities in the most promising approaches identified across the good practices collected by the different groups.

2) **Innovation:** The need **to strengthen research capabilities and innovation ecosystems** is naturally a topic addressed by the R&I WG, but it is also closely tied to the scope of the Digital WG, given the transformative role that digital technologies play in fostering innovation and building robust digital innovation ecosystems. These technologies enable smarter, more efficient solutions across various sectors, facilitate seamless knowledge transfer, and empower regions to enhance their

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[37] European Commission (2022), GreenComp: The European sustainability competence framework, https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/greencomp-european-sustainability-competence-framework_en

[38] EU4Digital (n.d.), 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade, https://eufordigital.eu/library/2030-digital-compass-the-european-way-for-the-digital-decade/ https://eufordigital.eu/library/2030-digital-compass-the-european-way-for-the-digital-decade/

[39] European Commission (n.d.), Horizon Europe, https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

[40] European Commission (n.d.), European Digital Innovation Hubs Network, https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/home

[41] DIRECTIVE (EU) 2016/2102 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016L2102&from=EN

[42] European Commission (n.d.) Rural Vision. https://rural-vision.europa.eu/index_en

[43] More information available at https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-skills

competitiveness in an increasingly digital world. Innovation is not only crucial for enhancing a region's attractiveness to high-skilled individuals but is also vital for driving efficiency, sustainability, and growth across sectors such as healthcare, energy, and education. The Territorial WG explores innovation through the lens of local dynamic innovation ecosystems, while the Health WG emphasises the role of innovation in improving efficiency and service delivery in healthcare systems under growing strain.

3) **Inclusion:** Furthermore, the theme of **inclusion (gender equality, multiculturalism, and social inclusion)** is central to the priorities of the Digital WG and closely intersects with the objectives of other WGs, highlighting the importance of coordinated efforts. From a digital perspective, inclusion entails ensuring equitable access to digital services and technologies for all individuals, irrespective of age, physical abilities, or socioeconomic background. This focus is particularly relevant in contexts such as healthcare, where innovations like remote consultations depend on both digital accessibility and sufficient digital literacy among users. This is explored by the Health WG, which investigates how to enhance service models and address the needs of ageing populations. In addition, this focus aligns with the Territorial WG's emphasis on promoting inclusion, diversity, and talent retention.

4) **Essential services and quality of life:** According to the European Pillar of Social Rights, everyone has the right to access essential services (including digital communications) of good quality, and support for access to such services shall be available for those in need. The provision of access to essential services and quality of life is a cross-cutting topic between the Working Groups as each addresses critical aspects of accessibility and quality. The Digital WG focuses on ensuring equitable access to digital services and technologies, which are fundamental for modern healthcare, education, and mobility solutions. The Health WG examines how to enhance healthcare service models, particularly for ageing populations, by leveraging digital innovations and ensuring accessibility. The R&I WG contributes by fostering research and innovation ecosystems that develop new solutions for essential services, thereby improving regional capabilities and addressing disparities. Together, these efforts ensure that all regions can provide access to essential services and quality of life for all citizens, regardless of their place of living, age or social background.

The figure below provides a summary of the scope of action of the Digital WG, including the main challenges and problem drivers tackled, EU context and cross-cutting themes (section 2), as well as the expected outputs it intends to produce in this context (section 3).

Figure 1: Overview of the scope of action of the Digital WG
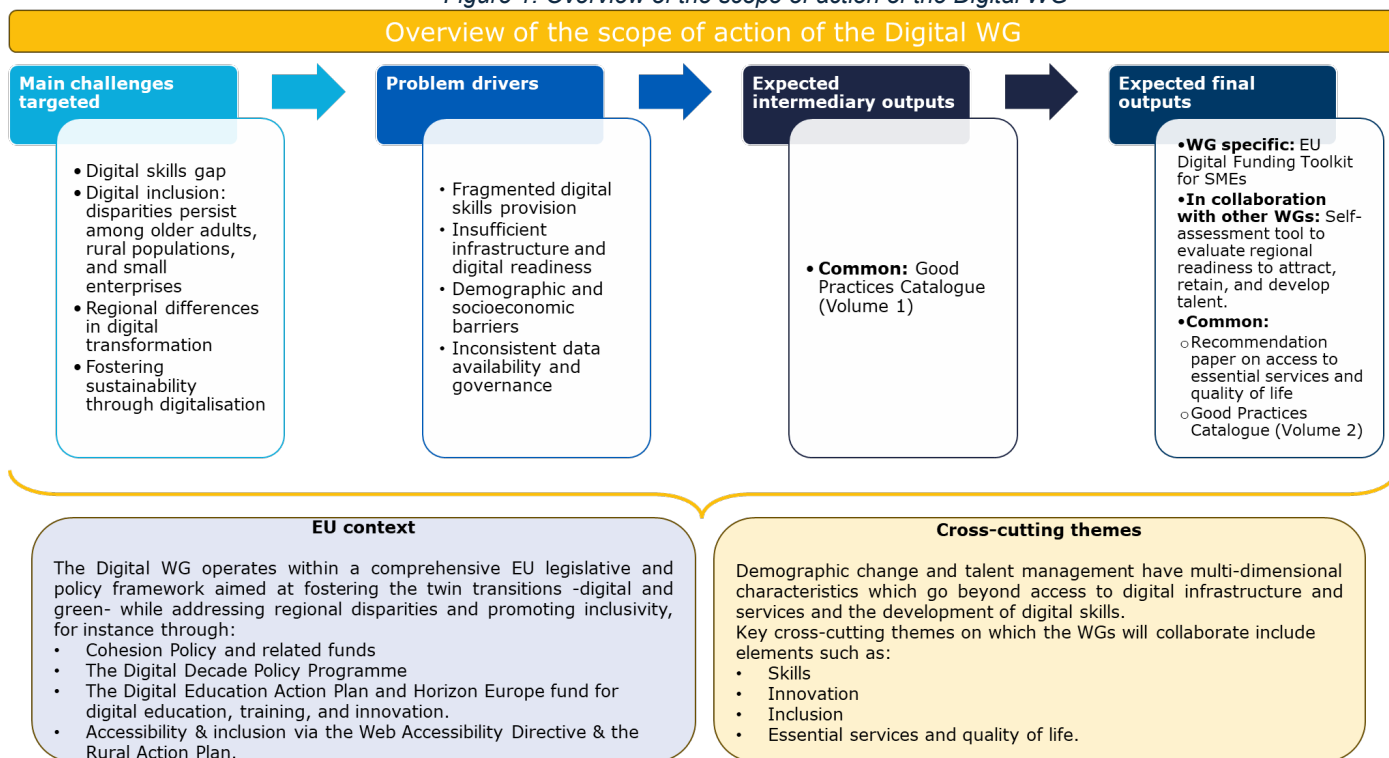
3. Expected outputs

The delivery phase in which the WGs are currently engaged can be clustered into two different sub-phases, with the first one focusing on the collection of information, resulting in a set of intermediary outputs and a subsequent phase, characterised by the analysis of information gathered, with results being presented as part of the final outputs.

The intermediary outputs consolidate initial analyses made by the Digital WG in the issue papers, to pave the way for presenting the unique view of local/regional stakeholders on EU challenges related to the topic of harnessing talent. By exploring the different dimensions of how these challenges are manifested on the ground, the local/regional stakeholders can then contribute to the development of recommendations for policy solutions through the production of the final outputs.

These intermediary outputs are also designed as essential steps within a logical sequence, laying the groundwork for the development of final deliverables, planned to be published in 2026. These final outputs will represent the culmination of 2.5 years of analysis, iterative production, engagement with external stakeholders, and alignment with emerging EU priorities. They are envisioned as the WG's legacy, providing actionable solutions through well-defined problem analysis and evidence-based recommendations in order to:

1) help regions mitigate challenges associated with population decline of tertiary educated population and how to harness talent in the digital sector
2) support evidence-based policies on regional development and migration and facilitate policy making from EU regional authorities (in particularly those at risk/in a talent development trap)

The table below presents an overview of the intermediary and final outputs envisioned by the Digital WG at this stage[44].

Table 1: Expected outputs of the Digital WG

INTERMEDIARY OUTPUTS		PROPOSED FINAL OUTPUTS		
WG SPECIFIC	**CONTRIBUTION TO THE OUTPUT COMMON FOR ALL WGs**	**WG SPECIFIC**	**IN COLLABORATION WITH OTHER WGs**	**COMMON FOR ALL WGs**
N/A	Good Practices Catalogue (Volume 1) with initial reflections on their contribution to harnessing talent in regions. (Coordination: HTP Secretariat. Contribution: All WGs)	EU Digital Funding Toolkit for SMEs	Self-assessment tool to evaluate regional readiness to attract, retain, and develop talent. (Leader: Digital WG. Collaboration with the R&I WG).	Recommendation paper on access to essential services and quality of life (Leader: Territorial WG. Contribution: Digital, R&I, Health WGs). Good Practices Catalogue (Volume 2) with final reflections on their contribution to harnessing talent in regions. (Coordination: HTP Secretariat. Contribution: All WGs)

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[44] The list of final outputs may be subject to further revision in the light of changing priorities.

Intermediary outputs

Contribution to the common intermediary output for all WGs:

Good Practices Catalogue (Volume 1): A common goal across all WGs as well as all thematic areas of the Digital WG, is to identify good practices, which represent relevant solutions and strategies to support a) policy makers and b) practitioners on the ground. The Digital WG is therefore contributing with a number of selected good practices to the Good Practices Catalogue (Volume 1), a document that will pool all cases from across the WGs, combined with initial reflections on their contribution to harnessing talent.

The catalogue will include specific fiches to provide detailed insights into the selected good practices, Drawing on the good practices, the catalogue will also feature an analysis of 'preliminary takeaways' from the perspective of the Digital WG, which will be based on the good practices collected.

Therefore, Digital WG members are collecting/have collected good practices focusing on:

a) Enhancing the digital skills of teaching and training staff.
b) Implementing strategic initiatives to enhance digital skills.
c) Implementing useful and efficient digital public services.
d) Securing digital innovation funding.

Across the WGs, the WG members based on their expertise and networks, have collected to date a total of more than 110 good practices, with 30 of them having been collected by the Digital WG. A subset of these, carefully selected by the WG members, will be published as part of Volume 1 of the Catalogue. Over the upcoming months additional good practices may be collected by the WG members (and potentially through consultations with stakeholders). Such additional good practices may be considered for the Good Practices Catalogue (Volume 2).

Final outputs

WG specific final outputs:

As a result of the data collection phase, the Digital WG aims to develop a **practical and accessible EU Digital Funding Toolkit** to support SMEs in navigating available funding opportunities for digital innovation. Recognising the persistent challenges faced by small and medium enterprises in securing EU funding for digital transformation, the WG seeks to address key barriers such as **lack of awareness of digital funding programs, complexity of application processes, and limited access to tailored support mechanisms**. The WG recognises that beyond financial capital, SMEs require support in leveraging EU funding to attract and retain talent, invest in innovation, and enhance competitiveness in both local and global markets.

SMEs -particularly those in **regions that are in or at risk of falling into a talent development trap**- face significant difficulties in accessing financial support for digitalisation, innovation, and workforce upskilling. Existing resources, such as the EU Funding and Tenders Portal and national resources, provide a wealth of information, but they can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate, especially for smaller businesses without prior experience in EU funding. Moreover, insufficient coordination between EU, national, and regional digital funding programs creates inefficiencies, making it harder for SMEs to leverage funding effectively for their digital transition.

To address these challenges, the WG is planning to develop an EU Digital Funding Toolkit for SMEs, designed to provide clear, structured, and practical guidance on digital funding opportunities. The toolkit would focus exclusively on funding programs that support digital innovation, digital skills development, and SME digital transformation, to ensure that businesses can access relevant financial instruments to drive their competitiveness in the digital economy.

The toolkit would include a **comprehensive overview of ten key EU digital funding programs**, such as Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, EIC Accelerator, and Resilience and Structural Funds, breaking down opportunities by purpose, eligibility criteria, and impact on SME competitiveness. The toolkit would be tailored to the specific needs of SMEs, offering step-by-step guidance on applications, links to support networks, and real-world case studies of SMEs that have successfully leveraged digital funding.

A critical aspect of the initiative would be regional adaptability, with a **focus on SMEs in regions experiencing -or at risk of- a talent development trap**. By providing targeted guidance on digital

funding opportunities, the toolkit would help these enterprises invest in digital skills, adopt new technologies, and enhance their ability to attract and retain talent. The resource would also integrate with established SME support networks, directing enterprises to platforms such as the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, Enterprise Europe Network, and regional digital innovation hubs, to ensure it complements rather than duplicates existing resources.

Additionally, it would align with emerging EU priorities, including the upcoming Competitiveness Fund and Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) reforms, ensuring that SMEs remain well-positioned to benefit from evolving funding mechanisms.

The development of the toolkit is planned to be informed by consultations with key stakeholders, including SME representatives such as SME United and Eurochambres, as well digital business networks, and representatives from SMEs and digital clusters. The WG also plans to engage in dedicated exchanges with the R&I WG, to ensure alignment with broader efforts to strengthen digital innovation ecosystems and improve access to EU funding for digital transformation.

In collaboration with other WGs:

The Digital WG (output leader) is planning to collaborate with the R&I WG (output contributor) to create a **Self-assessment tool to evaluate regional readiness to attract, retain, and develop talent.** This tool would be designed to help regions evaluate their current digital capabilities and identify specific challenges in knowledge valorisation and digitalisation. This tool would provide a diagnostic framework, enabling regions to pinpoint gaps in their ability to harness and translate knowledge into tangible innovative products or e-services. It would offer a baseline understanding of where a region stands in terms of its digital readiness (Digital WG) and talent valorisation capacity (R&I WG). This final output is envisaged as a practical, standardised framework that would enable regions to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities within their digital talent ecosystems. The tool would target both the regional authorities as collective entities and the civil servants or executives (individual level) working in these entities. Collaboration among the Digital and R&I WGs would be essential for the development of this tool, as these domains and expertise closely complement each other. This multidisciplinary approach would ensure that the tool addresses the interconnected dimensions of talent readiness, making it both robust and adaptable to diverse regional contexts.

The Self-assessment tool, through a series of targeted questions, would be designed to gain insights into areas such as knowledge valorisation, digital readiness, skills development, public service delivery, innovation capacity, and inclusivity. The roles of the two WGs would be as follows:

- **The Digital WG** would elaborate on a questionnaire focused on assessing digital readiness. This section would address critical dimensions such as digital infrastructure, the availability and development of digital skills, the digitalisation of public services, capacity for digital innovation, and inclusivity in access to digital tools and services.

- **The R&I WG** would contribute by developing an assessment questionnaire that evaluates a region's readiness in various aspects of knowledge valorisation. This would include fostering collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and other R&I actors, strengthening networking capabilities, and ensuring the availability of infrastructure suitable for research and innovation activities.

Under the guidance of the HTP Secretariat, the combined efforts of these two WGs would result in a comprehensive, practical tool that would empower regions to strengthen their capacity to attract and retain talent while supporting inclusive and sustainable development.

Contribution to common final outputs for all WGs:

- **A Recommendation paper on access to essential services and quality of life**, which is planned to be produced under the lead of the Territorial WG. Access to innovative solutions and services, regardless of an individual's age, social status or place of home is an essential factor contributing to the overall quality of life. The Digital WG members would therefore provide suggestions and ideas for potential actions that policymakers should consider to ensure equitable access to digital tools and technologies. These contributions would focus on recommendations to enhance digital connectivity, inclusivity, and literacy, thereby enabling all Europeans, regardless of age, social status, or location, to benefit from essential services such as healthcare, education, and public administration in a digitalised society. Additionally, the Digital WG would incorporate aspects of the green transition and sustainability in its inputs. This would include recommendations on how to

leverage digital technologies to support environmentally sustainable practices, reduce carbon footprints, and promote energy/costs efficiency in the provision of essential services.

- **Good Practices Catalogue (Volume 2)**, which is planned to be a shared production, capturing good practice fiches from all four Working Groups. It shall follow a similar structure to Volume 1. The publication of this second Volume of the Catalogue would allow the Digital WG to contribute with additional cases if deemed relevant.

4. Governance and collaboration methods and partners

Role of the Working Group members and the HTP secretariat

To achieve the coordinated production of outputs and to ensure that these are coherent, impactful, and mutually reinforcing, a structured approach with clear responsibilities has been elaborated for each WG and is presented here below. This approach will focus on fostering synergies across WGs, minimising overlaps, and leveraging contributions from other TBM stakeholders and EU initiatives.

1) Governance of the Digital WG and collaboration between the WG members and the HTP Secretariat

Each WG is composed of two WG leaders and WG members who collectively steer and execute the group's activities. Within the WG members, additional thematic area coordinators will support the production of thematic outputs, notably to ensure that the Digital WG priority themes are well-covered for all planned outputs (see section 3). .

WG leaders:

- Responsible for driving the overall activities of the respective WGs.
- Provide strategic guidance and ensure adherence to the timeline.
- Foster collaboration within the Digital WG and across the WGs (Health, Territorial and R&I).
- Act as a key point of contact for other WG members and spokesperson of the Digital WG.

WG members:

- Validate the WG's strategic direction, priorities, and selected topics for analysis.
- Approve the WG's workplan (see section 5 of this document) and ensure alignment with its objectives.
- Contribute to the identification and assessment of good practices.
- Lead or supporting the production and drafting of intermediary and final outputs within their area of expertise.
- Refine and validate cross-cutting intermediary and final outputs, ensuring they align with the WG's goals and broader HTP objectives.
- Participate in consultations (where applicable), fostering synergies and mutual learning.

Thematic area coordinators:

- Steer the work towards the production within particular thematic areas.
- Delegate responsibilities among WG members to ensure an efficient and timely production.
- Monitor progress and ensure the timely delivery of contributions.

The **HTP Secretariat** provides strategic, logistical, and operational support to the WGs. Its primary role is to enable the smooth functioning of WGs, foster collaboration, and ensure the production of high-quality outputs. As such, the HTP Secretariat is in charge of:

- Steering the development of the outputs by coordinating the efforts of the WG members, following-up on agreed actions and providing methodological guidance.
- Reviewing the content and consolidating intermediary and final outputs of the WG until reaching publishable formats on the HTP.
- Supporting the validation process for cross-cutting outputs by ensuring input and buy-in from all relevant WGs.
- Facilitating alignment with the work conducted by relevant EU initiatives and stakeholders.

Each WG is assigned **dedicated facilitators** from the HTP Secretariat. The WG facilitators are:

- The primary points of contact for the WG, which are aware of the outputs' development and content.
- Responsible for moderating WG outputs and meetings to ensure productive and inclusive discussions
- Tasked with overseeing the progress of WG activities more closely, providing ongoing support to WG leaders and members.
- Ensuring that the WG's activities remain aligned with the overall goals and timelines of the HTP.

Collaboration activities and methods

While the four WGs cover different topics, sectors and thematic areas, they all work towards a common goal, which is to provide a deeper insight into how regions dealing with demographic challenges can attract, develop and retain talent, by exploring potential solutions and devise instruments linked to their respective themes. As such, the WGs are encouraged to support each other's work through reviews, knowledge sharing and discussions. Furthermore, WGs are collaborating directly in the light of the production of common outputs such as the good practices catalogues or certain recommendation papers. Their collaboration is supported by the following means:

- **Shared resources and tools:** A MS Teams channel with common SharePoint has been set-up to support remote collaboration. A number of shared files support the centralisation and streamlining of contributions. These files include a repository of good practices, ongoing draft outputs, and key insights from consultations. Furthermore, WG members have the possibility to review each other's work and comment on respective working documents.

- **Regular inter-WG meetings:** To facilitate active coordination, monthly inter-WG meetings are held. These meetings provide updates on progress and intermediary outputs, identify overlapping themes or challenges that could benefit from joint efforts, discuss opportunities for developing cross-cutting recommendations and shared outputs.

- **Dedicated coordination contact points:** The WG leaders act as "Collaboration lead", responsible for ensuring their WG's contributions align with shared objectives, acting as a liaison for inter-WG communication and coordination, and leading efforts to integrate cross-cutting themes into outputs.

Collaboration with partners outside the realm of the WGs

As the envisioned outputs of the WGs' activities should benefit a large number of stakeholders outside the realm of their own network, it is important that the WG members engage in the dialogue with other partners. Here specifically the engagement with other TBM stakeholders and other EU actors and platforms is deemed relevant.

Engagement with other TBM stakeholders

The WG members could engage with some regions under Pillar 1 or Pillar 2 of the TBM (Technical Assistance) and or project beneficiaries from Pillars 3 to 5[45]. Where relevant, meetings can be organised, if requested by WG members or regions and project beneficiaries, giving Pillar representatives an opportunity to discuss challenges they are facing or share insights from their own regional perspective to then benefit from the thematic expertise of the WGs members. This dialogue can also shape the production of outputs such as the focus of good practices collected, or recommendations drafted by the WG members.

In addition, all final WG outputs will be made publicly accessible on the HTP website and via dedicated HTP Newsletters. This will ensure broad dissemination and transparency, allowing stakeholders across Europe to engage with the findings, recommendations, and tools developed by the WGs.

Engagement with other EU actors, initiatives and platforms

As identified in the WGs issue papers, within the European landscape other initiatives are relevant to the scope and the activities of each of the WGs. Thematic consultation (interviews and/or workshops) with selected stakeholders and platforms (e.g. relevant DGs, initiatives or research bodies) will be organised. These consultations will provide external perspectives and insights into WG themes, test the

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[45] For more information on the different Pillars of the TBM, please visit the **Support on the Ground** page of the HTTP:
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communities-and-networks/harnessing-talent-platform/support-on-the-ground_en

relevance and applicability of proposed outputs, and identify opportunities for alignment with ongoing EU initiatives.

Below one can find a list of other potential partners for the Digital WG, which may be consulted throughout the delivery phase (this list may be evolving):

- European Commission, DG REGIO
- European Commission, DG EAC
- European Commission, DG CONNECT
- European Commission, DG EMPL
- Working Groups within the European Education Area (EEA)
- European Innovation Council (EIC)
- Digital Innovation Hubs

Where applicable, consultations with these stakeholders are envisaged. In other cases, a thorough review of available documentation produced by these stakeholders is planned. The HTP Secretariat will coordinate these engagements, with the support of DG REGIO, leveraging its network to identify and involve relevant external actors at appropriate stages of the WG's work.

5. Workplan

The production of outputs within the HTP WGs follows a structured, multi-stage approach to ensure clarity, quality, and coherence at each level: the process began with a data collection phase and will result in first intermediary outputs such as the Good Practices Catalogue Volume 1. Insights will later fuel the production of final outputs, whether they are WG specific or produced in collaboration with other WGs.

To ensure the timely production of the outputs, the WG members will meet several times either within their own WG, together with other WGs or as part of WG overall progress meetings (organised three times a year, one in-person meeting and two online meetings). In addition to these official meetings, the WG members can engage in a variety of operational meetings that take place both at the WG level and with the contributors to different thematic areas. Additional inter-WG online meetings (on top of those listed in the table below) may be organised by the HTP Secretariat if requested by the WG members or if deemed relevant by the HTP Secretariat to facilitate the contribution to common outputs.

The following table provide an overview of the foreseen timeline for the Digital WG up to the production of final outputs.

OUTPUTS	TIME	Digital WG meetings	Consultations with other Working Groups	Consultations with external stakeholders
INTERMEDIARY OUTPUTS	Jan-25	WG overall progress meeting	Online WGs plenary meeting (*)	Consultations with DG REGIO, DG EAC, DG CONNECT, DG EMPL, Working Groups within the European Education Area (EEA), EIC, Digital Innovation Hubs and other relevant stakeholders to conclude on the definition of planned final outputs
	Feb-25	Thematic meeting on the 'Good Practices Catalogue Volume 1'		
	Mar-25	WG overall progress meeting	Online WGs plenary meeting (*)	
	Apr-25	Thematic meeting to discuss the planned stakeholder consultations and potential refinements of final outputs	Meeting with R&I WG on the Self-assessment tool to evaluate regional readiness to attract, retain, and develop talent.	
	May-25	WG overall progress meeting		
*WGs plenary meeting offer the possibility to concentrate on overall progress and outputs common to all WGs.				
FINAL OUTPUTS	Jun-25	Thematic meeting on results of the consultations and preparation of the final outputs of the Digital WG (EU Digital Funding Toolkit for SMEs)	Online WGs plenary meeting: Exchange on shared final outputs (Recommendation paper on assessing skills needs and addressing skills development in place-based innovation strategies, Self-assessment tool to evaluate regional readiness to attract, retain, and develop talent, Good Practices Catalogue Volume 2, Recommendation paper on access to essential services and quality of life)	Consultations with DG REGIO, DG EAC, DG CONNECT, DG EMPL, Working Groups within the European Education Area (EEA), EIC, Digital Innovation Hubs and other relevant stakeholders to support the preparation of final outputs

Jul-25	WG overall progress meeting		
Aug-25			
Sep-25	WG overall progress meeting	Meeting with R&I WG on the Self-assessment tool Meeting with all WGs on the Good Practices Catalogue Volume 2 and the Recommendation paper on access to essential services and quality of life	
Oct-25		In Person WGs plenary meeting	Consultations with DG REGIO, DG EAC, DG CONNECT, DG EMPL, Working Groups within the European Education Area (EEA), EIC, Digital Innovation Hubs and other relevant stakeholders on the finalisation of outputs
Nov-25	WG overall progress meeting		
Dec-25	Thematic meeting on the finalisation of WG specific outputs and their dissemination	Meeting with R&I WG on the Self-assessment tool Meeting with all WGs on the Good Practices Catalogue Volume 2 and the Recommendation paper on access to essential services and quality of life	
Jan-26		Online WGs plenary meeting: Finalisation of outputs	Review of prepared outputs in consultation with DG REGIO, DG EAC, DG CONNECT, DG EMPL, Working Groups within the European Education Area (EEA), EIC, Digital Innovation Hubs and other relevant stakeholders.
Feb-26	WG overall progress meeting		
Mar-26	-	-	
Apr-26		Last online WGs plenary meeting	