

STUDY

Requested by the CULT Committee

# Making the European Education Area a reality: state of affairs, challenges and prospects



**Culture and Education**



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RESEARCH FOR CULT COMMITTEE

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# Making the European Education Area a reality: state of affairs, challenges and prospects

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## **Abstract**

This study presents and examines three communications on a future European Education Area published by the European Commission between November 2017 and September 2020, analysing the reception and assessment of these communications by the other EU institutions, Member States and various stakeholders. It highlights existing challenges and makes concrete recommendations as regards the strategy, governance and priorities required to turn the vision of a European Education Area into reality by 2025.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BFUG</b>	Bologna Follow-up Group
<b>CoR</b>	European Committee of the Regions
<b>CoVEs</b>	Centres of Vocational Excellence
<b>CULT</b>	Committee on Culture and Education
<b>CVET</b>	Continuous Vocational Education and Training
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>ECTS</b>	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
<b>EEA</b>	European Education Area
<b>EESC</b>	European Economic and Social Committee
<b>EFTA</b>	European Free Trade Association
<b>EHEA</b>	European Higher Education Area
<b>EIT</b>	European Institute of Innovation and Technology
<b>EQF</b>	European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning
<b>ERA</b>	European Research Area
<b>ERAC</b>	European Research Area and Innovation Committee
<b>ESCN</b>	European Student Card Number
<b>ESI</b>	European Student Identifier
<b>ESIF</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>IVET</b>	Initial Vocational Education and Training
<b>NARIC</b>	National Academic Recognition Information Centres
<b>OMC</b>	Open Method of Coordination

<b>PISA</b>	Programme for International Student Assessment
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SHS</b>	Social and Human Sciences
<b>STE(A)M</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering, (Arts) and Mathematics
<b>VET</b>	Vocational Education and Training

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Creating a European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 features among the key objectives of European education policies and is considered both a **driver for economic growth and social cohesion**, and a means to foster a **sense of European belonging**. Focusing on the three main Commission communications outlining the plan of an EEA, this study intends to:

- 1) Embed the vision of a European Education Area into a broader **historical context**;
- 2) Provide an in-depth-analysis of the **evolution of policy initiatives** linked to the EEA and depict **reactions and responses** to these by EU bodies, Member States and important stakeholders in the field;
- 3) Analyse **shifts in policy priorities** and assess the proposed **future governance structure** of the EEA;
- 4) Outline challenges ahead and put forward a series of policy **recommendations**.

### 1. Introduction: from utopia to policy – towards a European Education Area

The Commission's political goal to create a European Education Area by 2025 needs to be seen in a broader historical context. This chapter illustrates that the vision of Europe as a common cultural and educational space has been an integral part of the European integration process since the Second World War, and also that it can be traced back to well before the twentieth century. In this regard, the role of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism and its universal concept of education is emphasised, as is the 'educational thrust' of Enlightenment philosophy and concrete educational reforms put in place under enlightened absolutist rulers. With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, voices arguing a European dimension in education became less pronounced, yet with some remarkable exceptions such as Stefan Zweig. From the beginning of the 'European project' and especially since the 1980s – thus long before the idea of a common European education area became an explicit EU policy objective –, significant initiatives paved the way for the emergence of the EEA, the most prominent being the launch of the Erasmus Programme (1987), the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), the Bologna Process (1999) and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (2010).

### 2. The Commission's 2017/2018 vision of creating a European Education Area by 2025

With the aim of revitalising the European project and tackling persistent challenges in the field of education, the Commission in tandem with the Council presented its first concrete vision of a European Education Area in November 2017. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, this vision centred on overcoming the obstacles still hampering students' and learners' mobility across Europe, and on strengthening EU citizens' sense of European belonging. Other EU bodies, Member States and relevant stakeholder organisations generally welcomed this initiative. Nonetheless, some reservations were expressed, revolving mainly around: (a) perceived gaps in the **implementation strategy**, (b) the uncertain **geographical scope** of the project, and (c) lack of information on the **interplay** of the future EEA with the existing European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. In May 2018,

the Commission published a further communication on the EEA that put forward **four flagship initiatives** aimed at making the EEA a reality by 2025:

- 1) The **mutual recognition** of diplomas and learning periods abroad;
- 2) The improvement of **language learning**;
- 3) The **European Student Card** initiative;
- 4) The **European Universities** initiative.

These initiatives generated divergent **reactions** from various actors involved in the policy field of education:

- As regards the mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad, while potential benefits were generally acknowledged, concerns about the time required to implement this initiative and its geographical scope were raised.
- The suggested improvement of language learning, putting a strong focus on language teaching in compulsory education and complemented by a specific Council recommendation in May 2019, generated only a limited reaction in the education community.
- The European Student Card Initiative, aimed at giving a European dimension to current student cards and digitalising administrative procedures, though perceived very positively, raised questions on data protection, the risk of duplicating digital infrastructures and its elevated cost.
- The European Universities initiative, the pilot phase of which resulted in 41 European university alliances involving 279 European higher education institutions being set up, was generally well perceived. It generated the largest number of responses, focusing primarily on issues of inclusion, financial sustainability and governance matters.

### 3. Towards a more comprehensive strategy: the Commission communication of September 2020

In September 2020, the Commission published an ambitious new communication on the EEA, promoting further cooperation between European educational institutions, targeting European citizens of all ages and proposing a series of initiatives revolving around **six key dimensions**: (1) **quality in education and training**, (2) **inclusion and gender equality**, (3) **green and digital transitions**, (4) **teachers and trainers**, (5) **higher education**, (6) **the geopolitical dimension**. The Commission put forward a wide range of proposals for action within these dimensions, comprising numerous ongoing initiatives, but also new projects under the new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), upcoming Council recommendations, the setting up of new expert groups and support to Member States.

It can be shown that in comparison to the previous communications of 2017 and 2018, certain areas – especially those covering gender equality, the green transition and the geopolitical dimension of the EEA – had gained prominence and visibility by 2020. At the same time, other topics such as media literacy or European identity, the latter being largely supplanted by the European way of life in 2020, had lost much of their initial relevance. A particular novelty of the 2020 communication was the envisaged creation of an **enabling framework** that can be seen as groundwork for a future fully fledged governance body for the EEA.

## 4. Outlook and recommendations

Despite the undeniable political efforts undertaken recently to translate the vision of a European Education Area into political reality, establishing a clear strategy on how to convert political ambitions into a concrete policy programme remains the main overarching challenge for the EEA in the years to come. Several more specific challenges have also been identified, addressed by means of **nine concrete policy recommendations**:

- 1) Set up a concrete **implementation strategy** and draw up a comprehensive **evaluation framework**, in line with UN sustainable development goal 4 on education, in order to monitor progress and identify shortcomings in the implementation of EEA initiatives.
- 2) Provide clarifications on the **geographical scope** of the European Education Area, taking into account current good practices in the Erasmus+ Programme and the implementation of the Bologna Process.
- 3) Clarify **governance arrangements** as regards the type of participation required from Member States and other levels of government having a competence or playing an active role in education policy, in particular local and regional authorities.
- 4) Specify the level of **involvement** expected from stakeholder organisations and engage further with representatives of sectors that have been underrepresented so far, such as primary and secondary education and the social sciences and humanities.
- 5) Look at how to ensure **synergies** between the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area.
- 6) Foster **media literacy** at all stages of learning as a central means of empowering responsible European citizens.
- 7) Establish the principle of **academic freedom** as a core principle of the European Education Area.
- 8) Foster **inclusiveness** in the broadest sense of the term, in order to support the participation of disadvantaged learners.
- 9) Ensure that a stronger **European dimension** is included in students' curricula and teachers' training, including through Jean Monnet actions and the Erasmus Teacher Academies.



# 1. INTRODUCTION: FROM UTOPIA TO POLICY – TOWARDS A EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

The creation of a European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 is among the declared key objectives of European education policies and seen not only as a means to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for economic growth and job creation, as well as improved social cohesion, but also as an instrument to strengthen a European sense of belonging.

This study intends to:

- 1) Locate the EU's political goal to create an EEA in a broader context, by examining preceding visions and concrete political initiatives aimed at creating a common educational and learning space in Europe;
- 2) Present the key objectives of the EEA and the positions of the various EU institutions and bodies, EU Member States and key stakeholders;
- 3) Critically examine the evolution of EEA policies and outline existing challenges and shortcomings;
- 4) Provide suggestions for the political way forward.

## 1.1. Visions of a common educational and learning space in Europe – historical perspectives

The vision of Europe as a common cultural and educational space is an integral part of the long (pre-) history of the European integration process, which dates back well before the twentieth century. Numerous politicians and practitioners, thinkers and visionaries from most divergent backgrounds and with very different world views and intentions have reflected upon both the purpose and form of a common Europe.

In this context, European philosophers, historians and others shared a clear understanding from early on that the formation of any community and body politic requires more than merely common political or economic structures, namely a minimum of cultural compatibility and a shared knowledge base in the wide sense of the meaning. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism, for example, advocated the role of education and learning by promoting comprehensive educational reform, considered a prerequisite for the full development of human abilities and citizenship through the acquisition of both knowledge and virtue<sup>1</sup>. Some of the key figures of this historical period (among them Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1466-1536) embodied not only the prototype of the wandering scholar in an internationalised scholarly community, but also the ideal of the global citizen.

Following in the wake of Renaissance humanism and based on a universal concept of education stressing the need for the holistic 'training' of humankind in its entirety, the Enlightenment was permeated by the idea that appropriate educational tools were indispensable for the making of self-determined citizens, and thus also for the achievement of social and civilisational goals. In other words, education was seen as suited for the generation of common values, for enabling progress, and for ensuring collaboration and ultimately peace among peoples<sup>2</sup>. The educational thrust of the

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<sup>1</sup> In essence, humanistic education was intended to enable man to recognise his true destiny and to realise an ideal humanity by imitating classical models.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of Enlightenment thought, educational goals are determined by the need of man to live in society: man has to be shaped in such a way that he can become a useful member of society. Existing abilities are to be developed in this forming process, yet the educational goals as such are not defined by the individual. Rather, they are ideals that can claim eternal validity independently of the individual.

Enlightenment found its expression both implicitly and explicitly; the latter, for example, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762), in which Rousseau described a new system of education enabling the *natural man* to fight corruption and create the modern society<sup>3</sup>, or Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) *Über Pädagogik* (1803). Therein, Kant stated that 'man can only become a human being through education. He is nothing but what education makes of him'<sup>4</sup> and thus declared that 'education is the greatest challenge, and the hardest task that can be given to man'<sup>5</sup>.

Inspired by Enlightenment philosophy, educational questions started to assume a more important role in the political realm as well. This became manifest in educational reforms being initiated throughout Europe, especially by prominent representatives of enlightened absolutism such as Frederick the Great in Prussia and Maria Theresa in the Habsburg Empire. The clearest expression of this trend was obligatory school attendance becoming increasingly common in Europe. Undoubtedly, educational efforts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were in most cases conceived in and framed by particular national or state contexts and interests, but there were also politicians and statesmen who had a broader European dimension in mind. Among them was not least Napoleon Bonaparte, who, in his late reflections on a united Europe – which he described as the ultimate goal of all his thinking and acting while in exile on St Helena –, recognised the fundamental civilising importance of education and also envisaged a common European area of knowledge<sup>6</sup>.

In an age of distinct national(istic) sentiments and jingoism, however, discourses on a united Europe and possible forms of supranationalism were a relatively peripheral phenomenon throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth century; and if they emerged, educational considerations usually fell well short of other considerations – especially political, institutional and economic ones. Nevertheless, there are some remarkable exceptions to this *Zeitgeist*, including the Austrian novelist, journalist and biographer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942). In 1932, in the midst of rising fascism throughout the continent, at a conference on the future of Europe held in Rome, Zweig delivered a lecture entitled *La désintoxication morale de l'Europe* (The moral detoxification of Europe)<sup>7</sup>. In this lecture, he made a series of visionary proposals, among them for a kind of Erasmus programme *avant la lettre* for both higher and secondary education. In offering European youth the possibility to experience Europe's cultural diversity through inclusive exchange programmes, Zweig saw a 'prerequisite for a durable pacification of Europe'<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> According to Rousseau, man must not be a slave to ambition, false needs and the opinion of others. Otherwise he would not be able to terminate the social contract – described in his *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique* (1762) – in the event of its violation and to re-enter his original rights. For that, gaining genuine knowledge of natural freedom through education was a *sine qua non*.

<sup>4</sup> Kant (1803), p. 11: 'Der Mensch kann nur Mensch werden durch Erziehung. Er ist nichts, als was die Erziehung aus ihm macht'.

<sup>5</sup> Kant (1803), p. 15: '[Daher ist die] Erziehung das größeste Problem, und das schwerste, was dem Menschen kann aufgegeben werden'.

<sup>6</sup> In November 1816, for example, Napoleon remarked: 'One of my great plans was the rejoining, the concentration of those same geographical nations which have been disunited and parcelled out by revolution and policy. There are dispersed in Europe, upwards of 30,000,000 of French, 15,000,000 of Spaniards, 15,000,000 of Italians, and 30,000,000 of Germans; and it was my intention to incorporate these people each into one nation. It would have been a noble thing to have advanced in prosperity with such a train, and attended by the blessings of future ages. [...] it would have been possible to indulge the chimera of the *beau idéal* of civilisation. In this state of things, there would have been some chance of establishing, in every country, a unity of codes, principles, opinions, sentiments, views, and interests. Then, perhaps, by the help of the universal diffusion of knowledge, one might have thought of attempting, in the great European family, the application of the American Congress, or the Amphictyons of Greece. What a perspective of power, grandeur, happiness, and prosperity, would thus have appeared!'; Napoleon to Count Las Cases, 11 November 1816. In: Las Cases (1823, Vol. 4, p. 134). He expressed confidence that 'this concentration will be brought about, sooner or later, by the very force of events. The impulse is given; and I think that since my fall, and the destruction of my system, no grand equilibrium can possibly be established in Europe, except by the concentration and confederation of the principal nations.' *Ibid.* (p. 139). For the idea of a European confederacy see also Napoleon's remarks of 24 August 1816: 'the same principles, the same system everywhere. An [sic] European code; a court of European appeal, with full powers to redress all wrong decisions [...] Money of the same value but with different coins the same weight, the same measures, the same laws, etc. etc. Europe would soon in that manner [...] have really been but the same people, and every one, who travelled, would have everywhere found himself in one common country.' *Ibid.* (Vol. 3, p. 266).

<sup>7</sup> Zweig (2014).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* (pp. 89-94): 'La deuxième exigence préalable à une réelle pacification de l'Europe serait de permettre à la jeunesse de faire aussi l'expérience vécue de l'histoire culturelle [...]. Pour une part, ce travail en commun pourrait avoir lieu dans les universités. Voilà un point sur lequel je voudrais insister. Il me semble depuis longtemps que des conventions internationales entre États et universités seraient

Nevertheless, after the Second World War and its catalytic effect on the European integration process, political action was clearly focused on the economic integration of Europe, as manifest in the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 and the European Economic Community (EEC) six years later.

Education was not entirely absent in post-war debates on the future of Europe. Yet efforts to overcome the national fragmentation of education policies, or prepare the ground for a more common education area in Europe, were faced with considerable challenges – even in the field of higher education, which has traditionally had a more international predisposition and impetus than other fields of education due to the long history of scholarly mobility across borders and the (relative) comparability of curricula and forms of training. This is demonstrated, for example, by the longstanding controversies surrounding the idea of a European supranational university from the mid-1950s onwards<sup>9</sup>. Being faced with considerable resistance from different sides, including the various national rectors' conferences and university associations fearing for their influence and the specifics of their respective higher-education cultures, the idea of a European university was fighting an uphill battle. After almost two decades, the only tangible result was the creation of the European University Institute in Florence (Italy) in 1972, with the use of the term 'university' being consciously avoided, and with the Institute having a narrow focus in terms of both disciplines covered (history and civilisation, law, political science and economics) and forms of teaching/research offered (exclusively post-graduate and post-doctoral).

The stark resistance to close European cooperation in education and training (including in the field of higher education), let alone any common European (higher) education policy<sup>10</sup>, can be explained by the fact that education is intrinsically linked with the issue of (national) identity: more than most other policy areas, education, alongside culture, touches upon the fundamental questions 'Where do we come from?', 'Who are we?' and 'Where do we want to go?'. National peculiarities and 'special paths' tend to be more pronounced in the field of education than elsewhere, as do national sensibilities and pride in own traditions. Accordingly distinct are the reservations towards supranationalism of all kinds, which can easily be perceived as undermining a national sense of belonging and thus considered dangerous. In addition, there are considerable structural challenges that stand in the way of a Europeanisation of education, for example the close interlink of existing (national) education systems with home-grown economic structures and the specific needs of the respective labour markets (with repercussions on, e.g., the acceptance of different qualifications and degrees, or the role – and success – of dual training, which requires close collaboration between educational institutions and economic operators). As a result, lasting changes can usually only be implemented in the medium or even long term. Moreover, electoral politics and the long horizon necessary for reaping the fruits of education reform (given the need to often overcome major resistance and make considerable investments both politically and otherwise) reduce the attractiveness of pursuing ambitious and visionary education agendas, at both national and European level.

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nécessaires qui permettraient aux étudiants d'obtenir la reconnaissance d'un semestre ou d'une année d'études dans une université étrangère. [...] Aujourd'hui, entre la plupart des pays, cette possibilité n'existe pas encore, puisqu'un Allemand qui voudrait faire ses études dans une université italienne pendant un semestre ou une année entière devrait considérer comme perdue cette année humainement et moralement si enrichissante, puisque, dans son pays d'origine, elle ne serait pas reconnue comme équivalente à une année d'études. Par une telle réglementation, on barre la route d'innombrables jeunes gens, précisément aux meilleurs et aux plus avides d'apprendre, à ceux qui voudraient confronter les méthodes d'apprentissage en usage dans leur propre pays aux méthodes pratiques à l'étranger, apprendre à fond une langue étrangère et entrer en contact avec d'autres représentants de leur génération [...]. Mais il ne faudrait pas limiter ces échanges aux universités et, au contraire, mettre à profit les vacances des lycéens pour élargir, grâce à des bourses ou à des échanges, la connaissance et la vision du monde de ces jeunes gens avides d'apprendre. [...] Si les États s'entendaient entre eux pour accorder aux candidats retenus la gratuité du voyage en train à l'aller et au retour et si un échange était convenu entre les familles, afin que les élèves de milieu pauvre ou modeste bénéficient, aux aussi, de cet avantage.'

<sup>9</sup> See Lehmann (2020a and 2020b). For a summary in English see Lehmann (2019).

<sup>10</sup> On the history of European education policies since the Second World War see, e.g., Pépin (2006). On European higher education policies more particularly see especially the works of Anne Corbett (Corbett 2003, 2005 and 2012).

Against this background, it is not surprising that the European Education Area has long remained predominantly a topic of scholarly literature and a vision of Europhile idealists<sup>11</sup>, rather than a concrete objective of European policymaking. Nonetheless, since the 1980s, and thus long before it turned into an explicit European policy objective, several concrete initiatives helped to prepare the ground for the emergence of the EEA.

## 1.2. Early initiatives towards a European Education Area

Among the main political initiatives that preceded the official unveiling of the vision of an EEA in November 2017<sup>12</sup> was the launch of the Erasmus programme in 1987. Since its modest beginnings, Erasmus has developed into one of the best known and most successful EU funding programmes in terms of both number of participants and public perception, and is therefore sometimes also referred to as the EU's 'flagship programme'. As a backronym (**Eu**ROpean **Co**munity **A**ction **S**cheme for the **M**obility of **U**niversity **S**tudents) consciously harking back to Erasmus of Rotterdam and Renaissance humanism, the Erasmus programme has contributed significantly to the enhancement of mobility in European higher education over the last three decades, with the number of students and staff becoming mobile between programme countries reaching 325 000 and 69 700 respectively in the academic year 2017/18<sup>13</sup>.

Yet while mobility – also favoured by the general globalisation trend as well as the ever more common use of English as a research and teaching language around the world – has increasingly become an integral and popular element of higher education for students and staff alike, major challenges have continued to persist, especially for student mobility. Among the two most important ones are the comparability of degrees and the recognition of academic credits.

The Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, which explicitly aimed at the 'harmonisation of the architecture of the European Higher Education system'<sup>14</sup>, and the Bologna Process were important in this respect. Named after the University of Bologna, where the declaration was signed by education ministers from 29 European countries in 1999, the Bologna Process was intended to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent higher-education systems in Europe. This, in turn, paved the way for the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) under the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which was officially launched in March 2010 during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Bologna Process<sup>15</sup>.

In the wake of these significant steps in the field of higher education, awareness of the potential benefits of joint European initiatives also in other fields and levels of education has been growing as well. From the mid-1990s onwards, for example, the existing Erasmus programme was supplemented by other education programmes at EU level, such as Comenius (school education), Leonardo da Vinci (vocational education and training), Grundtvig (adult education) and Jean Monnet (European integration studies). In 2013, these programmes – together with a number of other previously separate sectoral and transversal programmes and policies under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP, 2007-

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Antunes (2009); Lawn and Nóvoa (2005).

<sup>12</sup> European Commission (2017b).

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2020g, p. 34). For statistical reports and analyses on the current Erasmus+ programme and its predecessor programmes see: European Commission, [Erasmus+ Statistics](#) (Accessed: 14 January 2021). For an overview on the development of EU higher education policies see: European Parliament, [Factsheet on Higher Education](#) (Accessed: 14 January 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (1998), [Sorbonne Joint Declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system](#) (Accessed: 14 January 2021).

<sup>15</sup> For a collection of reference documents concerning the EHEA see [Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area, Main documents](#) (Accessed: 16 December 2020).

2013) – were combined in the new Erasmus+ Programme<sup>16</sup>, pursuing the central aim of investing in education and training as well as youth and sport through a single integrated EU programme.

At the same time, political endeavours towards achieving a common European area of skills and qualifications<sup>17</sup> have intensified, in particular by means of the Europass initiative, aiming at making a person's skills and qualifications clearly understood throughout Europe, and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF): the former was established by Decision 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 *on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)* and entered into force on 1 January 2005<sup>18</sup>; the EQF – a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating lifelong learning – was implemented based on the Recommendation *on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*, adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 23 April 2008<sup>19</sup>.

Those initiatives were accompanied by measures aimed at intensifying policy cooperation and exchange of good practices between EU Member States. Of particular importance in this context were the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 *on establishing a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)*<sup>20</sup>, in essence a forum allowing Member States to exchange best practices and learn from each other<sup>21</sup>. ET 2020 pursued four common EU objectives:

1. Make lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
2. Improve the quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. Promote equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and
4. Enhance creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

In order to monitor progress made towards the achievement of these objectives, the ET 2020 introduced several educational benchmarks to be attained at a European level by 2020, namely:

- at least 95 % of children should participate in early childhood education;
- fewer than 15 % of 15-year-olds should be under-skilled in reading, mathematics and science;
- the rate of early leavers from education and training aged 18-24 should be below 10 %;
- at least 40 % of people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education;
- at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning;
- at least 20 % of higher education graduates and 6 % of 18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad;

<sup>16</sup> See European Commission, *The Plus of Erasmus+* (Accessed: 17 December 2020).

<sup>17</sup> This terminology was used, for example, in a stakeholder consultation on the potential benefits of developing a 'European Area of Skills and Qualifications' and a corresponding *Eurobarometer report*, both initiated by the European Commission in 2014.

<sup>18</sup> European Union (2004). The five central Europass documents – sharing a common brand name and logo – are: Curriculum Vitae, Language Passport, Europass Mobility, Certificate Supplement and Diploma Supplement. Since 2012, all Europass documents can be assembled in the European Skills Passport.

<sup>19</sup> European Union (2008).

<sup>20</sup> Council of the European Union (2009).

<sup>21</sup> European Commission, *European policy cooperation (ET 2020 framework)* (Accessed: 14 January 2021).

- the share of employed graduates (aged 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education one to three years ago) should be at least 82 %<sup>22</sup>.

Research has demonstrated that the increasing use of comparison, benchmarks, indicators and quality assurance mechanisms allowed for the development of soft forms of governance in the field of education and turned Europe into a 'commensurable policy space' or 'space of equivalence', paving the way for a European Education Area. The Europeanisation of education rests on the building of new spaces of collaborative education policy work created by the numerous EU-level networks and associations, and backed up by the use of a common language of high quality and equity for European education<sup>23</sup>. Viviane Reding, former Commissioner for Education and Culture, described this process as a 'silent revolution'<sup>24</sup>.

In their entirety, all these different policy measures and initiatives were already providing the outline for a European Education Area. The explicit launch of the EEA, however, was only due to happen during the Gothenburg Summit (Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth) in November 2017, and was based on the preparatory Commission communication *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture: the European Commission's contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg, 17 November 2017*<sup>25</sup>. In this communication, the Commission stressed that 'the time has come to work towards a European Education Area',<sup>26</sup> and presented its vision of a European Education Area to be achieved by 2025.

In what follows, the Commission's evolving vision of the EEA, as depicted in three key communications, will be analysed in more detail. Chapter 2 introduces the communications of 2017 and 2018 and examines their reception by EU institutions, Member States and relevant stakeholders, and Chapter 3 provides a detailed analysis of the Commission's latest communication on the EEA in 2020. A particular focus is put on the policy priorities outlined in the 2020 communication, which are compared with those of the previous communications, and a detailed analysis of the new governance framework proposed. On that basis, the concluding Chapter 4 provides an overview of the challenges ahead and a number of concrete policy recommendations<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> The first five of these indicators were already included in the Council conclusions of 2009 (Council of the European Union (2009), cf. Annex I). The mobility and employability benchmarks were defined at a later stage. On the role of benchmarks and numbers more generally for and within European education policies see Dötsch (2019).

<sup>23</sup> See Grek, Lawn et al. (2009); Grek & Lawn (2012); Grek, Lawn et al. (2013); Antunes (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Reding (2001).

<sup>25</sup> European Commission (2017d).

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> The methodology used for this study mainly consisted of a limited number of interviews with the Commission, the Council and some Member States, as well as desk research of relevant policy documents, studies, reports and position papers released by stakeholder organisations. In the latter case, it is worth noting that most of the position papers analysed were published by organisations representing the higher education sector, given the underrepresentation of other education sectors at EU level. Among the 41 position papers analysed, 11 came from the European University Association (EUA), 9 from the European Student Union (ESU), 5 from the Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research (CESAER), 4 from the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), 2 from The Guild, 2 from the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL), 1 from the European Association for International Education (EAIE), 1 from the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), 1 from the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), 1 from the Council of European Employers of the Metal Engineering and Technology-Based Industries (CEEMET), 1 from the European University Foundation, 1 from the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), 1 from the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) and 1 from the OBESSU (Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions).

## 2. THE COMMISSION'S 2017/2018 VISION OF CREATING A EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

### KEY FINDINGS

In November 2017, with a view to revitalising the European project and tackling the challenges Europe is facing in the field of education, the Commission presented its vision of a European Education Area (EEA). While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, the vision for creating a common EEA centred around overcoming the obstacles still hampering mobility and strengthening European citizens' sense of belonging to the European Union.

The other EU institutions, Member States and stakeholder organisations generally welcomed the proposal. However, reservations were expressed regarding the gaps in the implementation strategy, the uncertain geographical scope of the project and the lack of information on the interplay of the future European Education Area with the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

In May 2018, the Commission put forward four flagship initiatives aimed at making the EEA a reality by 2025, namely (i) the mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad; (ii) the improvement of language learning; (iii) the European Student Card Initiative; and (iv) the European Universities initiative. These initiatives generated diverse reactions from the different actors involved in the policymaking process:

- In view of the challenges of the Bologna Process, a number of observers expressed concerns about the ambition of the Council recommendation on *Promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education*. The recommendation was eventually passed in November 2018, despite the fact that the growing digitisation of recognition mechanisms might offer new prospects;
- While putting such a strong focus on the teaching of languages in primary and secondary education was a first for an EU policy document, the Council recommendation published in May 2019 on 'A comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages' did not generate much enthusiasm across the education community;
- The European Student Card Initiative, aimed at giving a European dimension to current student cards and at facilitating administrative procedures through digitisation, was perceived very positively despite technical and legal implementation difficulties, but not much concrete action has been taken since 2018;
- The European Universities initiative was well received by the academic community and beyond, and resulted in the setting up of 41 European university alliances involving 279 higher education institutions across Europe. This initiative generated the largest number of responses, which primarily focused on inclusion matters, financial sustainability and governance matters.

## 2.1. Outline of the Commission's vision

### 2.1.1. Background

At the end of the decade 2010-2019, despite the significant progress achieved over the past 30 years, the **European Union still faces numerous difficulties in the realm of education**, including:

- Low achievement of pupils in reading, mathematics and science: in 2020, the share of European pupils who failed to complete basic tasks was around 20 % (22.5 % for reading, 22.9 % for mathematics and 22.3 % for science). Over the last decade, the situation actually worsened for science and reading, while remaining stable in mathematics<sup>28</sup>;
- Insufficient student mobility and international cooperation: to date, only 5 % of students have benefited from an Erasmus+ experience<sup>29</sup>, while numerous bureaucratic obstacles deterred universities from collaborating;
- Limited linguistic skills: in 2019 almost half of Europeans citizens could not carry on a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue<sup>30</sup>;
- Low attractiveness of teaching professions: an increasing number of European countries reported that they were confronted with teacher shortages, particularly in STEAM subjects, and a lack of recognition of teaching professions;
- Lack of digital skills: while the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the digital divide and making ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) awareness even more crucial, only 58 % of EU citizens have basic digital skills<sup>31</sup>;
- Insufficient development of lifelong learning: in 2018, only 38 % of adults aged between 25 and 64 had benefited from lifelong learning during the last 12 months<sup>32</sup>;
- Persistent inequalities in various forms: students from rural areas, or from migrant or disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, are still overrepresented among underachievers, while there are persistent gender disparities in STEM fields (Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and insufficient educational provision for persons with disabilities<sup>33</sup>.

Besides the existing shortcomings in the field of education, changes within the wider international context can also be seen as drivers for the Commission's endeavours towards creating an EEA. Among the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure global peace by 2030, for example, **quality education** figures as one of the 17 identified global goals. Similarly, phenomena such as the rise of neo-nationalism, populism and fake news in Europe and beyond, widespread Euroscepticism and concrete events such as Brexit or the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 can be seen as having contributed to the Commission's renewed efforts in forging a more ambitious and consistent European education policy.

### 2.1.2. Strategy

In order to address the challenges outlined above, and with a view to 'reigniting a European spirit'<sup>34</sup>, more ambitious strategies in the field of education were launched from 2017 onwards.

<sup>28</sup> European Commission (2019a, p. 61).

<sup>29</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 10).

<sup>30</sup> Council of the European Union (2019a).

<sup>31</sup> European Commission (2020d).

<sup>32</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 19).

<sup>33</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 7).

<sup>34</sup> Gowan (2018).

On 26 September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech at the Sorbonne University, in which he set out a number of goals for the field of education in Europe: to enable all young Europeans to spend at least six months in another European country and all students to speak two European languages by 2024; to launch European Universities consisting of networks of higher education institutions across Europe; and to establish a process of mutual recognition of secondary education diplomas (as for higher education)<sup>35</sup>.

In November 2017, echoing the Sorbonne speech, the Commission published a communication for the EU Leaders' Summit in Gothenburg on education and culture, in which it presented its vision of a European Education Area:

*'A vision for 2025 would be a Europe in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent where spending time in another Member State – to study, to learn or to work – has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm. A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity'*<sup>36</sup>.

While the concept of some form of a European Education Area was not new in academic literature<sup>37</sup>, it was the very first time that it appeared explicitly within political discourse. In the 2017 communication, the European Education Area was presented as serving a dual purpose: **on the one hand, consistently with a market approach<sup>38</sup>, the Commission called for a number of barriers to be removed in order to allow for better flows of learners, teachers and knowledge. On the other hand, it presented a vision of education as a means to build a European identity and promote active citizenship** and underlined that 'strengthening our European identity remains essential and education and culture are the best vectors to ensure this'. As sensed by Lawn and Grek in 2012, 'the revelation of a European education area is fundamental to the contemporary structuring of the EU (...). It is a significant attempt to manage the launch of a new transnational state by producing an idea which links together education, work and citizenship as its 'big idea'<sup>39</sup>.

On its website, the Commission summarises the main objectives of the European Education Area as follows<sup>40</sup>:

- Spending time abroad to study and learn should become the norm;
- School and higher education qualifications should be recognised across the European Union;
- Knowing two languages in addition to one's mother tongue should be standard;
- Everyone should be able to access high-quality education, irrespective of their socio-economic background;
- People should have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity.

<sup>35</sup> Macron (2017).

<sup>36</sup> European Commission (2017d, p. 11).

<sup>37</sup> See Antunes (2009); Lawn & Nóvoa (2005); Grek, Lawn et al. (2009): 'European Education Space'; Lawn et al. (2019): 'European Education Policy Space'; Lawn & Grek (2012); Bertoincini (2015, p. 19): 'European education and training area'.

<sup>38</sup> Antunes (2020): 'Simultaneously, and with a strong input from the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes, a European Education Area has been gradually set up with (European) regulatory processes and instruments that are consistent with a market: a degree structure; a credit system; a European Qualifications Framework; quality assurance systems'.

<sup>39</sup> Grek & Lawn (2012, p. 13).

<sup>40</sup> European Commission, [European Education Area](#) (Accessed: 6 October 2020).

**In its communication, the Commission also recalled its adherence to the principle of subsidiarity** and reiterated that the competences for education and culture lay primarily with Member States at national, regional and local level.

The initial policy documents remained silent on the question of the interplay between the European Education Area on the one hand and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) on the other hand. However, when questioned about the risk of policy fragmentation and parallel processes, Tibor Navracsics, the then Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, answered that ‘the European Education Area complements rather than duplicates the European Research Area’<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, his successor Mariya Gabriel stated in July 2020 that ERA and EEA would remain separate projects<sup>42</sup>.

### 2.1.3. Reactions

The announcement of the creation of a European Education Area prompted very positive feedback from the other EU bodies, the Member States and the main stakeholders.

In the case of key stakeholders, however, it should be noted that most of responses emanated from organisations representing higher education; these came particularly from the European University Association and the European Student Union. Given that the European Education Area addressed primary, secondary and vocational education to a much greater extent than EU policies had done in the past, it is rather disappointing that it received so little attention from organisations representing these sectors. One of the reasons might be that such organisations are embedded far more deeply into national education systems and have not been exposed to the internationalisation of research and of higher education. This might become a significant source of concern for the future since a regular and in-depth dialogue between the EU institutions and all sectors of education appears to be crucial for achieving the European Education Area.

From the Member States’ side, the European Education Area had been on the agendas of all Council Presidencies since 2018 and was publicised at national level through various communication channels<sup>43</sup>.

First and foremost, **calls for a more focused strategy were expressed**. The European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education called on the Commission to ‘propose a bold policy framework for future European education policy, transforming the European Education Area from a loose vision of principles into a concrete work programme with a set of measurable objectives, including making the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications, diplomas and learning periods abroad a reality in the Union by 2025 at the latest’<sup>44</sup>. In the same vein, the Academic Cooperation Association advised ‘building and expanding on existing flagship programmes rather than creating new activities or programmes’<sup>45</sup>. In December 2019, sixteen Member States endorsed a non-paper in which they advocated more coherence between the European Education Area and the post-ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation in education and training policies. They stated that **the European**

<sup>41</sup> European Parliament (2018a).

<sup>42</sup> Zubaşcu (2020).

<sup>43</sup> For instance: Austrian Government, Federal Ministry Education, Science and Research, [European Education Area](#) (Accessed: 13 October 2020); Wallonia-Brussels Federation Government (2020); German Federal Government (2017); Portuguese Government, Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior, [Towards a European Education Area by 2025](#) (Accessed: 13 October 2020); Spanish Government, Ministerio de educación y formación profesional (2018); Spanish Government, Ministerio de educación y formación profesional (2019).

<sup>44</sup> European Parliament (2020f).

<sup>45</sup> Academic Cooperation Association (2020b).

**Education Area should give priority to quality and equity objectives** and recommended that focus should not only centre around mobility, multilingualism and recognition aspects<sup>46</sup>.

**In regard to the scope of the European Education Area, there was a wide consensus that it should cover the whole spectrum of education and training from early childhood education and care to adult learning**<sup>47</sup>. Nevertheless, some parties deplored the fact that the Commission's proposal was still too focused on youth and lacked a holistic approach to lifelong learning<sup>48</sup>. From a geographical perspective, **several organisations stated that the European Education Area should not be limited to the EU only**. One of them recommended extending it to all signatories to the European Cultural Convention (which coincides approximately with the area covered by the Bologna Process)<sup>49</sup>. Interestingly, the Romanian Presidency of the Council was one of the few parties insisting on challenges related to the international attractiveness of the European Education Area<sup>50</sup>.

**In terms of educational priorities and curricula, heterogeneous recommendations were made**, including: strengthening the acquisition of basic and soft skills, supporting the teaching of foreign languages, boosting digital competences, ensuring better inclusion of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) at primary and secondary school levels and reinforcing the links between STEM and the SHS (Social and Human Sciences)<sup>51</sup>. In the case of higher education, the Guild, an organisation representing Europe's research-intensive universities, cautioned against the risk of creating overloaded curricula and stressed that innovation should not hinder the fundamental mission of universities consisting in providing students with broad and deep academic knowledge<sup>52</sup>.

Some stakeholders stressed the need to **strengthen ties between the labour market and education**<sup>53</sup>, while others pointed out that the European Education Area should not be considered solely from an economic and employment point of view and should be instrumental in achieving the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>54</sup>.

**Various stakeholders advocated further coordination between the EHEA, the ERA and the EEA**, an alignment with existing frameworks (e.g., the Bologna Process) and more synergies between Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe<sup>55</sup>. The Academic Cooperation Association referred to the concept of a European knowledge area and suggested moving towards a European area of education, research, innovation and cooperation<sup>56</sup>.

As regards digital issues, **the Finnish Government suggested that the achievement of a European Education Area required a proper digital integration strategy**. In a non-paper on the Digital Education Action Plan, it set out a list of conditions to be met, including a European Educational Interoperability Framework, the use of open standards and open licensing, the possibility for education

<sup>46</sup> *Non-paper on 'the post-2020 EU strategic framework for cooperation in education and training'* endorsed by Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain (2019).

<sup>47</sup> European Parliament (2018a and 2018e); Council of the European Union (2019c); CEEMET (2019).

<sup>48</sup> European Association for the Education of Adults (2018).

<sup>49</sup> CESAER (2020c). The [European Cultural Convention](#) was signed in 1954 under the auspices of the Council of Europe and brings together 50 Member States of which 48 take part in the Bologna Process (the exceptions being San Marino and Monaco).

<sup>50</sup> Romanian Government (2019): 'By creating a pole of educational excellence and mobility, the European Education Area will support all European education and training systems, making them more competitive and attractive for students and teachers from around the world'.

<sup>51</sup> CESAER (2020c); Academic Cooperation Association (n.d., b); CEEMET (2019); Walczyk (2020). See also German Government (2020): 'We will take advantage of Germany's Council Presidency to launch a number of initiatives focusing on the different aspects of digital education and continue to develop digital education as part of realising the European Education Area'.

<sup>52</sup> The Guild (2020).

<sup>53</sup> CEEMET (2019).

<sup>54</sup> European Students' Union (2018c, 2018d and 2018e).

<sup>55</sup> European University Association (2017); European Students' Union (2018d); Academic Cooperation Association (2020a); European Committee of the Regions (2020b).

<sup>56</sup> Academic Cooperation Association (2020b and n.d., b).

actors to exchange and interpret shared data (beyond Erasmus+ exchanges) and further support to Member States in building their digital capabilities<sup>57</sup>. At the same time, in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Guild cautioned policymakers to remain prudent concerning the use of online learning and various forms of digital mobility and recommended considering digitalisation 'as a means to an end, not as an end in itself'<sup>58</sup>.

## 2.2. First concrete initiatives

According to the web pages [of the Commission](#) and [the Council](#) (European Education Area timeline), more than a dozen measures form part of the European Education Area. A **first package**, announced in January 2018, grouped together three initiatives addressing key aspects of the EEA, namely:

- The *Digital Education Action Plan* (17 January 2018);
- A Council Recommendation on *Promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching* (22 May 2018);
- A Council Recommendation on *Key competences for lifelong learning* (22 May 2018).

Based on the Council timeline mentioned above, the Recommendation on *A European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships* (15 March 2018) is also part of this first package.

A **second package** of initiatives presented in May 2018 and aiming 'to help secure a more competitive, inclusive and cohesive Europe'<sup>59</sup>, brought together a set of policy proposals in the fields of education, training, youth and culture, comprising the following initiatives:

- A strengthened *Erasmus+* programme;
- An ambitious framework for European policy cooperation in education and training (strategic framework succeeding ET 2020);
- Renewed support for Member State reforms through the European Semester;
- Better targeted use of EU funds;
- The *European Universities initiative* (supposed to become an integral part of Erasmus+);
- The *European Student Card*;
- A Council Recommendation on *High-quality early childhood education and care systems* (22 May 2019);
- A Council Recommendation on *Promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad* (26-27 November 2018);
- A Council Recommendation on *A comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages* (22 May 2019).

In its communication of 22 May 2018 on *Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies*, the Commission refined the scope of the European Education Area by describing four flagship initiatives aimed at achieving it. Taken together, these would serve the purpose of concretely overcoming 'obstacles that make it more difficult to learn, train or work in another country with the

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<sup>57</sup> Finnish Government (n.d.).

<sup>58</sup> The Guild (2020).

<sup>59</sup> Chircop & Schomaker (2020).

aim of realising the ‘free movement of learners’ and create a genuine European learning space<sup>60</sup>. The following sections will trace the emergence of these particular flagship initiatives by exploring the extent to which they have gained or lost in significance.

### 2.2.1. Mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad

#### a. Overview

There is currently no mechanism allowing for automatic recognition of higher education diplomas across Europe. Since 1999, the Bologna Process has led to better comparability between higher education diplomas and created more favourable conditions for recognition across 48 European countries. Recognition processes are mainly based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which aims to harmonise the counting of academic credits from one institution to another. Along with the ECTS scheme, the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs) support the students in the recognition of diplomas and periods of study undertaken abroad. However, even though the Bologna Process and the NARICs have paved the way for a European Higher Education Area, the results have not met expectations, one of the reasons being that many countries did not take all the necessary measures to ensure that the provisions of the Lisbon Recognition Convention were properly incorporated into their national legislation<sup>61</sup>.

As regards secondary education, recognition processes are at a much earlier stage of development. While some Member States have implemented nearly automatic recognition mechanisms for school leaving certificates (e.g., Poland, the Benelux countries and the Baltic countries) or for school study periods abroad (Austria, Italy), these mechanisms lie solely within the competence of national governments or individual institutions and have still not become widespread<sup>62</sup>.

Against this backdrop, **in November 2018 the Council issued a Recommendation on Promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad<sup>63</sup>. This Recommendation called on the Member States to take measures to achieve automatic mutual recognition by 2025.** The text covered not only higher education qualifications but also, for the first time, upper secondary education and training qualifications giving access to higher education, as well as the outcomes of a learning period abroad. It reiterated that recognition policies should be based on transparency and quality and encouraged the Member States to make further use of the existing tools and frameworks<sup>64</sup>. It also urged governments to develop guidance to support higher education institutions in the recognition processes and to strengthen their support to the NARICs. The approach of the Council was cautious, pragmatic and fully compliant with the principle of subsidiarity (‘step-by-step approach’, ‘commitments of a voluntary nature’, ‘exchange of good practices’ etc.). It is worth noting that, whereas the recent Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education<sup>65</sup> gave much prominence to migration issues, this dimension was not addressed in the Council Recommendation.

<sup>60</sup> European Commission (2018a).

<sup>61</sup> European Commission (2020), p. 89).

<sup>62</sup> Franke & Heriard (2018).

<sup>63</sup> Council of the European Union (2018c).

<sup>64</sup> European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training, European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area etc.

<sup>65</sup> UNESCO (2019).

As regards lifelong learning, a debate emerged around the use and recognition of micro-credentials across Europe as a tool for the 'flexibilisation of education'<sup>66</sup>. Micro-credentials can be described as sub-degree learning units, whether formal (awarded after the completion of a short course), non-formal or informal, that could confer a small number of ECTS credits. They are often perceived as a key component of lifelong learning strategies. However, there are still some grey areas, and debates are still required on how to reach a common definition of the concept and how to implement quality assurance and recognition mechanisms. More broadly, stakeholder organisations expect the European Union to further support universities in the development of lifelong learning programmes and in the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>67</sup>.

#### a. Reactions

A Eurobarometer survey on the European Education Area, carried out in 2018 among young people aged 15 to 30 in all Member States, indicated that there was strong support for further developing mechanisms of diploma recognition, with '91 % agreeing that this would be useful to young people'<sup>68</sup>. For its part, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) stated that better recognition procedures could reduce 'brain waste' and foster 'remigration'<sup>69</sup>.

However, a number of Parliamentary questions raised on this topic over the last few years have demonstrated that recognition processes are still far from satisfactory<sup>70</sup>. **Some parties perceived the deadline set out in the Recommendation (2025) as too optimistic and were strongly critical of the relevance of a new recommendation, given that the objectives of the Bologna Process had not yet been reached.** The European University Foundation regretted that almost no progress had been made since 2010 when a study found that 21 % of students had to resit examinations when they returned to their home institutions<sup>71</sup>. According to the European University Association, one of the main reasons for failure included the absence of clear distinction between the recognition for access to further education and admission for further studies (despite the provision of the Council Recommendation that recognition processes would not prejudice educational institutions' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes). The European University Association considered that difficulties were also due to a lack of awareness of the Lisbon Recognition Convention among the staff of educational institutions and insufficient support from the NARICs to students seeking recognition of their diplomas<sup>72</sup>.

**In order to move forward, the European University Foundation pinned its hopes on the growing digitisation of recognition processes**, most notably through the project Erasmus without Paper, and made two recommendations:

- Every learning agreement associated with student mobility should state how many ECTS have been earned in the host university and should become enforceable;
- Following the example of Austria, students should be given the possibility to lodge a complaint to an Erasmus Ombudsperson in the event that their home university refuses to recognise credits earned abroad<sup>73</sup>.

<sup>66</sup> Mitchell (2020).

<sup>67</sup> CESAER (2020b); European University Association (2020d); European Consortium of Innovative Universities (2020).

<sup>68</sup> European Commission (2018c).

<sup>69</sup> European Committee of the Regions (2020a).

<sup>70</sup> European Parliament (2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2019a and 2020g).

<sup>71</sup> European University Foundation (2019).

<sup>72</sup> European University Association (2018b).

<sup>73</sup> European University Foundation (2019).

The European Students' Union advocated that recognition processes should not be restricted to EU Member States, but cover all EHEA countries<sup>74</sup>. Furthermore, in addition to the principles of transparency, trust and quality, a Member State also suggested basing the recognition processes on a principle of reciprocity.

For its part, the European Trade Union Committee for Education expressed strong reservations about recognition processes, given the principle of subsidiarity laid down in the Treaty of Lisbon, and underlined the implementation difficulties<sup>75</sup>.

**Particular attention was paid to the concept of a 'European degree'**. While the Commission had stated that the European Universities would award such degrees<sup>76</sup>, the European University Association and the European Students' Union stressed that **the term evaded any clear-cut definition beyond the frame of the European Universities Initiative**, unless one considered every degree delivered within the EHEA to be a European degree<sup>77</sup>.

**Position papers released by the main stakeholders did not elaborate on the issue of recognition at upper secondary education level.** By contrast, together with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), they insisted on taking into account non-formal and informal learning and further developing the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>78</sup> launched on the basis of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on *The validation of non-formal and informal learning*<sup>79</sup>.

## 2.2.2. Improved language learning

### a. Overview

In the 2018 Commission communication on *Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies*, improved language learning represents the second concrete initiative aimed at reinforcing the EEA. The main objective of this policy proposal was to ensure that every young European citizen could speak at least two languages in addition to their first language.

**In May 2019, the Council issued a Recommendation on A comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages**<sup>80</sup>. The main elements of that Recommendation can be summarised as follows:

- The Council called on the Member States to 'explore ways to help all young people acquire before the end of upper secondary education and training – in addition to the languages of schooling, where possible – a competence level in at least one other European language which allows them to use the language effectively for social, learning and professional purposes, and to encourage the acquisition of an additional (third) language to a level which allows them to interact with a degree of fluency';
- The Council recommended drawing on existing frameworks and schemes, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the Europass Language Passport, the European Day of Languages and the European Language Label, as well as the mobility and

<sup>74</sup> European Students' Union (2018e) <https://www.esu-online.org/?news=students-views-proposal-european-education-area-european-graduate-survey>.

<sup>75</sup> European Trade Union Committee for Education (2018).

<sup>76</sup> European Commission (2018a).

<sup>77</sup> European University Association (2020e); European Students' Union (2020).

<sup>78</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (2018); European Students' Union (2018d); Lifelong Learning Platform (2018); CEEMET (2019) <http://www.ceemet.org/positionpaper/building-european-education-area-2025>.

<sup>79</sup> Council of the European Union (2012).

<sup>80</sup> Council of the European Union (2019a).

cooperation opportunities offered by Erasmus+ and eTwinning. It reiterated that multilingual competence was one of the eight key competences identified in the Council Recommendation on *Key competences for lifelong learning*<sup>81</sup>;

- **Rather innovatively, it placed emphasis on primary and secondary education by promoting language awareness in schools, as well as on Vocational Education and Training (VET).** The text recommended paying more attention to teacher training in these sectors, resorting to new teaching methods and fully harnessing the potential of digital tools; it deplored the shortage of qualified language teachers but did not elaborate on how to tackle this challenge;
- The Recommendation took into consideration the wave of migration from third countries that had characterised the last decade: it suggested strengthening ‘the competence in the languages of schooling as the basis for further learning and educational achievement in school for all learners, and especially those from migrant, refugee or disadvantaged backgrounds’ and ‘assess[ing] and validat[ing] language competences that are not part of the curriculum, but result from informal learning (for example in the case of learners of migrant, refugee or bilingual backgrounds)’. Further, in connection with the context of rising migration, the terminology describing the first language evolved: while the Commission communication of November 2017 used the term ‘mother tongue’, the one of May 2018, as well as the Recommendation of May 2019, talked about the ‘language of schooling’;
- As mentioned above, the Commission’s approach was market-oriented: enhanced multilingual competence would enable citizens to benefit more from the opportunities the internal market offers, such as free movement of workers. In the same vein, better linguistic skills were considered particularly important in cross-border regions in order to ‘prepare graduates to enter the labour market on both sides of the border’.

#### a. Reactions

From the EU citizens’ side, reactions were very positive overall: the Eurobarometer survey mentioned above showed that ‘77 % of young Europeans [said] they would like to learn a new language, while 84 % would like to improve the knowledge of a foreign language they [had] previously learnt’<sup>82</sup>. However, probably because of its nature as a non-binding text, **the Commission’s proposals on language learning did not seem to raise much interest among other EU bodies, stakeholders in the field or Member States**, which may be an indication for existing doubts regarding its potential for implementation.

A number of reactions revolved around the question of **target audiences**:

- In an opinion on the second package of measures relating to the European Education Area, the EESC welcomed the intention of the Council to **target not only compulsory education but all stages in life**. It also suggested paying closer attention to both Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) and Continuous Vocational Education and Training (CVET)<sup>83</sup>. The CEEMET and the EAEA underlined that language learning should start very early and also be part of adult education<sup>84</sup>;

<sup>81</sup> Council of the European Union (2018b).

<sup>82</sup> European Commission (2018c).

<sup>83</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (2018).

<sup>84</sup> CEEMET (2019); European Association for the Education of Adults (2018).

- The EESC insisted on the **linguistic issues raised by migration**. Similarly, Czechia stated that the Recommendation lacked an emphasis on working with heterogeneous groups of pupils, in particular those coming from foreign countries or having special educational needs<sup>85</sup>;
- The Lifelong Learning Platform pointed out that more and more learners were turning to private lessons to develop their linguistic skills, which might further widen inequalities<sup>86</sup>.

In relation to **teaching methodologies**, suggestions and approaches were very diverse:

- Some parties recommended improving and extending the use of ICTs for language teaching<sup>87</sup>, whereas the Lifelong Learning Platform suggested that innovative approaches should not be limited to the use of digital technologies<sup>88</sup>;
- The government of Czechia called on policymakers to further involve teachers of non-language subjects and advocated a wider engagement of native speakers into language teaching; for its part, the European Trade Union Committee for Education opposed the idea of hiring staff with other professional experience as language teachers to address teacher shortages<sup>89</sup>;
- The European Trade Union Committee for Education insisted that studying ancient languages (Latin, Ancient Greek) could help students in understanding European culture and constituted a first step in learning modern languages<sup>90</sup>.

Lastly, CESAER, an organisation representing the universities of science and technology in Europe, advocated the adoption of a European benchmark on language competences<sup>91</sup>, which was actually incorporated into the final text of the Council Recommendation<sup>92</sup>.

### 2.2.3. European Student Card

#### a. Overview

Since autumn 2015, the European Student Card Initiative had been tested in France, Germany, Italy and Ireland, as well as at cross-border universities such as the [European Campus \(Eucor\)](#). The term does not refer to a new physical student card but describes a process of digitisation of all procedures relating to student mobility. Its main purposes are to streamline and simplify administrative procedures, to reduce the bureaucratic burden on universities and students and to allow easier cooperation between European higher education institutions, 'while at the same time being a visible symbol of the European student identity'<sup>93</sup>.

This initiative rested on three main pillars:

- **An 'upgrade' of the national student cards in order to give them a European dimension:** each card would be associated to (i) a European Student Card Number (ESCN) contained in a QR code, (ii) a European Student Identifier (ESI) based on the student number of his/her home institution, and (iii) a personal email address. The incorporation of a hologram would certify that the card complies with the standards of the European Student Card. The cards would still be issued and owned by each higher education institution. Cardholders would benefit from various facilities provided by their university, such as electronic access to libraries and online resources prior to mobility, course registration, access to online learning, catering,

<sup>85</sup> Czech Government (n.d.).

<sup>86</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2018).

<sup>87</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (2018); European Trade Union Committee for Education (2018).

<sup>88</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2018).

<sup>89</sup> European Trade Union Committee for Education (2018).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> CESAER (2020c).

<sup>92</sup> Council of the European Union (2019a): 'The European Commission will work on a proposal for a new set of European education and training benchmarks together with options for data collection, which may include a European benchmark on language competences, with the aim to provide a more accurate picture of multilingual competence in the Union'.

<sup>93</sup> European Commission (2018a).

accommodation, etc. They would also benefit from discounts on public transport or cultural activities. Additionally, the card could potentially serve as an electronic wallet for certain services. In March 2020, 2.3 million students already held a European Student Card with the hologram and the QR code<sup>94</sup>. The Commission intends to fully roll out the European Student Card for all Erasmus students by 2021 and for all other students by 2025, but the concept still needs to be clarified before a large-scale deployment is possible;

- **An enhanced version of the mobile app Erasmus+:** this mobile application would supplement the services offered by the card, with the same purpose of facilitating a number of administrative procedures for students and providing them with a wide range of information;
- **The Erasmus Without Paper system:** this project would allow for secure online registration at higher education institutions and exchange of student data between higher education institutions across Europe, in particular when it comes to recognition of ECTS credits or previously obtained diplomas. More than 1 000 higher education institutions already use parts of the Erasmus Without Paper system on a voluntary basis. As regards the calendar for implementation, mandatory use of electronic data transfer would be implemented as follows<sup>95</sup>:
  - 2021: management of online learning agreements;
  - 2022: management of interinstitutional agreements;
  - 2023: exchange of student nominations and acceptances and transcripts of records related to student mobility.

The European Student Card Initiative is primarily funded by the Erasmus+ programme, but also by the Connecting Europe Facility funding instrument. It is supported by the [Emrex](#) network that brings together various players working on student data portability issues<sup>96</sup>. It will ensure the privacy of the students by allowing them to manage their own data and by complying with the eIDAS Regulation on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market<sup>97</sup>.

#### a. Reactions

The European Student Card Initiative was welcomed by the EESC, the European Parliament and several stakeholders, some of them underlining the contribution of this initiative in fostering the mutual recognition of diplomas, in addition to its other assets<sup>98</sup>. It was also publicised through institutional websites in various Member States<sup>99</sup>. The Flash Eurobarometer 466 on the European Education Area published in May 2018 indicated that the initiative was perceived most positively also by EU citizens, with 90 % of young Europeans considering that a range of services provided by a European Student Card would be useful. Nevertheless, it also underlined that this initiative was supported mainly by people with a high level of education (i.e. having finished their education at or after the age of twenty)<sup>100</sup>.

Some stakeholders suggested going further by envisioning the establishment of a European Lifelong Learning Card, not only for higher education students but for all learners<sup>101</sup>, or by creating a 'status of

<sup>94</sup> European Parliament (2020a).

<sup>95</sup> European Association for International Education (2019).

<sup>96</sup> European Commission, [European Student Card Initiative](#) (Accessed: 26 October 2020).

<sup>97</sup> European Union (2014).

<sup>98</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (2018); European Parliament (2019b); Lifelong Learning Platform (2018); CESAER (2020c); European University Association (2018a).

<sup>99</sup> Spanish Government, Ministerio de Universidades, Servicio español para la internacionalización de la educación, [Digitalización Erasmus+](#) (Accessed: 26 October 2020); French Government, Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation, [C'est quoi la carte européenne étudiante ?](#) (Accessed: 26 October 2020).

<sup>100</sup> European Commission (2018c).

<sup>101</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2018).

European student', to which a set of rights would be associated<sup>102</sup>. Regarding the digital dimension of the project, the Finnish Government's position appeared to be much more ambitious by calling for the implementation of a European Educational Interoperability Framework<sup>103</sup>.

However, some parties raised concerns about a number of issues, including:

- Private and academic data protection;
- The complex nature of the project and the risk of duplicating existing digital infrastructures;
- The cost of the initiative, which might be detrimental to the current Erasmus+ activities<sup>104</sup>.

## 2.2.4. European Universities

### a. Overview

Over the last few years, numerous universities across Europe have deepened the European dimension of their activities to varying degrees, ranging from *Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees* programmes to more integrated forms of cooperation, such as the [University of the Greater Region \(UniGR\)](#), [EuroTech Universities](#) and the [European Campus \(Eucor\)](#). **In May 2018, the Commission communication on *Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies* aimed to 'bring this cross-border cooperation to the next level of ambition' and proposed to support the establishment of at least twenty European Universities by 2024.** These universities would have the following characteristics<sup>105</sup>:

- They would consist of bottom-up networks bringing together at least three higher education institutions from three different countries (Member States or Erasmus+ programme countries);
- They would be expected to develop joint long-term institutional strategies for top-quality education, research and innovation and to contribute to the emergence of 'European degrees' recognised throughout Europe;
- Their activities would be based on a multidisciplinary approach, with a strong focus on the major challenges of our times (climate change, democracy, health, big data, migration), and students would be given the possibility to design their own curricula;
- Practical experience would be encouraged in order to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and develop civic engagement;
- Mobility would be a standard feature, with at least 50 % of students benefiting from physical, virtual or blended mobility;
- The student body would 'reflect the diversity of the population (in terms of social, economic and cultural aspects), including lifelong learners, part-time and non-traditional students'.
- As announced in the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience (henceforth the Skills Agenda) presented in June 2020, the European Universities would also cooperate with the European Institute for Innovation and Technology (EIT) 'to bring together leading organisations from business, education and research (...) to develop innovative teaching and learning, train the next generation of innovators, and

<sup>102</sup> European Students' Union (2018d).

<sup>103</sup> Finnish Government (n.d.), non-paper on *Digital Education Action Plan: Priorities and next steps*.

<sup>104</sup> European Students' Union (2018d and 2019b).

<sup>105</sup> European Commission (2018a); European Commission, [European Universities Initiative factsheet](#) (Accessed: 10 November 2020); European Commission, [Erasmus+ Programme Guide / European Universities](#) (Accessed: 10 November 2020).

accompany the transition of higher education institutions to more entrepreneurial organisations<sup>106</sup>.

Two calls for projects published in October 2018 and November 2019 resulted in the selection of 41 European University alliances involving 279 higher education institutions from all Member States and four other countries participating in the Erasmus+ programme<sup>107</sup>. A total budget of EUR 287 million supports each project for three years with an amount of up to EUR 7 million, of which EUR 5 million are covered by the Erasmus+ programme (under the heading 'Key Action 2: Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices') and EUR 2 million by the Horizon 2020 programme. The EU grants co-finance the alliances up to a maximum of 80 % of their costs. The European Universities Initiative will be fully rolled out under the Erasmus+ successor programme (2021-2027), backed up by a substantial budget<sup>108</sup>. Despite the existing legal status of European grouping of territorial cooperation<sup>109</sup> granted, for instance, to the [European Campus \(Eucor\)](#), Tibor Navracsics indicated that the Commission would work on a European legal status for the new alliances<sup>110</sup>.

These first calls aimed to 'test different models to implement the new concept of European Universities and its potential to boost higher education'<sup>111</sup>. As pointed out by Gowan (2018), 'there is no fully formed or set model for this 'European Universities' Initiative that can be lifted and replicated, especially in time for the pilot calls. The vague nature of these 'European Universities' is in the hope that those involved early will help shape it for those that follow, fitting into their want to demonstrate 'flexibility' and no 'one-size-fits-all' model'<sup>112</sup>.

**The European Universities Initiative aims to foster European citizenship awareness, promote European values and achieve an ever-closer union between European countries**, by building trust across different European higher education institutions. It would also contribute to the European Knowledge Economy and boost the performance, competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education institutions<sup>113</sup>.

Alongside the European Universities Initiative, the Commission proposed to support with funding and technical means the **establishment of 50 Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs)**, whose purpose would be to offer both initial training to young people and continuous training to adults and to develop innovative approaches to upskilling and reskilling. These centres would bring together VET providers, employers, research centres and employment services and would be connected through a transnational European framework<sup>114</sup>. 12 CoVEs have already been implemented as pilot projects, bringing together more than 300 VET institutions and partner organisations<sup>115</sup>. The implementation of these CoVEs is also part of the Skills Agenda<sup>116</sup>.

#### a. Reactions

Among the four flagship initiatives relating to the European Education Area, the one on European Universities inspired the greatest interest and discussion. It was the subject of a survey conducted by the European University Association among more than 200 higher education institutions across Europe

<sup>106</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 11).

<sup>107</sup> Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey. See European Commission (2019d) and European Commission (2020n).

<sup>108</sup> European Commission (2019b and 2020a).

<sup>109</sup> European Union (2006b).

<sup>110</sup> Navracsics (2018).

<sup>111</sup> European Commission (2019b).

<sup>112</sup> European Commission, [Erasmus+ Programme Guide / European Universities](#) (Accessed: 13 November 2020).

<sup>113</sup> Gowan (2018).

<sup>114</sup> European Commission (2020j).

<sup>115</sup> European Parliament (2020c).

<sup>116</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 10).

and one of the main elements of the Eurobarometer survey on the European Education Area mentioned above.

Notwithstanding the European University Association observing that ‘it was rather like old wine being poured into new bottles’<sup>117</sup>, the project was broadly well perceived by the European consultative bodies, the main stakeholders and a number of Member States, who announced that they would provide financial support for the European universities<sup>118</sup>. It was also widely supported among young Europeans: ‘93 % think that it would be useful to create EU degrees delivered by networks of European universities, offering students the chance to study in different EU countries, with a flexible choice of courses or modules offered within the network’<sup>119</sup>.

**One of the main issues at stake appeared to be scope and inclusion in its multiple dimensions:**

- From a geographical perspective, the initiative reopened the well-known debate between the proponents of a ‘cohesion’ approach and those defending ‘excellence’: whereas some advocated a better representation of universities from central, southern or eastern European countries,<sup>120</sup> other stakeholders expressed reservations regarding the use of geographical balance as an evaluation criterion and recommended selecting ‘a limited number of excellent research-based European University alliances instead of a large number of poorly funded alliances’<sup>121</sup>. Conversely, there was wide consensus that the initiative should not be limited to the Erasmus+ programme countries, but should be open to all countries taking part in the Bologna Process (the case of Switzerland being frequently mentioned) and even to Erasmus+ partner countries<sup>122</sup>;
- From a thematic perspective, some position papers stressed the need to further involve universities of applied sciences and other professional higher education institutions, and to place more emphasis on STEAM topics in the evaluation criteria<sup>123</sup>. In the same vein, concerning the CoVEs, the Lifelong Learning Platform suggested ‘promot[ing] the parity of esteem’ of these centres with academic pathways<sup>124</sup>;
- From a scale perspective, several stakeholders pointed out the risk of creating a two-tiered system only benefiting existing and well-funded key-players and leaving behind small universities. The European University Association insisted on the need to ‘find a balance between supporting such alliances and funding smaller scale collaboration projects’<sup>125</sup>;
- From the perspective of individual students, the European Students’ Union considered that virtual mobility should not be counted as part of the quota of 50 % of the students benefiting from mobility. It also called for ‘better incorporation of the social dimension through a convergence on students’ rights’<sup>126</sup>.

<sup>117</sup> European University Association (2019), in reference to the European University Institute, the College of Europe, Eurcor or the University of the Greater Region).

<sup>118</sup> Irish Government, Department of Education and Skills (2017 and 2019); Portuguese Government, Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior, ‘*European University Networks*’ (Accessed: 12 November 2020); French Government, Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l’Innovation (2018), *Création d’un réseau d’universités européennes* (Accessed: 13 November 2020): « La France apportera dans le cadre du PIA un financement complémentaire d’au moins 100 M€ sur dix ans aux établissements français qui participeront aux projets d’universités européennes retenus dans les appels à projets de la Commission ». Alain Beretz, former president of Eurcor, was assigned the task of coordinating all French initiatives in the field.

<sup>119</sup> European Commission (2018c).

<sup>120</sup> European Students’ Union (2018a); Academic Cooperation Association (n.d., a).

<sup>121</sup> The Guild (2018); CESAER (2020a).

<sup>122</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (2018); European Students’ Union (2018a and 2018b); CESAER (2019).

<sup>123</sup> European Students’ Union (2018d); CESAER (2018); EURASHE (2019); Academic Cooperation Association (n.d., a).

<sup>124</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2018).

<sup>125</sup> European Students’ Union (2018b, 2018d and 2019a); European University Association (2019); Academic Cooperation Association (n.d., a).

<sup>126</sup> European Students’ Union (2019c).

**Besides inclusion, many comments and questions were focused on funding concerns** beyond the initial three-year period:

- While several stakeholders, as well as some Members of the European Parliament, raised the issue of the financial sustainability of the initiative beyond the pilot calls for projects, the Commission stated that the project would be fully rolled out under the next Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), depending on the outcome of the negotiations on the future Erasmus programme<sup>127</sup>. The Guild recommended that the scheme should be 'designed for at least 10 years, with a mid-term review after the first 5 years'<sup>128</sup>;
- A number of organisations advocated increased synergies with other EU funding programmes beyond Erasmus+, primarily with Horizon Europe, in order to strengthen the links between education and research and to make the 'knowledge triangle' a reality, but also with the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)<sup>129</sup>;
- The European Students' Union cautioned against involving private institutions in the networks as 'Associated Partners' and 'Affiliated entities', with the possibility of financial contribution, in order to avoid the risk of 'higher education commodification'<sup>130</sup>.

Finally, **the European Universities Initiatives elicited comments concerning governance:**

- While most reactions welcomed the bottom-up approach as the best way to ensure sufficient room for manoeuvre, they also called for the simplification of the procedures<sup>131</sup>;
- Various stakeholders stressed the experimental dimension of the initiative and the need for flexibility in order to test genuinely new models of cooperation, involving students in their design<sup>132</sup>;
- CESAER proposed to examine further the question of a European legal status for the European Universities<sup>133</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> European Parliament (2020b).

<sup>128</sup> The Guild (2018).

<sup>129</sup> European University Association (2019 and 2020g); European Students' Union (2020); German Government (2020).

<sup>130</sup> European Students' Union (2018a) <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=resolution-european-commission-european-universities-alliances>.

<sup>131</sup> European Parliament (2018e); European Economic and Social Committee (2018); European University Association (2020g).

<sup>132</sup> Academic Cooperation Association (n.d., a); The Guild (2018); European Students' Union (2019a).

<sup>133</sup> CESAER (2020c).

### 3. TOWARDS A MORE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY: THE COMMISSION COMMUNICATION OF SEPTEMBER 2020

#### KEY FINDINGS

In September 2020, the Commission published a more ambitious communication on the European Education Area revolving around six dimensions: (1) Quality in education and training, (2) Inclusion and gender equality, (3) Green and digital transitions, (4) teachers and trainers, (5) Higher education, (6) Geopolitical dimension.

In addition to these dimensions, the Commission put forward a list of 46 proposals for action, mainly consisting in new initiatives under the Erasmus+ programme, upcoming Council recommendations, the setting-up of new expert groups and support to Member States.

Compared with the previous communications issued in 2017 and 2018, specific topics had gained prominence, including gender equality, green transition and the geopolitical dimension of the EEA. At the same time, other ideas and concepts lost some of their initial relevance, such as media literacy or 'European identity', the latter now becoming supplanted by the 'European way of life'.

The envisaged creation of an enabling framework can be seen as laying the ground for a fully fledged governance body. Among other things, this enabling framework would monitor the achievement of a strategic framework succeeding the current ET 2020, the main novelty of which is a benchmark on low achievement in computer and information literacy.

#### 3.1. Ambition

On 30 September 2020, **in its communication on *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, the European Commission proposed to foster the achievement of the EEA through a holistic strategy** promoting further cooperation between European educational institutions, targeting European citizens of all ages and revolving around the following six dimensions<sup>134</sup>:

<sup>134</sup> European Commission (2020b).

**Figure 1: The six dimensions of the European Education Area and the means to achieve them**



Source: European Commission, [Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, Factsheet](#) (Accessed: 8 December 2020).

Complementing initiatives under way since 2017, the Commission introduced a number of new policy proposals, highlighting topics that were underrepresented in former communications on the EEA. While the first two communications on the European Education Area comprised a dozen measures, the communication of September 2020 mainly resembled a ‘wish-list’ totalling **46 proposals for action along the six dimensions mentioned above**. To some extent, any new European policy initiative taken in the field of education since the Summit of Gothenburg could be considered to relate to the EEA. **In most cases, these actions consisted in strengthening existing frameworks and funding or were recommendations and measures to support Member States**. Very few of them envisaged the creation of new tools or structures (the exceptions including the Erasmus Teacher Academies, the European Universities Initiative, the CoVEs and the European degrees) and many of the policy proposals presented echoed initiatives already introduced by the Skills Agenda.

Presenting the 2020 communication to the Committee on Culture and Education, Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life Margaritis Schinas stressed that the European Education Area would never be a ‘one-shot’ endeavour, but ‘the gradual creation of a broader ecosystem in which national priorities and reform efforts are reinforced through EU support’<sup>135</sup>.

### 3.1.1. Quality in education and training

Under this dimension, the Commission stressed the importance of mastering **basic skills** that, according to the latest PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey, remained a

<sup>135</sup> European Parliament (2020d).

major source of concern. According to the Commission, the acquisition of such basic skills was a ‘prerequisite to thrive in life, to find fulfilling jobs and to become engaged citizens’<sup>136</sup>. A further aspect mentioned was the mastering of **transversal skills**, including entrepreneurship, in line with action 7 of the Skills Agenda (‘promotion of entrepreneurship skills at all levels of education and training – from primary and secondary school education, to VET and higher education to provide students with the knowledge and motivation to encourage entrepreneurial activity’<sup>137</sup>). The Commission also expressed the intention to foster **language learning and multilingualism** and to promote the **mobility of learners and teachers** as well as the freedom of education institutions to associate with one another in Europe and beyond. In order to strengthen the quality of education and training within these areas, the Commission presented several initiatives, consisting in:

- Updating the **learning mobility framework** accompanying the strengthened Erasmus programme;
- Supporting Member States in the implementation of the 2019 **Council Recommendation on A comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages**, including in VET<sup>138</sup>. The Commission also aimed to promote so-called ‘**language-aware schools**’ through the future Erasmus programme and to continue supporting language competences in a **lifelong learning** perspective;
- Developing a ‘**European perspective**’ in education through strengthened **Jean Monnet Actions**, bringing them closer to schools with a view to promoting the European way of life, sustainability and EU values<sup>139</sup>;
- Providing a **wider range of opportunities** for learners at all levels to develop **transversal skills**, through the future Erasmus programme;
- Supporting Member States in the identification of policy reforms supporting **innovative and multi-disciplinary teaching and learning approaches** for **basic skills**.

### 3.1.2. Inclusion and gender equality

The Commission stated its intention to **reduce gender gaps** and promote more **gender-sensitive teaching** in schools. For this purpose, a number of initiatives were presented that, together with the new Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025<sup>140</sup>, would ‘promote a gender equal workplace culture and help combat racism and all forms of discrimination, including gender stereotyping’<sup>141</sup>. Concretely, the Commission proposed to:

- **Strengthen research** exploring the role of gender in education and training practices as well as the links between gender, education and social and economic success;
- Introduce **dedicated modules** under the **Teacher Academies** to foster gender-sensitive teaching in schools;
- Elaborate a new agenda for higher education promoting **gender balance in academic careers and study choice**;
- Open further traditionally **male- or female-dominated professions** and increase gender balance in leadership positions;

<sup>136</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 5).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. (p. 14).

<sup>138</sup> Council of the European Union (2019a).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> European Commission, [Questions and Answers: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#) (Accessed: 8 December 2020).

<sup>141</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 4).

- Propose dedicated working streams within the **EEA enabling framework** aimed at developing policy guidance on gender equality in education;
- Convene an **expert group** to develop strategies to create supportive learning environments, including addressing gender-specific challenges.

The dimension 'Inclusion and gender equality' also comprised actions aiming at fostering the **inclusiveness** of the European education sector<sup>142</sup>. In its communication, the Commission stated how 'educational attainment and achievement should be decoupled from social, economic and cultural status, to ensure that education and training systems boost the abilities of every individual and enable upward social mobility', also putting a stronger focus on the inclusion of persons with disabilities<sup>143</sup>. In order to boost the inclusive dimension of education, the following was proposed:

- More inclusive **Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps Programmes**;
- A **Pathways to School Success initiative**, helping pupils to reach a baseline proficiency level in basic skills, with a special focus on groups risking underachievement and early school leaving;
- Building on the Council Recommendation on *Policies to reduce early school leaving*<sup>144</sup>, the Commission would co-develop with Member States **policy guidance** on reducing low achievement and increasing secondary education attainment;
- The **European Semester** should support Member States in their efforts to raise competence levels, foster inclusiveness and prevent youth unemployment. Close coordination with actions envisaged in the recent Youth Guarantee would be ensured;
- An **expert group** assigned the task of developing strategies for creating supportive learning environments for groups at risk of underachievement and for supporting well-being in schools;
- Support the establishment of **50 CoVEs**;
- Support the implementation of the **European framework for high-quality early childhood education and care systems**<sup>145</sup> and create a **tool-kit** for inclusion in early childhood education in 2012. The Commission is also working on a **Child Guarantee**;
- Work towards a **European Approach to micro-credentials**, to widen learning opportunities and strengthen the role of higher and vocational education in **lifelong learning**. Present a proposal for a **Council Recommendation** in 2021 to support building trust in micro-credentials across Europe and have all necessary steps in place by 2025.

### 3.1.3. Green and digital transitions

The achievement of the 'twin transitions' can be seen as a shared goal in the communications on the European Education Area and the Skills Agenda<sup>146</sup>. In the 30 September communication<sup>146</sup> it was emphasised how 'education and training policies and investments geared towards inclusive green and

<sup>142</sup> European Commission (2020i, pp. 10 and 16).

<sup>143</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 7).

<sup>144</sup> Council of the European Union (2011).

<sup>145</sup> Council of the European Union (2019b).

<sup>146</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 12).

digital transitions hold the key to Europe's future resilience and prosperity'<sup>147</sup>. To enhance the green transition in education, the Commission presented the following proposals for action:

- Launch an **Education for Climate Coalition** by the end of 2020, with the aim of mobilising expertise, providing resources for networking and supporting creative approaches with teachers, pupils and students;
- Propose a **Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability** in 2021, linked to a **European Competence Framework** on education on climate change and sustainable development, as set out also in the Skills Agenda;
- Promote **sustainable education** and the **greening of education infrastructure** with the support of the European Investment Bank;
- Launch the **'Researchers at Schools' initiative**, allowing young researchers supported by the Marie Curie Actions to engage with teachers and pupils on environmental issues.

Concerning the digital transition, the Commission presented the following initiatives:

- Support the implementation of the new **Digital Education Action Plan** among Member States;
- Launch a **Digital Europe Programme** envisaging funding for advanced digital skills in fields such as AI, cybersecurity and high-performance computing;
- Plan **workshops on digital skills** in cooperation with the EIT and parts of Horizon Europe;
- Organise short **placement schemes for female students** in digital and STEM-related areas in different economic sectors.

#### 3.1.4. Teachers and trainers

In the wake of the Second European Education Summit, which focused on the teaching profession<sup>148</sup>, this component of the European Education Area addressed teacher training and recognition. Since 'teachers, trainers and educational staff are at the heart of education', playing 'the most important role in making education a fruitful experience for all learners'<sup>149</sup>, the communication of September 2020 proposed several initiatives aimed at revalorising the teaching profession in both social and financial terms:

- Design **European guidance for the development of national career frameworks** during 2021-2022, supporting the career progression of school education professionals;
- Establish a **European Innovative Teaching Award** by 2021;
- Establish 25 **Erasmus Teacher Academies** by 2025, consisting of networks of education institutions and teacher associations able to contribute to national and EU education policies and support innovative teaching practices.

#### 3.1.5. Higher education

Lying 'at the heart of both the European Education Area and the European Research Area and [being] particularly well placed to connect them together', actions targeting higher education institutions were well represented in the latest Commission communication on the EEA<sup>150</sup>. Besides referring to initiatives

<sup>147</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 8).

<sup>148</sup> European Commission (2019c).

<sup>149</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 9).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. (p. 20).

launched over the past two years (European Universities, European Student Card Initiative, mutual recognition of qualifications), the Commission announced several other policy actions in this area:

- Create a '**transformation agenda for higher education**' by the end of 2021, including all EU initiatives in the field;
- Renew the **Recommendation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education**, aiming at the automatic recognition of academic qualifications across Member States by 2025<sup>151</sup>;
- Renew the **Europass** Platform to help people better promote their skills by issuing digital credentials, as mentioned also in the Skills Agenda;
- Support the development of new **STE(A)M curricula**, also in order to make them more attractive to women;
- In response to questions raised by some stakeholders, the communication announced further investigation into the creation of **European degrees** (restricted to university alliances), this initiative being put forward also in the Skills Agenda;
- Explore the necessity of a **legal statute for university alliances** (in particular on the suitability of the status of 'European grouping of territorial cooperation')<sup>152</sup>. If justified, actions to facilitate such cooperation may follow from 2023 onwards;
- Support the **European graduate tracking initiative**, achieving Europe-wide implementation of graduate tracking by 2025.

### 3.1.6. Geopolitical dimension

Under this dimension, the Commission outlined its strategy to **promote its values and interests outside its borders**, strengthen international partnerships and make European higher education more attractive. 'Education', according to the Commission, 'has gradually become an important instrument for the implementation of EU external policies as an indisputable instrument of soft power'<sup>153</sup>. The communication announced the creation of a '**Team Europe approach**' to foster cooperation between the EU and the Member States on the external dimension of education. The Commission also proposed to:

- Strengthen **cooperation with strategic global partners** in the field of education (e.g., China, Japan, the US);
- Expand the international dimension of the Erasmus programme, fostering actions such as the **Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees**;
- Foster cooperation with Africa, supporting the implementation of the **EU's comprehensive Africa strategy**;
- Widen the association of non-EU countries to the EEA, especially those of the **Western Balkans, by 2025**.

<sup>151</sup> European Union (2006a).

<sup>152</sup> European Commission (2020i, pp. 11 and 13).

<sup>153</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 11).

### 3.2. Shifting priorities: comparison between the September 2020 communication and the previous communications on the EEA

The September 2020 Commission communication on *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025* clearly built upon previous actions taken by the Commission in the field of education. Nonetheless, when comparing the priorities set out in the 2020 document with the ones outlined in the two communications of 2017 and 2018, certain shifts of direction can be found. **Whereas specific topics gained prominence, others seem to have lost some of their initial relevance.** This chapter analyses these shifts and illustrates the emergence of ‘new’ policy priorities concerning the European Education Area. For this purpose, a twofold distinction is made between changes on a ‘horizontal’ and changes on a ‘vertical’ dimension. The vertical dimension regroups policy proposals targeting different education sectors (e.g., higher education and vocational training), as well as the professional category of teachers and trainers, whereas the horizontal dimension focusses on goals and initiatives cross-cutting different sectors (e.g., gender equality, inclusion and green transformation). The 2020 communication also emphasised the challenges European education systems are facing due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, an aspect which for obvious reasons was missing in the previous communications on the EEA<sup>154</sup>.

#### 3.2.1. Horizontal dimension

##### Inclusion and Gender Equality

The 2020 communication brought together numerous policy actions aimed at fostering the ‘inclusiveness’ of European education systems. **For the first time, the inclusion of persons with disabilities, not mentioned in the previous communications, was addressed.** However, the Commission’s commitment in this regard was limited to emphasising its adherence to the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. In contrast, the 2017 communication did not introduce a single policy initiative explicitly targeting inclusion, whereas in 2018, the Commission put a slightly stronger focus on the concept of inclusion in the EEA<sup>155</sup>. When addressing the inclusive dimension of education, both the 2018 and 2020 communications frequently referred to the Council Recommendation on *Promoting Common Values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension of Teaching* of May 2018<sup>156</sup>.

**The aspect of gender equality was given more emphasis in the 2020 communication than it was previously.** In both previous communications, issues linked to gender inequality were barely mentioned, and if they were, that was alongside other topics and not in themselves. Consequently, no concrete policy proposals were made in this field. Featuring as one out of six dimensions of the European Education Area introduced by the September 2020 communication, gender equality and gender-related issues thus clearly gained importance. A further indicator for this increased sensibility towards gender-related aspects is the fact that **proposals targeting gender could be found in almost all areas of education**, from school education to higher education and VET.

<sup>154</sup> In the communication the Commission states that ‘it is essential to prevent the health crisis from becoming a structural barrier to learning and skills development’; see European Commission (2020b, p. 1).

<sup>155</sup> To support Member States in ‘improving the inclusive, lifelong-learning based and innovation-driven nature of their education and training systems’ is presented as one of the main objectives that should be pursued by the EEA. See European Commission (2018a, p. 6).

<sup>156</sup> Council of the European Union (2018d).

## Green and digital transformations

While **the 2020 communication puts a strong focus on environmental sustainability in education**, thus introducing a considerable range of policy initiatives in this field, this issue was completely absent in the previous communications. The promotion of a 'green transition' constituted one of the six EEA dimensions introduced in 2020 and was linked to initiatives targeting different education sectors. When it comes to revising the mobility framework of the Erasmus programme, for example, the importance of enhancing the 'green mobility' of students and teachers was highlighted. The 2020 communication also recurrently referred to the *European Green Deal* and the *UN Sustainable Development Goals*. Further, the green transition was regularly coupled with the 'digital transition', as the Commission often refers to the 'twin transitions' and states how 'education and training policies and investments geared towards inclusive green and digital transitions hold the key to Europe's future resilience and prosperity'<sup>157</sup>. Similarly, the Skills Agenda highlighted how 'the twin green and digital transitions [were] reshaping the way we live, work and interact'<sup>158</sup>.

**Unlike environmental issues, digitalisation played a prominent role in the 2017 communication**, where it was depicted as a key factor to improve education. In January 2018 the Commission then presented its first *Digital Education Action Plan*, a renewed version of which was presented in September 2020 for the period 2021-2027<sup>159</sup>. In fact, almost all EU initiatives promoting the digitalisation of European education systems can be found in these two documents<sup>160</sup>. However, **it is worth noting that the aim of promoting 'media literacy' disappeared in the 2020 communication**: while the problem of disinformation, linked to the growing importance of fake news and 'alternative facts', was mentioned several times in the former communications, it was completely left out of the 2020 one<sup>161</sup>.

## European Identity and cultural heritage

'European Identity' as well as 'European cultural heritage' and cultural policies undoubtedly took a prominent role in the first two Commission communications on the EEA. In the 2017 communication on *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture*, the term 'identity' appeared in the title of the document, manifesting the emphasis on the creation of a European identity as the ultimate goal to be achieved through culture and education policies<sup>162</sup>. The 2018 communication used a similar rhetoric, emphasising how 'education and culture heighten our awareness, understanding and appreciation of Europe's rich shared cultural heritage, history, experiences, convictions and values. This unites people across borders (...) and gives us a sense of belonging together. Education, training and culture can help us discover and experience what it means to be European'<sup>163</sup>. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing how the 2020 communication avoided using the term (European) 'identity', and instead used phrases such as the 'sense of belonging together as Europeans', the 'experience of what it means to be

<sup>157</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 8).

<sup>158</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 3).

<sup>159</sup> European Commission (2018 b and 2020e).

<sup>160</sup> This strong focus on digitalisation of education systems echoes the German Council Presidency Programme presented on July 2019, stating how the Council 'will take advantage of Germany's Council Presidency to launch a number of initiatives focusing on the different aspects of digital education and continue to develop digital education as part of realising the European Education Area'. See German Government (2020, p. 7).

<sup>161</sup> See also European Commission (2018e).

<sup>162</sup> On the intricacies of the concept of 'European identity' and related policies see, e.g., Prutsch (2017).

<sup>163</sup> European Commission (2018a, p. 8).

European’, or the need to let people ‘experience what the European project is about’ through the promotion of ‘cultural diversity and shared heritage’.

**The aim of strengthening ‘European identity’ – or the ‘sense of belonging together as Europeans’ – as an explicit objective was almost absent in the 2020 communication**<sup>164</sup>. Furthermore, the importance of (European) cultural heritage was only marginally mentioned, and actions targeting the cultural sector clearly did not appear as a priority. Nevertheless, when it comes to education policies, **the need to integrate a ‘European perspective’ into education was mentioned, and the accentuation of the EU’s commitment in the promotion of democratic freedoms and a ‘European way of life’ could be interpreted as (indirectly) referring to the idea of a European identity**<sup>165</sup>. However, it is remarkable how the goal to strengthen a sense of common identity among EU citizens, clearly present in the previous communications, apparently lost much of its initial significance.

### Geopolitical dimension

In the 2020 communication, the geopolitical and international dimension of the European Education Area had a prominent place and several policy initiatives in this area were presented. The Commission stated how changes in the global order (e.g., the rise of China and the retreat of the US from the multilateral order) called for strengthening the EU’s role as a global player, including in education. ‘High-quality international cooperation in education and training’ was depicted as ‘essential for the achievement of the Union’s geopolitical priorities’<sup>166</sup>. In the previous communications, the relevance of the EEA within the arena of international politics was barely mentioned. In fact, in both documents, the only initiative linked to the international competitiveness of the EU as an actor in the education sector was the European Universities initiative. Since Member States are traditionally reluctant to concede the EU much room to manoeuvre in the field of international politics, **the strong focus on the geopolitical dimension of the EEA present in the 2020 Commission communication can be seen as a remarkable novelty**. At the same time, as regards proposals to widen the scope of the European Education Area to non-EU countries, the Commission remained vague. The communication hinted at the possibility of including some Balkan countries, yet left out the option to extend the geographical scope of the EEA to all signatory countries of the *European Cultural Convention* (coinciding approximately with the area covered by the Bologna Process), as suggested by some stakeholders.

#### 3.2.2. Vertical dimension

##### Teachers & trainers

The quality of teachers and of teaching methods was already a topic in the communication of 2017, where it was identified as a key factor for the achievement of the European Education Area. The ensuing Commission communication of 2018 paid less attention to it, mainly pointing to initiatives outlined in its communication on *School Development and Excellent Teaching for a Great Start in Life*, released in May 2017 and specifically targeting the issue of teaching<sup>167</sup>. **In its latest communication on the EEA, ‘Teachers and Trainers’ figured as one of the six priority dimensions of the European Education Area**, and it was stated that ‘teachers, trainers and educational staff are at the heart of education. They

<sup>164</sup> The term ‘identity’ is only mentioned once in relation to the Erasmus+ programme aiming at promoting a so-called ‘European student identity’.

<sup>165</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 8).

<sup>166</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 11).

<sup>167</sup> European Commission (2017c).

play the most important role in making education a fruitful experience for all learners (...). Without teachers and trainers, no innovation, no inclusion and no transformational education experiences for learners can take place'<sup>168</sup>. In order to revalorise the teaching profession and guarantee teachers and trainers continuous opportunities for professional development, several proposals were made (e.g., Erasmus Teacher Academies, EU guidance for national career frameworks and a European Innovative Teaching Award).

### Higher education

'Higher education' figured as one of the six dimensions of the EEA introduced in the 2020 communication and was thus to be considered a priority area for communitarian action in the field of education. Nonetheless, **most of the Commission's proposals addressing higher education could already be found in the previous two communications**. The Commission's flagship initiative of the European universities, for example, was introduced already in 2017 and only further developed in the following communications<sup>169</sup>. An aspect addressed by all three communications is the problem of the recognition of higher education degrees, but also second education qualifications, across European borders. Upon request of the Commission, the Council presented a Recommendation on the issue in November 2018<sup>170</sup>. Building on the May 2017 Commission communication on *A renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education*<sup>171</sup>, the 2020 communication proposed to present a 'transformation agenda for higher education', bringing together all EU initiatives in the field by the end of 2021.

### Vocational training and lifelong learning

Due to the reactions of stakeholders addressing the Commission's predominant focus on higher education when first presenting its idea of a European Education Area in 2017, **the communications of 2018 and 2020 put a stronger focus on vocational education**<sup>172</sup>. As can be read in the 2018 communication, 'the provision of high quality technical and specific vocational skills is essential to support innovation and competitiveness'. To this end, in 2018 the Commission proposed the establishment of 'Vocational Education and Training Centres of Excellence'<sup>173</sup>, an initiative later integrated in the New European Skills Agenda of June 2020<sup>174</sup> and readdressed in the communication on the EEA of September 2020 that will become an integral part of the 2021-2027 edition of the Erasmus+ programme. According to the Commission, the purpose of these Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) would not be limited to offering initial training to young people, but would also provide continuous training to adults, thus promoting lifelong learning.

The importance of lifelong learning was already mentioned in the 2017 communication, where it was identified as a key factor in achieving the European Education Area. A similarly strong focus on lifelong learning could be found in the 2018 communication, which emphasised how the EEA 'will cover

<sup>168</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 9).

<sup>169</sup> It must be noted that the communication of September 2020 no longer refers to the School of Transnational Governance, which leaves its future role for and within the EEA in doubt. Based within the European University Institute in Florence, the School of Transnational Governance aims to become a recognised teaching and research centre for European and regional transnational governance and will deliver 'teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State'. The communications of 2017 and 2018 had announced a strengthening of its activities as well as the establishment of closer links with institutions having similar characteristics, such as the Hertie School of Governance (DE), the École nationale d'administration (FR) and the College of Europe (BE and PL).

<sup>170</sup> Council of the European Union (2018c).

<sup>171</sup> European Commission (2017a).

<sup>172</sup> Nonetheless, it is worth noting that whereas within the Commission's EEA 'six-dimensions model' the area of higher education has a dimension exclusively dedicated to it. This is not the case for VET and secondary education, which are subsumed under other dimensions. Moreover, progress reports examining the degree to which the ET2020 mobility objectives have been met have predominantly, if not exclusively, focused on the mobility of higher education students. See: European Commission (2018d, p. 11 and 2020f, p. 83).

<sup>173</sup> European Commission (2018a, p. 9).

<sup>174</sup> European Commission (2020i, p. 10).

learners of all age groups', the right to lifelong learning being established in the first principle of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*. In its 2020 communication, the Commission merely restated its support for fostering lifelong learning strategies across Member States, introducing no additional initiatives to the ones already included in prior EU initiatives addressing the subject<sup>175</sup>.

### Early childhood and school education

**Early childhood education was presented in all three Commission communications as an important component of the EEA.** In its latest communication on *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, the Commission stated how 'participation in early childhood education and care [was] an important determinant of later basic skills acquisition'<sup>176</sup>. The Council Recommendation on *High-Quality Early Childhood and Care Systems* of May 2019 can be seen as resulting from the Commission's endeavours towards such a recommendation already expressed in the EEA communications of 2017 and 2018. New initiatives introduced by the 2020 Communication were the development of a tool kit for early childhood education and of a Child Guarantee<sup>177</sup>.

It is worth noting that school education (primary and secondary education) never appeared as a 'stand-alone' category in the Commission's communications on the EEA. Initiatives targeting this education sector were often 'horizontal' or 'cross-sectoral', thus not addressing the area of school education per se (e.g., promotion of inclusiveness, education on environmental sustainability and gender issues, quality of teachers and trainers). Beyond that, secondary education was referred to in relation to mutual recognition of qualifications across EU Member States, which, however, does not present a novel proposal in itself<sup>178</sup>.

### 3.3. Governance

The communication of September 2020 set out the establishment of an 'enabling framework' consisting of an embryonic form of governance body for the European Education Area that would be responsible, inter alia, for implementing the post-ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation in education and training policies.

The enabling framework would work closely with the Council, although the Commission remained vague with regard to the exact nature of the relationship ('strengthened guidance from the Council'). The text of the communication reflects the cautious step-by-step approach adopted by the Commission: it suggested that the composition and working methods of a steering board representing the Member States would be defined in 2021, based on 'flexible cooperation methods' and before the establishment of a 'fully-fledged governance framework' in 2025. In accordance with the recommendations expressed in a 2019 non-paper endorsed by 15 Member States<sup>179</sup>, most of the operating methods of the ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation in education and training policies, such as working groups and peer-learning activities, would be maintained.

<sup>175</sup> See: Council of the European Union (2016, 2018a and 2018b); European Commission (2016 and 2020i).

<sup>176</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 15.)

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. (p. 15).

<sup>178</sup> The mutual recognition of upper secondary education and training qualifications giving access to higher education was firstly included in the November 2018 [Council Recommendation on Promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad](#).

<sup>179</sup> *Non-paper on the post-2020 EU strategic framework for cooperation in education and training* endorsed by Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain (2019).

Two main tasks would be assigned to the new enabling framework:

- Foster the *integration of education and training in the European Semester* in order to support Member States with country-specific recommendations in the realm of education;
- Monitor progress made towards the European Education Area through the establishment of *five benchmarks to be reached by 2030*. As shown in the table below, and following the recommendations of the Member States in the non-paper mentioned above, the Commission kept the number of benchmarks limited 'in order to maximise their effectiveness'<sup>180</sup>:

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<sup>180</sup> European Commission (2020k, p. 62).

**Table 1: Education and Training targets: benchmark data and achievements**

	<b>Targets 2020 (ET 2020)</b>	<b>Targets 2030 (EEA communication of 2020)</b>	<b>Progress toward targets</b>
<b>Underachievement in reading, maths and science</b>	The rate of 15-year-olds with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 %	The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 %	Rate 2020: 22.5 % for reading, 22.9 % for mathematics and 22.3 % for science
<b>Underachievement in computer and information literacy</b>	-	The share of low-achieving year eights in computer and information literacy should be less than 15 %	-
<b>Early childhood education</b>	At least 95 % of children between the age of four and the time they start compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education	At least 98 % of children between the age of three and the time they start compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education	Rate 2020: 94.8 %
<b>Tertiary educational attainment</b>	The rate of 30-34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40 %	The share of 30-34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 50 %	Rate 2020: 40.3 %
<b>Early leavers from education and training</b>	The rate of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10 %	The share of 20-24-year-olds with at least an upper secondary qualification should be 90 %	Rate 2020 of early leavers: 10.2 %
<b>Adult participation in learning</b>	An average of at least 15 % of adults (aged between 25 and 64) should participate in lifelong learning	50 % of the adult population in the EU should participate in learning every year (Skills Agenda)	Rate 2020, during the last four weeks: 10.8 %. Rate 2016, during the last 12 months: 38 %
<b>Learning mobility</b>	At least 20 % of higher education graduates and 6 % of 18-34-year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad	-	Rate 2018 in higher education: 13.5 %
<b>Employment rate of recent graduates</b>	At least 82 % of graduates (20-34-year-olds having successfully completed upper secondary or tertiary education) who left education in the last one to three years should be in employment	-	Rate 2019: 80.9 %

Sources: European Commission (2020f); European Commission (2020b).

Apart from increasing the target percentages for two benchmarks (participation in early childhood education and tertiary educational attainment), the main new development of the 2020 EEA communication is the introduction of a benchmark on digital skills. Based on a survey carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) every five years, this benchmark would serve as the yardstick against which the implementation of the EEA's 'digital transition' dimension would be assessed.

Since the ET 2020 target on low achievement was not met, the target percentage for the benchmark on basic skills in reading, mathematics and science was maintained. This benchmark could be seen as

particularly relevant to the EEA dimension on 'quality in education and training'. The benchmark on early school leaving was turned into an indicator addressing the 'share of people aged 20-24 years old with at least an upper secondary qualification' in order to put greater emphasis on completion of compulsory education and to stress that 'completing upper secondary education progressively became 'a minimum standard''<sup>181</sup>. The target relating to lifelong learning became much more ambitious and was incorporated in the Skills Agenda<sup>182</sup>. While the 2020 communication on the EEA gave much prominence to learning mobility, it comes as a surprise that the targets for 2030 did not include any indicator against which to measure the achievement of this objective. The issue of whether the EU should set a target percentage of gross domestic product allocated to education – as is the case for research and innovation through the European Semester – was raised several times<sup>183</sup>, but this proposal was not taken up by the Commission.

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<sup>181</sup> European Commission (2020k, p. 63).

<sup>182</sup> European Commission (2020i, pp. 18-19).

<sup>183</sup> CESAER (2020b); European Parliament (2020e).

## 4. OUTLOOK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### KEY FINDINGS

Despite the fact that significant steps have been taken to translate the ambition of creating a European Education Area by 2025 into political action, the EEA continues to resemble more a vision than a concrete policy programme. To a considerable extent, the EEA initiative still consists of declarations of intent focussing on 'what to achieve' rather than on 'how to achieve it'. This constitutes the main overarching challenge for the future of the EEA.

Besides, several more particular challenges have been identified when it comes to making the European Education Area a reality, including:

- Design of a more consistent strategy concerning, among other things, the interplay between the six dimensions covered by the EEA and the indicators of the post-ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation in education and training policies, as well as the geographical scope of the EEA;
- Clarification and realisation of governance arrangements in the light of current practices in related governance bodies such as the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), especially as regards the type of participation required from Member States and the level of involvement expected from stakeholder organisations;
- Need to elaborate further on important priorities for the European education sector such as: acknowledging and fostering academic freedom as a fundamental value; developing ambitious 'media literacy' policies; promoting the concept of inclusiveness, its understanding and implementation in the broadest sense of the term; and assisting Member States to integrate a 'European perspective' in students' and teachers' education at national level.

Detailed examination of the three main communications of the Commission dealing with the EEA<sup>184</sup> shows that a number of key questions have not been addressed in sufficient detail. These questions mainly revolve around the design of a clear strategy, the establishment of a proper governance structure and the setting of priorities for the coming years within clearly defined time lines. These issues should be tackled in the coming months and years through intensified exchanges between the Council and the Commission, starting with the Portuguese Presidency of the Council, in the context of which a resolution on the European Education Area is scheduled for adoption on 19 February 2021.

### 4.1. Strategy

#### 4.1.1. Implementation strategy and evaluation framework

Various education actors have pointed out that the communication of September 2020 lacks vision<sup>185</sup>. Confusingly, while the Commission had initially assigned five major objectives to the EEA<sup>186</sup> and a

<sup>184</sup> European Commission (2017d, 2018a and 2020b).

<sup>185</sup> See Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (2020): 'The lack of a common vision on education and training (...) will also affect the implementation of the initiatives put forward in the Communication'.

<sup>186</sup> Spending time abroad to study and learn should become the norm; school and higher education qualifications should be recognised across the EU; knowing two languages in addition to one's mother tongue should be standard; everyone should be able to access high-quality education, irrespective of their socio-economic background; people should have a strong sense of their identity as a European, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity.

limited number of proposals for action, the communication of September 2020 put forward six key 'dimensions' – either cross-cutting (1; 2; 3; 6) or sectoral (4; 5) – and proposed as many as 46 initiatives to make the European Education Area a reality. It also laid the foundations for a post-ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation in education and training policies with a set of benchmarks that did not seem fully consistent with the six dimensions mentioned above. For instance, the five new benchmarks covered neither the geopolitical dimension nor the issues of gender equality or green transition. Furthermore, although the deadline of 2025 was mentioned several times, a clear implementation calendar was missing. Against this backdrop, the Committee on Culture and Education called on the Commission to 'propose a bold policy framework for future European education policy, transforming the European Education Area from a loose vision of principles into a concrete work programme with a set of measurable objectives'<sup>187</sup>. In November 2020, national governments called for greater coherence between the future EEA and the post-ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation in education and training policies, advocating for the development of indicators taking into account the diversity of national educational systems<sup>188</sup>. The Commission acknowledged that it was 'necessary to develop with all stakeholders a new approach to indicators and targets for the European Education Area along its six dimensions'<sup>189</sup>.

Furthermore, it is surprising that none of the communications on the EEA placed the EU strategy on education firmly within global initiatives. Education is central to the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2015. Under the heading 'Quality Education', SDG 4 proposed to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. This goal comprises a number of targets and indicators relating to free access to education for all, in particular for the most vulnerable people, and to the completion of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. Above all, it insists on the need to teach the skills needed to promote sustainable development, 'including human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development'<sup>190</sup>. Although EU Member States already rank amongst the best performers against the indicators relating to SDG 4<sup>191</sup>, a specific proposal on the articulation between these indicators and those relating to the EEA could have been expected in the EU policy documents.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

- **Set up a consistent and concrete implementation strategy and draw up a comprehensive evaluation framework, consistent with UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education, in order to monitor progress and identify shortcomings in the implementation of EEA initiatives.**

#### 4.1.2. Geographical scope

While some voices have called for a widening of the European Education Area to all 50 signatories to the European Cultural Convention, including the 48 members of the European Higher Education Area<sup>192</sup>, the Commission has sidestepped the question of geographical scope, apart from insisting that the EEA should include the Western Balkans. Yet, it would appear consistent that, in addition to the Member States, third countries associated to the Erasmus+ programme<sup>193</sup> should be involved on the basis of specific agreements, along the lines of those in place with a selection of higher education

<sup>187</sup> European Parliament (2020f).

<sup>188</sup> Council of the European Union (2020b).

<sup>189</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 25).

<sup>190</sup> Sustainable Development Goals Fund, [Goal 4: Quality education](#) (Accessed: 11 January 2021).

<sup>191</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018).

<sup>192</sup> CESAER (2020b and 2020c); European Students' Union (2018a, 2018b and 2018e).

<sup>193</sup> See European Parliament (2019c, Article 16).

institutions of five non-EU countries in the framework of the European Universities Initiative under the current Erasmus+ programme (Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Turkey, United Kingdom)<sup>194</sup>.

Several specific characteristics of the education sector could boost arguments for expanding the EEA, with a focus on two potential benefits:

- The opportunity to promote, through education, the EU's fundamental values among young generations outside EU borders, especially in countries ruled by authoritarian governments. As an instrument of 'geopolitical soft power', this would be in the clear interest of the EU, seen from a long-term perspective, and in line with the Council of Europe's fundamental objective of 'building bridges' between European countries through culture and science;
- The opportunity to cooperate with the best universities across Europe in a wide sense and, by doing so, to strengthen the performance and international attractiveness of the EEA.

Conversely, one could argue that in spite of the relevance of the concept of 'differentiated integration' applied to this context<sup>195</sup>, the decision to widely broaden the European Education Area should be carefully considered, in view of:

- The financial dimension of the actions planned in the framework of the EEA, which should aim at striking a fair balance with regard to the contributions and benefits of participating countries that are not EU Member States;
- The decision-making process, in which the possibility of granting non-EU countries the status of 'observer' in future governance bodies should be examined (see below), as is the case within the European Research Area and innovation Committee (ERAC)<sup>196</sup>;
- The particular characteristics of some sectors, including safety and security aspects for universities of science and technology.

**Recommendation 2:**

- **Provide clarifications on the geographical scope of the European Education Area, taking into account current good practices in the Erasmus+ programme and the implementation of the Bologna Process.**

## 4.2. Governance

Beyond the long list of proposals for action laid down in the communication of 30 September 2020, the introduction of an 'enabling framework' as a first step towards setting up a 'fully-fledged governance framework' may reasonably be considered as a major leap forward. However, progress towards such a

<sup>194</sup> Besides the 27 EU Member States, participation of the following countries would be possible in the Erasmus+ successor programme 2021-2027:

- Those under Article 16a of the proposal for a regulation, i.e. members of the EFTA which are members of the European Economic Area (EEA): three countries, namely Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway;
- Those under Article 16b of the proposal for a regulation, i.e. [acceding countries, candidate countries and potential candidates](#): six countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey (NB: Kosovo is not among the signatories to the European Cultural Convention);
- Those under Article 16c of the proposal for a regulation, i.e. [countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy](#), most notably the eastern ones: six countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine;
- Those under Article 16d of the proposal for a regulation, i.e. 'other third countries': potentially two countries, namely Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

<sup>195</sup> See Kelemen, Menon & Slapin (2014): 'Frank Schimmelfennig explores the impact of EU enlargement on the phenomenon of 'differentiated integration' – a process that involves the adoption of policies that are not uniform for all Member States, but instead allow for a variety of opt-outs, derogations and forms of enhanced co-operation for subsets of states. He shows that widening has been an important driver of increases in differentiated integration. Because enlargement leads to increased heterogeneity of preferences and capacities, states turn to differentiation as a way to either exempt or to exclude new Member States from certain policies'.

<sup>196</sup> 'Countries associated to the Framework Programme will be invited to participate as observers, provided this is foreseen in the respective association agreements', European Commission (2020c, p. 17).

framework would require the establishment of a clear mandate covering the three dimensions of: (i) mission, (ii) composition and (iii) working method. To this end, policymakers could draw on the experience of related governance bodies such as the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) – despite their particular nature<sup>197</sup> (see table 2 below). Thus, the mandate to be given to a future EEA governance body should provide further clarifications on the following points:

#### 4.2.1. Actors

Keeping in mind that the Union has only a supporting competence in the field of education, unlike in research (shared competence), it is not clear whether the ‘fully-fledged governance framework’ announced by the Commission would be a consultative body placed under the auspices of the Council and imply the ‘mandatory’ participation of the Member States, as is the case for the ERAC, or whether the open method of coordination (OMC) based on voluntary cooperation would continue to apply. For their part, many Member States have called for continuity of the OMC with regard to the governance structure<sup>198</sup>. Additionally, considering that local and regional authorities play an important role in the implementation of education policies and that in some Member States, education is even a regional competence, the question of **actively involving local and regional authorities in the governance structure** would merit consideration.

#### Recommendation 3:

- **Clarify governance arrangements with regard to the type of participation required from Member States and other levels of government having a competence or playing an active role in education policy, in particular local and regional authorities.**

#### 4.2.2. Involvement of stakeholders and society

In a context where many stakeholders and ‘end users’ advocated for further involvement, greater transparency and bottom-up approaches, the role attributed to them within the future governing body should be carefully considered<sup>199</sup>. In this respect, the Commission should take stock of the experience of the BFUG where ‘stakeholder organisations and other institutions that have a European scope to their work and are instrumental in the implementation of the Bologna Process’, enjoy the status of consultative members whose advice is sought on a systematic basis<sup>200</sup>. Furthermore, given the holistic approach underpinning the European Education Area, addressing all dimensions of education and all stages of life, it becomes urgent to engage with representatives of sectors so far underrepresented, particularly from primary and secondary education (and not only higher education) and from the social and human sciences (in addition to STEM stakeholders). As is well known, the principle of subsidiarity suggests that the primary responsibility for education and training policies lies with Member States. Nonetheless, the EU’s supporting role can only offer joint solutions to multiple joint challenges when national and local policy actors allow space for collaboration, even in areas such as compulsory education, which are less prone to internationalisation. The involvement of stakeholders in the EEA should be seen as a process of creating relationships of *mutual* responsibility and trust, where cross-national work, learning from best practice and using peer pressure instruments, can expand the national horizon so that it works more flexibly and enjoys the full benefits of a common European

<sup>197</sup> Research is a shared competence of the European Union and the European Research Area is mentioned in the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (Article 179). Education is only a supporting competence of the European Union and, for obvious reasons, the EEA is not mentioned in the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union. The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental process involving 48 European countries.

<sup>198</sup> Council of the European Union (2020b).

<sup>199</sup> Lifelong Learning Platform (2017); European University Association (2020b and 2020c); Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (2020).

<sup>200</sup> [Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area, Members](#) (Accessed: 26 November 2020). See also European University Association (2020a).

education policy space. Lastly, EU policymakers should explore avenues for enhancing the involvement of citizens and society at large, thus going beyond the stakeholder level.

**Recommendation 4:**

- **Specify the level of involvement expected from stakeholder organisations and engage further with representatives of sectors that have so far been underrepresented, such as primary and secondary education, as well as the social sciences and humanities, and society at large.**

#### 4.2.3. Synergies

Although the communication on the EEA and the one on the European Research Area (ERA)<sup>201</sup> released in September 2020 both referred to ‘synergies’ between education and research, the Commission did not address the issue of the interplay between the EEA, the EHEA and the ERA in any detail. In this respect, it should be recalled that the ERA covers a large number of higher education institutions conducting research activities. The European University Association has advocated for further synergies with the ERA and for ‘the close alignment of EU actions in higher education with the Bologna Process’<sup>202</sup>. From this perspective, one could expect the upcoming communication on *The global approach to research, innovation, education and youth* announced in the Commission Work Programme 2021<sup>203</sup> to provide clarifications and make concrete proposals going beyond the simple logic of a common umbrella. As suggested by the Council, synergies could address elements of the EEA related to higher education, especially when it comes to institutional transformations, research careers, science education, training, international cooperation and knowledge circulation<sup>204</sup>. In the same way, the ‘Paris Communiqué’ called on the BFUG to interact with the ERAC.<sup>205</sup> The Commission should examine the feasibility and practicality of a transparent cooperation scheme between the ‘enabling framework’ and these bodies, including the upcoming ‘Forum for Transition’ and the ‘Pact for Research and Innovation’ announced by the Commission in its communication on the ERA<sup>206</sup>. The European University Association expressed the same wish in various documents published in October 2020 and stressed the need to further clarify the governance structures<sup>207</sup>.

**Recommendation 5:**

- **Elaborate on how to ensure synergies between the governing bodies of the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area.**

<sup>201</sup> European Commission (2020c).

<sup>202</sup> European University Association (2020b and 2020c).

<sup>203</sup> European Commission (2020m, p. 4).

<sup>204</sup> Council of the European Union (2020a, p. 10).

<sup>205</sup> Conférence ministérielle européenne pour l’enseignement supérieur (2018).

<sup>206</sup> European Commission (2020c): ‘the Commission proposes that Member States reinforce their commitment to shared policies and principles, drawing on the 20 years of the ERA, by adopting a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe. With the Pact, the governance process should be made more effective and impactful with regular political dialogue with Member States addressing priorities, implementation strategies and progress monitoring towards the realisation of the set objectives’ (p. 5). ‘The ERA *Forum for Transition* is a Commission-driven forum for discussion with Member States of the four priorities of the new European Research Area’ (p. 7).

<sup>207</sup> European University Association (2020c and f).

**Table 2: Comparison between the governance frameworks of ERA, EHEA and EEA: mission, composition, working method**

	European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC)	Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)	European Education Area, proposed enabling framework
Mission	<p>Advise the Council (in particular the Competitiveness Council), the Commission and EU Member States in ERA priority areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. More effective national research systems;</li> <li>2. Optimal transnational cooperation and competition (2a); research infrastructures (2b);</li> <li>3. Open labour market for researchers;</li> <li>4. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research;</li> <li>5. Optimal circulation of, access to and transfer of scientific knowledge;</li> <li>6. International cooperation.</li> </ol>	<p>The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process between Ministerial Conferences. The BFUG is entrusted with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ preparing the Ministerial Conferences, policy forums;</li> <li>✓ overseeing the Bologna Process between these;</li> <li>✓ taking forward matters that do not need to be decided by the Ministers or that have been delegated by the Ministers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Deliver on initiatives put forward in the communication to achieve the European Education Area;</li> <li>✓ Identify targets and indicators to guide and monitor progress towards the EEA;</li> <li>✓ Foster integration of education and training in the European Semester;</li> <li>✓ Lay the groundwork for setting up a fully-fledged governance framework for the European Education Area by 2025;</li> <li>✓ Take stock and ensure momentum of all these initiatives leading to the achievement of the EEA.</li> </ul>
Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Delegates from EU Member States and the Commission.</li> <li>✓ Non-EU countries associated to EU research and innovation programmes may take part as observers (i.e. 16 countries: members of the EFTA, which are members of the European Economic Area (EEA), candidate countries and potential candidates, and countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy).</li> <li>✓ The Committee may also invite Members of the European Parliament as observers, if particular items so require.</li> <li>✓ Stakeholder organisations invited upon specific request.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ EHEA/BFUG members: 48 countries involved in the Bologna Process and the Commission;</li> <li>✓ Consultative members: non-voting category who represent stakeholder organisations and other institutions that have a European scope to their work and are instrumental in the implementation of the Bologna Process.</li> <li>✓ Partners: organisations that wish to be associated with the Bologna Process/the BFUG but are not included in the Consultative members category.</li> <li>✓ Further technical experts may be invited to events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Composition to be defined with Member States by the end of June 2021.</li> </ul>
Working method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ ERAC meets four times a year in plenary sessions.</li> <li>✓ The committee is co-chaired by the Commission and an elected representative from an EU Member State.</li> <li>✓ The Council provides its secretariat. Together with ERAC, six sub-groups monitor ERA priorities: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. High Level Group on Joint Programming;</li> <li>2. Strategic Forum for International Scientific and Technological Cooperation;</li> <li>3. Standing Working Group on Open Science and Innovation;</li> <li>4. Standing Working Group on Human Resources and Mobility;</li> <li>5. Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation;</li> <li>6. European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ A steering group, the BFUG, meets at least once every six months.</li> <li>✓ The Bologna Process is co-chaired by the country holding the EU presidency and a non-EU member country.</li> <li>✓ The BFUG has the possibility to set up working groups to deal with specific topics. The BFUG decides on the Terms of References of different groups and decides which of the recommendations of those groups will be proposed to the Ministers: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thematic peer Group on qualifications framework (QF);</li> <li>2. Thematic Peer Group on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC);</li> <li>3. Thematic peer Group on quality assurance (QA).</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Flexible cooperation methods, based on strengthened guidance from the Council.</li> <li>✓ Steering Board for the EEA to ensure momentum of all these initiatives leading to the achievement of the EEA.</li> <li>✓ Working methods to be defined with Member States.</li> <li>✓ Working groups: 'the European Education Area enabling framework maintains all the tried and tested mutual learning arrangements of the ET 2020, such as the working groups, Directors-General formations, peer learning instruments, with funding support in particular from the Erasmus programme'.</li> </ul>

Sources: Council of the European Union, [European Research Area and Innovation Committee](#) (Accessed: 26 November 2020); [The Bologna Process – European Higher Education Area, Bologna Follow-up Group \(BFUG\)](#) (Accessed: 26 November 2020); European Commission (2020b).

### 4.3. Policy priorities for the coming years

The communication of September 2020 was intended to be comprehensive and put forward a large number of proposals for action. However, from a close analysis of recent academic studies and position papers issued by stakeholder groups, as well as a comparison with the previous communications released by the Commission on the EEA, significant shortcomings and challenges can be identified with respect to priorities for the coming years:

#### 4.3.1. Media literacy

In a communication of 2007 entitled 'A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment', the Commission defined media literacy as 'the ability to access the media, understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contexts and to create communications in a variety of contexts'<sup>208</sup>. Also known as 'media and information education', media literacy closely interacts with and encompasses the concepts of 'scientific literacy', 'citizenship education' and 'digital literacy'. Surprisingly, the concept of 'media literacy' no longer appears in the communication of September 2020, whereas it was addressed in those of November 2017 and May 2018 as well as in the Paris Declaration of March 2015 and in the Council Recommendation on *Promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching*<sup>209</sup>. In times of disinformation, increasing distrust towards scientific facts and the growing use of social media, it becomes urgent to promote educational approaches based on fact-checking and, more broadly, to equip not only students but citizens at large with skills to critically analyse the flows of information they are exposed to, despite – or precisely because of – the sensitivity of some debates revolving around social, religious or scientific topics<sup>210</sup>. There is scientific evidence that teaching media literacy can have a positive impact of learners' attitudes towards media<sup>211</sup>.

#### Recommendation 6:

- **Foster media literacy at all stages of learning as a central means of empowering responsible European citizens.**

#### 4.3.2. Academic freedom

None of the communications from the Commission on the European Education Area addresses academic freedom, while the topic is a matter of increasing attention in Europe, in particular for higher education. Academic freedom is mainly important for higher education and research. However, in what follows, it should be understood to have a wide meaning and also to apply to other areas of education<sup>212</sup>. Academic freedom is enshrined in Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and is one of the core values of the Bologna Process<sup>213</sup>. It is further protected by the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel<sup>214</sup>. Additionally, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are among the key principles of the *Magna Carta Universitatum* signed by 889 universities from 88 countries<sup>215</sup>. However, a growing number of infringements on academic freedom have been witnessed across Europe in recent years. Most importantly, the intrinsic links between academic freedom and the rule of law have become more and

<sup>208</sup> European Commission (2007).

<sup>209</sup> Informal meeting of European Union education ministers (2015); Council of the European Union (2018d).

<sup>210</sup> Siarova, Sternadel & Szónyi (2019); Malet (2021).

<sup>211</sup> McDougall, Zezulkova, van Driel & Sternadel (2018).

<sup>212</sup> For instance, in France, 'pedagogical freedom' (*liberté pédagogique*) is enshrined in Article L912-1-1 of the National Education Code and refers to the freedom given to teachers to choose the methods which seem to them most appropriate to achieve the objectives assigned by the Ministry of Education.

<sup>213</sup> European Union (2000, Article 13); [Bologna Process - European Higher Education Area](#) (Accessed: 18 January 2021).

<sup>214</sup> UNESCO (1997).

<sup>215</sup> [Observatory Magna Carta Universitatum](#) (Accessed: 30 November 2020).

more manifest in recent years<sup>216</sup>. Building on the recent judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union on the Central European University, which stated that the Hungarian Government's 2017 law on higher education violated European Union law<sup>217</sup>, the EU could establish the principle of academic freedom as a core value of the EEA. The Bonn declaration on freedom of scientific research, adopted by a total of 40 countries and signed by several research ministers of EU Member States on 20 October 2020, proposed a shared definition of freedom of scientific research and laid out the responsibilities of governments and higher education institutions in order to protect and strengthen academic freedom<sup>218</sup>. This declaration could be taken as a starting point for further EU actions to enshrine academic freedom as a core principle of the EEA.

#### **Recommendation 7:**

- **Establish the principle of academic freedom as a core principle of the European Education Area.**

#### 4.3.3. Inclusiveness

The prominence given to the dimension of 'inclusion and gender equality' in the 2020 communication on the EEA is to be welcomed, as it addresses a large number of challenges ranging from gender, financial or geographical issues (learners living in remote or rural areas), to situations of learners with disabilities, with a migrant background or coming from minorities (Roma). However, in order to consider the concept of inclusiveness in the wide sense of the meaning, the European University Association has suggested applying the definition of disadvantaged groups used in the proposal for the Erasmus+ successor programme (2021-2027): "people with fewer opportunities' means people who are disadvantaged in their access to the Programme because of various obstacles arising from, for example, disability, health problems, educational difficulties, their migrant background, cultural differences, their economic, social and geographical situation, including people from marginalised communities or at risk of facing discrimination based on any of the grounds enshrined in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union"<sup>219</sup>. Furthermore, in connection with economic obstacles, more attention should be paid to the problem of student accommodation, and particularly student accommodation abroad, this topic being frequently raised in the press and having been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., the situation of Erasmus students compelled to continue to pay their rent while they had to go back to their home country)<sup>220</sup>.

#### **Recommendation 8:**

- **Foster inclusiveness in the broadest sense of the term, in order to support the participation of disadvantaged learners.**

#### 4.3.4. European dimension

A survey conducted in 2014 found that 44 % of European citizens admitted that they had little knowledge of the European Union, while, in 2017, 89 % of young people stated that national governments should strengthen school education about the rights and responsibilities that European citizenship entails<sup>221</sup>. The European dimension in education remains strong in some Member States (Italy), but is weakening in others (France). In educational institutions, 'Europe' is presented and taught through different perspectives (geographical, historical or institutional), raising the issue of the

<sup>216</sup> Bard (2018); Corbett & Gordon (2018); Karran (2017).

<sup>217</sup> Court of Justice of the European Union (2020).

<sup>218</sup> Ministerial Conference on the European Research Area (2020).

<sup>219</sup> European Parliament (2019c, Article 2); European University Association (2020c).

<sup>220</sup> Birchard (2018); Nott (2020); Malet (2021, p. 32).

<sup>221</sup> European Commission (2014b, p. 117); European Commission (2018f, p. 55).

interdisciplinary teaching and research of European history and society. European subjects are taught without clear objectives (citizenship education, development of a shared identity and culture, etc.) and struggle to find their place between national and globalisation-related subjects<sup>222</sup>. ‘Teaching Europe’ is too often confined to higher education and especially to law, economics and political science, despite efforts to diversify audiences<sup>223</sup>. Over the past years, various policy documents have set out a series of recommendations on how to develop the teaching of European issues at school, including better accessibility to resources in the field of EU education for key stakeholders, exchange of best practices, grass-roots projects to improve the understanding of the European Union and further research investigating how the EU is taught in schools<sup>224</sup>. Against this backdrop, the 2020 communication on the European Education Area suggested the development of a ‘European perspective in education’, in particular through Jean Monnet actions<sup>225</sup>, while the Commission proposal for an Erasmus+ successor programme called for the extension of Jean Monnet actions to ‘all fields of education and training’<sup>226</sup>. Yet, recent research studies put forward more concrete proposals, mainly focusing on teacher training:

- Within the framework of Jean Monnet actions, the Commission should foster the creation of academic chairs focused on training teachers in European values and encouraging the development of comparative education, especially from the angle of values, justice and law<sup>227</sup>;
- Besides modules addressing issues such as ‘engaging in dialogue with society, education for sustainable development, or teaching in multilingual classrooms’ as described in the 2020 communication on the European Education Area<sup>228</sup>, the future Erasmus Teacher Academies should provide modules on how to teach European subjects at school. With regard to the teaching of European history, these modules could build on the work undertaken by the newly created ‘Observatory on History Teaching in Europe’<sup>229</sup>.

#### **Recommendation 9:**

- **Strengthen a distinct European dimension in students’ curricula and teachers’ training, including through Jean Monnet actions and the Erasmus Teacher Academies.**

<sup>222</sup> Chopin (2020); Hardouin (2009).

<sup>223</sup> European Commission (2020h): ‘students/audiences who do not automatically come into contact with European studies (in fields beyond law, economics and political science)’ are considered as ‘priority target groups’.

<sup>224</sup> European Parliament (2016); Council of the European Union (2018d); European Economic and Social Committee (2019).

<sup>225</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 13).

<sup>226</sup> European Parliament (2019c, Article 7).

<sup>227</sup> Malet (2021, p. 30). On shortcomings related to comparative education, see also Chopin (2020).

<sup>228</sup> European Commission (2020b, p. 19).

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## ANNEX: POTENTIAL GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

Countries	Signatories to the European Cultural Convention	Members of the European Higher Education Area	Member of the European Union	Third countries associated to the Erasmus+ programme (proposal for a regulation on Erasmus+ 2021-2027)				Countries participating in the European Universities Initiative (July 2020)
				Members of the EFTA which are members of the European Economic Area (Article 16a)	<a href="#">Acceding countries, candidate countries and potential candidates (Article 16b)</a>	<a href="#">Eastern countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (Article 16c)</a>	Other potential third countries (Article 16d)	
Albania	x	x			x			
Andorra	x	x						
Armenia	x	x				x		
Austria	x	x	x					x
Azerbaijan	x	x				x		
Belarus	x	x				x		
Belgium	x	x	x					x
Bosnia and Herzegovina	x	x			x			
Bulgaria	x	x	x					x
Croatia	x	x	x					x
Cyprus	x	x	x					x
Czech Republic	x	x	x					x
Denmark	x	x	x					x
Estonia	x	x	x					x
Finland	x	x	x					x
France	x	x	x					x
Georgia	x	x				x		
Germany	x	x	x					x
Greece	x	x	x					x
Hungary	x	x	x					x
Iceland	x	x		x				x
Ireland	x	x	x					x
Italy	x	x	x					x
Kazakhstan	x	x						
Latvia	x	x	x					x
Liechtenstein	x	x		x				
Lithuania	x	x	x					x
Luxembourg	x	x	x					x
Malta	x	x	x					x
Moldavia	x	x				x		
Monaco	x							
Montenegro	x	x			x			
Netherlands	x	x	x					x
North Macedonia	x	x			x			
Norway	x	x		x				x
Poland	x	x	x					x
Portugal	x	x	x					x
Romania	x	x	x					x
Russia	x	x						
San Marino	x							
Serbia	x	x			x			x
Slovakia	x	x	x					x
Slovenia	x	x	x					x
Spain	x	x	x					x
Sweden	x	x	x					x
Switzerland	x	x					x	
Turkey	x	x			x			x
Ukraine	x	x				x		
United-Kingdom	x	x					x	x
Vatican	x	x						
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>32</b>





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This study presents and examines three communications on a future European Education Area published by the European Commission between November 2017 and September 2020, analysing the reception and assessment of these communications by the other EU institutions, Member States and various stakeholders. It highlights existing challenges and makes concrete recommendations as regards the strategy, governance and priorities required to turn the vision of a European Education Area into reality by 2025.

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