

The European Education Area and the 2030 strategic framework for education and training

SUMMARY

European Union cooperation in the field of education and training has developed in a number of areas that now have well-established roots. The best-known example is possibly the Bologna Process that led to the establishment of the European higher education area. The Copenhagen Declaration lent impetus to a process of cooperation in vocational education and training. This was accompanied by two strategic framework agreements for European cooperation in education and training (ET2010 and ET2020).

The stocktaking on the expiry of the second framework for cooperation – ET 2020 – revealed some positive trends as the numbers of both young children in early childhood education and of graduates rose. However, the number of underachieving 15 year-olds remains high and the participation of adults in learning is low.

The European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament seem to concur that cooperation in education and training needs to be reinforced. The Commission has set out its vision for a European education area in three communications, which show that this is still work in progress. The Council, on the other hand, has endorsed another framework for cooperation up to 2030, which is clearly aimed at supporting the implementation of such an area. The May 2021 Education Council conclusions give pointers as to how aspects of this area are to be addressed.

The debate in the European Parliament is in its initial phase with the rapporteur noting that, while there is agreement on the need for a European education area and ongoing cooperation, the European institutions have yet to adopt a single approach.



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Background

Although primary responsibility for education and training lies with the Member States, the EU has already played a major role in making education more accessible across borders. This includes the implementation of the [Bologna Process](#) establishing a [European higher education area](#) and the [Erasmus+](#) funding programme, with the aim of modernising education through mobility. The [Copenhagen Declaration](#) lent impetus to a process of cooperation in vocational education and training. In 2010, with the framework for European cooperation in education and training ([ET2020](#)), the EU set itself a range of [educational targets](#). The figures show real progress on four of them:

- the participation rate in early childhood education rose from 90.3 % in 2009 to 95.3 % in 2019. The ET2020 target was at least 95 % by 2020;
- the early school leaving rate decreased from 13.8 % in 2010 to 10.1 % in 2020, with an ET2020 target of 10 % by 2020;
- tertiary educational attainment rose from 32.6 % in 2010 to 40.9 % in 2020 surpassing the 40 % target;
- the employment rate for upper secondary and university leavers was at 80.9 % in 2019; up from 78 % in 2009 and just short of the 82 % target.

Results for two other targets have been disappointing:

- the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning rose to 9.2 % in 2020 from 7.8 % in 2010, but the target was 15 %;
- in 2018, the percentages of 15 year-olds with low basic skills stood at 22.9 % in mathematics, 22.5 % in reading and 22.3 % in science, whereas they should not have been higher than 15 % by 2020. In all three instances, the percentages rose compared with 2009 levels (22.7 %, 19.7 % and 17.8 % respectively).

The absence or inadequacy of Eurostat statistics make it difficult to establish the degree of success in reaching the mobility targets of 20 % for higher education graduates and 6 % for those with an initial vocational education and training qualification. While efforts to improve education and training have achieved mixed results, the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament agree that the stakes are high. Lifelong learning must prepare current and future citizens for active citizenship, the green and digital transition and resilience in the face of repeated crises. The answer of the three institutions is to step up cooperation.

An evolving vision

According to the European Commission [website](#), European leaders endorsed the idea of a European education area for the first time at the 2017 [Gothenburg Social Summit](#). A 2021 European Parliament [study](#) indicates that the vision of Europe as an educational space has been an integral part of the European integration process since the Second World War, tracing the roots of this vision back to the practices of the 12th century.

The Commission laid out its vision for the establishment of a European education area by 2025 in three documents. A 2017 [communication](#) claimed that the establishment of a European education area would serve the purpose of supporting job creation, economic growth, social fairness and the experience of European identity in all its diversity. In early 2018, the Commission launched a package of measures to improve European citizens' key competences and digital skills, promote common values and raise pupils' awareness of the way the EU works. A [second](#) package brought together a set of initiatives in the fields of education, training, youth and culture to help secure a more competitive, inclusive and cohesive Europe. These initiatives included Council recommendations on the mutual recognition of diplomas, the teaching and learning of languages, and high quality early childhood education and care systems. Among the flagship initiatives were the 'European universities' and the European Student Card. In its [third communication](#) of 2020, the Commission clarified that in working towards making the European education area a reality, it would maintain a [lifelong learning](#) perspective.

The communication developed the European education area on the basis of six dimensions:

- quality education that equips young people;
- systems that are inclusive and that promote gender equality;
- education and training policies and investments geared to the digital and green transitions;
- well supported, highly competent and motivated educators with varied careers;
- closer and deeper cooperation between higher education institutions;
- education cooperation as part of external policies.

For each of these dimensions the Commission identified a series of actions and initiatives. It also identifies the tasks and a description of an enabling framework together with means of tracking progress. A recent [study](#) requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) noted how the priorities for the European education area have evolved as the Commission has published its communications, with some priorities such as gender equality, the green transition and the geopolitical dimension gaining prominence in the latest communication. Conversely, media literacy and European identity have become less relevant. In its 2020 work programme, the Commission stresses the importance of improving digital literacy and of relaunching an updated digital education action plan. The objective is to build on the results of cooperation between the EU Member States in the field of lifelong learning.

Balancing sovereignty with cooperation

The February 2021 [Council resolution](#) on 'a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European education area and beyond (2021-2030)', builds on the previous ET2010 and ET2020 frameworks for European cooperation. It fixes five strategic priorities: improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all; making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all; enhancing competences and motivation among teaching professionals; reinforcing European higher education; and supporting the green and digital transitions. While there are clear similarities between these priorities and those of the European education area identified by the Commission, the two sets of priorities do not match entirely. The document also sets out seven EU-level targets, the first five of which are to be achieved by 2030:

- the share of low-achieving 15 year-olds in mathematics, reading and science should be less than 15 %;
- the share of low-achieving students in their eighth year of schooling in computer and information literacy should be less than 15 %;
- 96 % of children aged between three and the compulsory school age should participate in early childhood education;
- the share of early school leavers should be less than 9 %;
- the share of 25-34 year olds with tertiary education attainment should be at least 45 %;
- by 2025, 60 % of vocational education and training students should take part in work-based learning;
- by 2025, at least 47 % of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning in the previous 12 months.

Subsequently, the [Porto Social Summit](#) of 7-8 May 2021 selected adult learning as one of the three main targets to be achieved throughout Europe by 2030, but set at 60 % the proportion of adults to attend a training course every year. While EU leaders noted rather than endorsed the [Porto Social Commitment](#) in their own [declaration](#), they then declared that they would put education at the heart of their policies in view of the green and digital transitions. They also committed to prioritising young people whose education and training have been negatively affected by the coronavirus crisis. Both positions are in line with the priorities of the European education area.

On 17 May 2021, the Education Council discussed two issues that are central to the implementation of the European education area. In its [conclusions on equity](#), it commented that there was no room for complacency in terms of efforts to improve access to and the quality of education. It pointed out

that Member States should make full use of the focus on inclusivity in programmes such as Erasmus+, the European Social Fund Plus, other European structural and investment funds, InvestEU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. It highlighted the importance of paying special attention to learners who face overlapping disadvantages. The potential of digital and artificial intelligence tools in overcoming inequalities also needs to be explored. It recommended the open method of coordination to promote the exchange of good practices and innovation. In its [conclusions on the European universities initiative](#), the Council acknowledged that this initiative could mark an important step towards bringing universities and other non-academic institutions closer together to implement the [knowledge square](#), thus improving education, research, innovation and service to society. Higher education institutions involved in the European universities pilot projects have already claimed that they were more resilient in facing the Covid-19 crisis thanks to common solutions and the pooling of resources. Ministers also looked to this initiative to improve the contribution of higher education institutions towards lifelong learning. In synergy with the European higher education area, the initiative could provide the impetus for more balanced and flexible mobility that mixes physical mobility with online collaboration. It could also facilitate the automatic recognition of qualifications and mobility periods abroad and act as a bridge between the European education area and the European research area. Ministers recommended that the initiatives be supported by sustainable funding, and the development and implementation of digital infrastructure and tools.

European Parliament – A shared holistic approach

While the European Parliament has held a number of debates on topics pertinent to the European education area, on 12 December 2020, the CULT committee nominated Michaela Šojdrová (EPP, Czechia) as rapporteur for an own-initiative report on 'the European education area: a shared holistic approach', and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, associated under Rule 57, appointed Ilana Cicurel (Renew, France) as rapporteur for opinion on 9 April 2021. In the explanatory statement attached to her [draft report](#), the rapporteur highlighted that the purpose of the European education area is to promote European integration, ensure economic and social prosperity, boost international competitiveness and facilitate the digital and environmental transitions. The statement draws attention to the rich repertoire of documents, more than 40 adopted at EU level since 2009 with direct relevance to the area, including Parliament's repeated statements on the importance of funding education to help it become truly accessible to all learners, including access to the EU's mobility programmes. Despite differences in approaches between the Commission, Council and stakeholders, the rapporteur discerned a clear consensus on the need for a European education area and to foster the European project, calling for an approach that is both holistic and shared. A [vote](#) in the CULT committee is expected in September 2021.

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