EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European Parliament

Research for CULT Committee - Making the European Education Area a reality: state of affairs, challenges and prospects

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**.

The present document is the executive summary of the study conductued for the CULT Committee on "Making the European Education Area a reality: state of affairs, challenges and prospects". The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: https://bit.ly/3r4SipT

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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.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: https://bit.ly/3r4SipT

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