EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

In education and vocational training policies, decision-making takes place under the ordinary legislative procedure. In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, education and training policies are as such decided by each European Union (EU) Member State. The role of the EU is therefore a supporting one. However, some challenges are common to all Member States—ageing societies, skills deficits in the workforce, and global competition—and thus need joint responses with countries working together and learning from each other[1].

LEGAL BASIS

While vocational training was identified as an area of Community action in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, education was formally recognised as an area of EU competency in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The treaty states that the Community ‘shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity’.

The Treaty of Lisbon did not change the provisions on the role of the EU in education and training (Title XII, Articles 165 and 166). However, there are new features worthy of mention: for instance the Treaty of Lisbon contains a provision which has been described in the literature as a horizontal ‘social clause’. Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states: ‘In defining and implementing its policies and actions, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of … a high level of education [and] training’.

Moreover, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which has the same legal value as the Treaties (Article 6 TEU), states: ‘Everyone has the right to education and to have access to continuing and vocational training’ (Article 14), as well as ‘the right to engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation’ (Article 15).

OBJECTIVES

A. Objectives pursuant to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

In defining and implementing its policies and actions, the Union must take account of requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of education and training. Thus, the EU’s long-term strategic objectives on education and training as set by the Council in 2009 are: (1) making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; (2) improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; (3) promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; (4) enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

[1]See also 5.13.4 on Higher Education.
B. Priorities on education and training

1. Europe 2020 and Education and Training 2020

Education and training policy has gained particular momentum with the adoption of Europe 2020, the EU’s overarching strategy focusing on growth and jobs. While the responsibility for education and training systems lies with the Member States, the EU plays a key role in supporting and supplementing efforts to improve and modernise their education systems.

Under the Europe 2020 strategy, Member States are given specific guidance on priority reforms each year in the form of country-specific recommendations. In education and training, the objectives, instruments and arrangements for joint work at EU level are outlined in the strategic framework Education and Training (ET) 2020, which is valid until 2020.

With the mid-term review of the ET 2020 framework in 2015, the four strategic objectives were confirmed and the work cycle set to five years (up from three in the 2010-2015 period). Its focus has been readjusted to reflect the importance of education and training for both employment and the promotion of fundamental values and active citizenship. This change is also reflected in the six priority areas: (1) relevant and high-quality skills and competences, focusing on learning outcomes, for employability, innovation and active citizenship; (2) inclusive education, equality, non-discrimination and promotion of civic competences; (3) open and innovative education and training, including by fully embracing the digital era; (4) strong support for educators; (5) transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning and labour mobility; (6) sustainable investment, performance and efficiency of education and training systems.

Progress is monitored with the help of indicators and against a set of benchmarks, designed to contribute to evidence-based policymaking and identify challenges. Core indicators are also used to monitor progress in a number of additional priority areas currently not covered by benchmarks, such as languages, adult skills, investment in education and training, ICT in education, entrepreneurship in education, and vocational education and training (VET).

Indicators and benchmarks are important means of measuring progress in education and training. As part of ET 2020, the following EU benchmarks for 2020 have been set: (1) at least 95% of children between age 4 and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education; (2) the number of 15-year-olds with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%; (3) the number of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%; (4) the number of 30 to 34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%; (5) an average of at least 15% of adults (aged between 25 and 64) should participate in lifelong learning; (6) at least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18 to 34-year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad; (7) the share of employed graduates (20 to 34-year-olds having successfully completed upper secondary or tertiary education) having left education 1 to 3 years ago should be at least 82%[2].

2. VET for employment

In 2016 the Commission released the communication ‘A new skills agenda for Europe’ (COM(2016) 0381), in which it proposes actions to equip people with the skills needed in the job market and to make better use of the skills they already have, in order to help them find quality jobs and to improve their life chances.

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One of the initiatives proposed under the ‘New Skills Agenda’ is an update of the Europass framework, which is the responsibility of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), one of the EU’s decentralised agencies.

Launched in 2005, Europass is a set of documents and tools, available in 28 languages, to help citizens of the EEA area to develop their own CV and portfolio of competences. In October 2016, the Commission proposed a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) — an update of the 2004 decision. Parliament and the Council are currently working on this proposal and will come to a decision under the ordinary legislative procedure in the second half of 2017 or in 2018.

The Copenhagen-Bruges Process is intended to enhance EU cooperation in the area of vocational education and training, and the priorities of the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning are concerned with promoting adult learning. Both these sectors have specific priorities for the period up to 2020.

Finally, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is the first EU initiative to fully integrate the three sides of the ‘knowledge triangle’ (education, research and innovation), and will seek to stand out as a world-class reference model, inspiring and driving change in existing education and research institutions (for detailed information on higher education, please refer to 5.13.4).

C. The Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020)

The fields of education, training and sport have been recognised as key drivers within the EU’s growth strategy for the coming decade to overcome the socio-economic crisis affecting European countries, to boost growth and jobs and to foster social equity and inclusion.

Against this background, Erasmus+ is the EU programme for the fields of education, training, youth and sport for the period 2014-2020. It builds upon earlier Union initiatives promoting exchanges and the development of education and training systems and youth work.

Erasmus+ is designed to support countries’ efforts to efficiently use the potential of Europe’s human and social capital, while affirming the principle of lifelong learning by linking support to formal, non-formal and informal learning throughout the fields of education, training and youth.

The specific objectives pursued by the Erasmus+ programme in the field of education and training are to: (1) improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market[3] and their contribution to a cohesive society; (2) foster quality improvements, excellence in innovation, and internationalisation at the level of education and training institutions; (3) promote the emergence of and raise awareness on a European lifelong learning area designed to complement policy reforms at national level, and to support the modernisation of education and training systems; (4) enhance the international dimension of education and training; (5) improve the teaching and learning of languages and promote the EU’s broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness.

The ambitious goal of the new Erasmus+ is to promote synergies and cross-fertilisation throughout the different fields of education, training and youth, removing artificial boundaries between the various actions and project formats, fostering new ideas, attracting new actors from the world of work and civil society, and stimulating new forms of cooperation. For the education sector, it is delivering on these goals within a framework of key actions. Key Action 1 is centred on...
on the mobility of students in higher education and VET and staff across all educational sectors, Key Action 2 revolves around partnerships, and Key Action 3 supports policy reform.

**ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

Parliament has always supported close cooperation between Member States in the fields of education and training and enhancing the European dimension in Member States’ education policies. It has, therefore, been an advocate for the establishment of a solid legal basis for education and training and has worked successfully to secure an increase in the budget resources available for Erasmus+, as well as supporting a shift in the priorities of EU funding in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) towards what is regarded as more future-oriented expenditure.

Parliament also actively participates in the policy cycle linked to ET 2020 and responds to the reports prepared in that framework (examples being its resolution on education, training and Europe 2020 adopted on 11 September 2012 and that of 23 June 2016 on the follow-up of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)).

Parliament also takes a strong interest in Commission communications targeting specific areas of education and training. Examples include Parliament’s resolutions of 12 May 2011 on early years learning in the European Union, of 1 December 2011 on tackling early school leaving, of 20 April 2012 on modernising Europe’s higher education systems, of 22 October 2013 on rethinking education, of 15 April 2014 on new technologies and open educational resources, of 8 September 2015 on promoting youth entrepreneurship through education and training and of 12 April 2016 on Erasmus+ and other tools to foster mobility in vocational and education and training.

An implementation report on Erasmus+ ([2015/2327(INI)](2015/2327(INI))) will be voted on in plenary in 2017. This report analyses the first years of implementation of the programme, underlines the successful points and suggests changes with a view to improving the second part of the multiannual framework programme.

The Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) are currently drawing up a joint own-initiative report on a ‘New Skills Agenda’. It is expected to be voted on in plenary in summer 2017. Both these committees are also working jointly on a legislative report on the Commission’s proposal on a new Europass decision ([2016/0304 (COD)](2016/0304 (COD))).

The CULT Committee is currently drawing up an own-initiative report on ‘academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy’ ([2016/2142(INI)](2016/2142(INI))).

Throughout its work in the domain of education and training, Parliament consistently advocates that education is crucial not only for creating opportunities for young people, but also for preparing individuals to become active citizens in complex societies.

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