



## HIGHER EDUCATION

In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, higher education policies are decided at the level of the individual Member States. The role of the EU is therefore mainly a supporting and coordinating one. The main objectives of Union action in the field of higher education include: supporting mobility of students and staff; fostering mutual recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between higher education institutions and developing distance (university) education.

### LEGAL BASIS

Education — and in this context also higher education — was formally recognised as an area of EU competency in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992.

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). Article 165(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that ‘the Union 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’. In Article 165(2) of the TFEU it is stated that Union action is to be aimed at ‘encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between educational establishments; and developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States’.

In addition, the Treaty of Lisbon contains a provision that can be described as a horizontal ‘social clause’. Article 9 of the TFEU states: ‘In defining and implementing its policies and activities, 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 of the TEU), states: ‘Everyone has the right to education’ (Article 14).

### OBJECTIVES

#### A. Objectives pursuant to the Treaties of the European Union

On the basis of the EU’s long-term commitment to making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving both the quality and the efficiency of education and training, and enhancing creativity and innovation, Article 165(2) of the TFEU specifically enumerates the objectives of Union action in the fields of education, vocational training, youth and sport. The following aims are of particular relevance to the field of higher education:

— Developing a European dimension in education;

- Encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging, inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study;
- Promoting cooperation between educational establishments;
- Developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of Member States; and
- Encouraging the development of distance education.

## **B. Current priorities in education and training**

The Europe 2020 strategy has raised European political interest in higher education<sup>[1]</sup>. Focused on ‘smart’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘inclusive’ growth, the goals of Europe 2020 are to be achieved through more effective investment in education, research and innovation. Among the key targets is a considerable increase in the number of young people completing third-level education (at least 40% of 30-34 year-olds by 2020)<sup>[2]</sup>. This ambitious goal was pre-formulated in the Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) strategic framework, adopted by the European Council in May 2009, which builds on its predecessor, the Education and Training 2010 (ET 2010) work programme, and provides common strategic objectives for the Member States, including a set of principles for achieving these objectives<sup>[3]</sup>. In addition to the Member States’ own political initiatives, the EU actively supports the priorities of the Bologna Process, which, since its inception in 1999, has worked towards more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe, culminating in the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference Declaration of March 2010.

After the acceptance of the Europe 2020 strategy, in 2011 the Commission focused on the potential of European higher education systems in its communication ‘Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems’<sup>[4]</sup>.

In 2017, the Commission published the ‘Renewed EU agenda for higher education’ ([COM\(2017\) 0247](#)). It focuses on four priority areas, some of which already played a role in the 2011 agenda:

1. aligning skills development in higher education with the needs of the labour market;
2. making higher education widely accessible, more inclusive and increasing its societal outreach;
3. boosting the innovation capacity of higher education;
4. increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education.

New EU-level initiatives to reach those objectives include, but are not limited to, graduate tracking (described in a separate Commission communication); using EU funding, e.g. through Erasmus+, to help higher education institutions develop strategies to become more inclusive; expanding the European Institute of Innovation and Technology regional innovation scheme model to more universities and regions; providing a review of funding, incentive and reward structures for higher education systems as a basis for the exchange of best practices; generating

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[1] See the Europe 2020 strategy paper, published in March 2010 ([COM\(2010\) 2020](#)) (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>). For additional information see the Commission’s website: [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm)

[2] The second key target in the field of higher education is reducing the rates of early school leavers to below 10%.

[3] See OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2 (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:EN:PDF>). Annex I, outlining the envisaged ‘European benchmarks’, states with regard to higher education that: ‘given the increasing demand for higher education attainment, and whilst acknowledging the equal importance of vocational education and training, by 2020, the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%’. Ibid., p. 7.

[4] ([COM\(2011\) 0567](#)).

a Knowledge Hub on higher education; and simplifying mobility by facilitating the electronic exchange of student data.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS**

### **A. The Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)**

Formally adopted in December 2013<sup>[5]</sup> and in application since 1 January 2014, the central aim of Erasmus+ is to invest in Europe's education, training, youth and sport through a single integrated programme. Erasmus+ combines previously separate sectorial and transversal policies in the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP, 2007-2013) in the fields of higher education (Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, bilateral programmes with other countries or continents), school education (Comenius), vocational education and training (Leonardo da Vinci), adult education (Grundtvig), youth (Youth in Action), and European integration studies (Jean Monnet). In addition, sport is included for the first time. LLP had a total budget of EUR 7 billion, and the Erasmus programme involved an annual basis of 300 000 teachers and 230 000 HEI students. Erasmus+ now has a budget of EUR 14 billion, and cooperation is possible both among Member States and between Member States and third countries.

Erasmus+ aims to restructure and streamline activity around three key actions across the targeted sectors:

1. learning mobility of individuals;
2. cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices;
3. support for policy reform.

Within the overarching architecture of Erasmus+, higher education assumes a central role. A minimum of 33.3% of the total budget for Erasmus+ is earmarked for higher education. Two million higher education students are expected to participate in mobility programmes during the period from 2014 to 2020. Erasmus+ not only supports the mobility of students and staff in higher education, but also funds Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees and Erasmus+ Master Loans.

### **B. Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA)**

Part of [Horizon 2020](#) — the EU framework programme for research and innovation —, the MSCA supports research training and career development focused on innovation skills. The programme funds worldwide and cross-sector mobility that implements excellent research in any field. As regards higher education, MSCA grants encourage transnational, inter-sector and interdisciplinary mobility. The MSCA will become the main EU programme for doctoral training, financing 25 000 PhDs and post-doctoral research projects. In addition to fostering mobility between countries, the MSCA also seeks to break the real and perceived barriers between academic and other sectors, especially business. The MSCA also funds the [European Researchers' Night](#), a series of public events that take place across Europe each year on the fourth Friday in September to promote the work of researchers.

## **ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

Given the limited competences of the EU in the field of higher education, Parliament's role has mainly been to foster close cooperation between Member States and strengthen European dimensions wherever possible. Thanks to its increasing political importance over recent decades

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[5]OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 50.

and facilitated not least by the general trend towards Europeanisation following on from the Bologna Process, Parliament has managed to exert a growing influence on the shaping of higher education policies in Europe.

Parliament has successfully and consistently worked for an increase in the budget available for existing programmes in the field of higher education, including Erasmus+, and has been instrumental in shifting the priorities of EU funding in the multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2014-2020 to what it considers to be more future-oriented expenditure, such as that in the field of higher education.

Throughout the years Parliament has always been interested in higher education and its link with employment. In 2010, Parliament adopted the resolution ‘University Business Dialogue: a new partnership for the modernisation of Europe’s universities’<sup>[6]</sup>, calling for dialogue between higher education institutions (HEIs) and businesses in all fields of study and recalling the importance of lifelong learning and mobility, fostering research and sharing best practices.

Following the aforementioned Commission communication of 2011, in 2012 Parliament adopted a resolution on ‘modernising Europe’s higher education systems’<sup>[7]</sup>, calling on HEIs to integrate lifelong learning into their curricula once again, to adapt to new challenges by creating new fields of study reflecting the needs of the labour market and to promote gender equality in higher education. In this resolution Parliament also insisted that Member States should reach the target of investing 2% of GDP in higher education.

For the 2017 follow-up communication ([COM\(2017\) 0247](#)) mentioned above, Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) will draw up an own-initiative report entitled ‘Modernisation of Education in the EU’ (also touching upon school education), expected to be voted in plenary in the first half of 2018.

Parliament has shown a long-standing interest in the consolidation and progress of the Bologna Process. The 2011 report on the contribution of the European institutions to the consolidation and progress of the Bologna Process resulted in a European Parliament resolution<sup>[8]</sup> which stressed the importance of the Bologna reforms for the creation of the EHEA and for the objectives set in the Europe 2020 strategy.

In 2015, Parliament discussed the implementation of the Bologna Process<sup>[9]</sup>. Members considered that the Bologna reforms contributed to the improvement of the quality of educational systems and to the attractiveness of higher education in Europe. The Bologna Process also made higher education structures more comparable, providing quality assurance systems in the recognition of diplomas. The Members of the European Parliament also called on HEIs, public administrations, the social partners and businesses to hold an ongoing dialogue on facilitating and enhancing the employability of graduates. They also called for further development of a wide range of skills and new models for learning, teaching and assessment.

On 12 September 2017, Parliament adopted a resolution on academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy<sup>[10]</sup>, and on 2 February 2017, it adopted a resolution on Erasmus+<sup>[11]</sup>, which analyses the first years of implementation of the programme, underlines its successes and suggests changes to improve the second part of the multiannual framework programme.

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[6]OJ C 161 E, 31.5.2011, p. 95.

[7]OJ C 258, 7.9.2013, p. 55.

[8]OJ C 251 E, 31.8.2013, p. 24.

[9]OJ C 346, 21.9.2016, p. 2.

[10]Texts adopted, P8\_TA(2017)0324.

[11]Texts adopted, [P8\\_TA\(2017\)0018](#).

