EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, education and training policies as such are 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, global competition and early childhood education — 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). In addition, it contains a provision that can be described 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 of the Treaty on European Union), 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

In 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;

[1]For further information, see Fact Sheet 3.6.4 on Higher Education.
enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A. ‘Europe 2020’ and ‘Education and Training 2020’

Education and training policy has gained particular momentum with the adoption of the [Europe 2020 strategy](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en). While the Member States have primary responsibility for education and training systems, the EU plays a key role in supporting and supplementing efforts to improve and modernise their education systems. Under Europe 2020, Member States are given specific guidance on priority reforms each year in the form of country-specific recommendations.

In the field of education and training, the [strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en) (ET 2020) outlines the instruments and arrangements for joint work at EU level. As part of ET 2020, the following EU benchmarks for 2020 have been set: (1) at least 95% of children between the age of four 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 initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad; (7) at least 82% of graduates (20 to 34-year-olds having successfully completed upper secondary or tertiary education) who left education one to three years ago should be in employment.

In order to implement the EU's policies in the fields of vocational education and training, the Commission operates through the [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en), which is one of the EU's decentralised agencies.

B. New Skills Agenda for Europe

In 2016, the Commission released a communication on a [New Skills Agenda for Europe](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en) (COM(2016)0381) in which it proposes 10 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:

- A Skills Guarantee to help low-skilled adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills;
- A review of the European Qualifications Framework;
- The ‘Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition’ to support cooperation among education, employment and industry stakeholders;
- The ‘Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills’ to improve skills intelligence;
- A ‘Skills Profile Tool for Third-Country Nationals’ to support early identification and profiling of the skills and qualifications of migrants;
— Support for vocational education and training, particularly through events and activities within the European Vocational Skills Week;

— A review of the recommendation on key competences to help more people acquire the core set of skills necessary to work and live in the 21st century;

— A revision of the Europass Framework, offering people better and easier-to-use tools to present their skills;

— A proposal for a Recommendation on Graduate Tracking with the aim of improving understanding of graduates’ performance after their education and training experiences;

— Analysis and sharing of best practices to manage the movement of highly skilled and qualified people between countries (‘brain flow’).

C. Early childhood education

Following the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which underscores the fact that ‘children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality’, the issue of early childhood education has become even more important. In May 2018, the Commission approved a proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (COM(2018) 0271). This proposal is based on previous work in this area, in particular the ‘Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care’, as put forward by a working group of national experts in 2014.

D. European Education Area


E. Erasmus

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 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 and raise awareness of 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 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 the mobility of students in higher education as well as in vocational education and training, and of staff across all educational sectors, Key Action 2 revolves around partnerships, and Key Action 3 supports policy reform.

The Commission’s proposal for a successor programme (2021-2027) was published in May 2018 (COM(2018)0367). It proposes naming the whole programme simply ‘Erasmus’. The overall architecture of the programme has not changed substantially, including the three ‘Key Actions’ already established under Erasmus+. However, the Commission suggests doubling the budget to EUR 30 billion, compared with the 2014-2020 programming period.

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 actively participates in the policy cycle linked to ET 2020 and responds to the reports prepared in that framework, e.g. through its resolution of 23 June 2016 on follow-up of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020).

A. Erasmus

Parliament has worked successfully to secure an increase in the budget resources available for Erasmus+. On 12 April 2016, Parliament adopted a resolution on Erasmus+ and other tools to foster mobility in VET — a lifelong learning approach[2]. In this resolution, it ‘calls on the Commission, the Member States and public employment bodies to publicise and raise awareness of the Erasmus+ Programme and other tools aimed at promoting mobility in the area of VET, in particular among SMEs’. In its resolution of 14 September 2017, Parliament acknowledged the extremely positive impact of Erasmus+. It stressed that the new programme should be more open and accessible, and drew attention to difficulties with the recognition of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. It called for the creation of a European student eCard to give students Europe-wide access to services. Members emphasised the importance of fostering active citizenship, civic education and European identity through the programme.

For the next generation of the Erasmus+ programme, Parliament proposed to triple the budget to EUR 41 billion, allowing for more participants and greater inclusivity. Vocational education exchanges, especially in border regions, will also be a priority of the new programme and will be allocated a bigger budget.

B. Education and employment

The Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) drew up a joint own-initiative report on the Commission communication on the new skills agenda for Europe. The resolution was adopted in Parliament on 14 September 2017. Parliament advocated a holistic approach to education and skills development, inviting Member States to not only focus on employability skills, but also skills that are useful to society. Other issues mentioned were a more comprehensive approach to the upskilling of migrants, investing in early childhood education and care, boosting lifelong learning opportunities, the key role of non-formal and informal learning as well as fostering digital, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and entrepreneurial skills.


C. Other specific areas

Parliament also takes a strong interest in Commission communications targeting specific areas of education and training. Examples include Parliament’s resolutions 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, of 12 September 2017 on academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy and of 12 June 2018 on modernisation of education in the EU.

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