



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 encouraging 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;
- 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 ([COM\(2010\)2020](#)). 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). This ambitious target was met in April 2019. It had been pre-formulated in the ‘Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training’ (ET 2020), adopted by the European Council in May 2009^[1]. 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.

In 2017, the Commission published the ‘Renewed EU agenda for higher education’ ([COM\(2017\)0247](#)). It focuses on four priority areas:

- Aligning skills development in higher education with the needs of the labour market;
- Making higher education widely accessible, more inclusive and increasing its societal outreach;
- Boosting the innovation capacity of higher education;
- Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education.

In May 2018, following the Gothenburg Summit, the European Commission published a communication entitled ‘Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies’ ([COM\(2018\)0268](#)). This document describes the Commission’s vision of building a European Education Area, including:

- A strengthened Erasmus+ programme;
- The creation of at least 20 European Universities by 2024. This should contribute to the emergence of European degrees, which would be recognised throughout Europe;

[1]OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.



- The creation of a European student card to facilitate mobility;
- A proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad (COM(2018)0270).

ACHIEVEMENTS

A. Erasmus+

Formally adopted in December 2013^[2] and in operation 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 sectoral 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. Erasmus+ 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:

- Learning mobility of individuals;
- Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices;
- 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.

The Commission issued its proposal for a successor programme (2021-2027) in May 2018 ([COM\(2018\)0367](#)). The overall architecture of the programme has not been changed, including the three key actions already established under Erasmus+. However, it is proposed that the budget be doubled to EUR 30 billion as compared with the 2014-2020 programming period. The programme will include some new initiatives, such as the implementation of the above-mentioned European Universities. The proposal was amended and approved by Parliament in March 2019.

B. Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA)

The MSCA, which is part of the EU framework programme for research and innovation 2014-2020 ('Horizon 2020'), 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, intersector and interdisciplinary

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



mobility. The MSCA has 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 programme also seeks to break the real and perceived barriers between academic and other sectors, especially business. It 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. The MSCA should not change substantially in the new EU framework programme for research and innovation 2021-2027 ('Horizon Europe').

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, Parliament has managed to exert a growing influence on the shaping of higher education policies in Europe.

A. Mobility

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 2014-2020 to what it considers to be more future-oriented expenditure, such as that in the field of higher education. In February 2017, it adopted a resolution on Erasmus+[³], 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. For the next generation of the Erasmus + programme, Parliament has proposed tripling the budget to EUR 41 billion, allowing for more students to participate and for greater inclusivity. Parliament also stressed the need for better cooperation with other European funding programmes and co-financing for actions currently not funded by Erasmus+[⁴]. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, Parliament has also played a central role in securing the rights and statutes of young people currently partaking in an Erasmus+ exchange programme[⁵].

B. Link with employment

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'[⁶], 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. In 2012, Parliament adopted a resolution on modernising Europe's higher education systems[⁷], calling on HEIs to integrate lifelong learning into their curricula once again, to adapt to new challenges by creating new

[3]OJ C 252, 18.7.2018, p. 31.

[4]Texts adopted, P8_TA(2019)0324.

[5]Texts adopted, P8_TA(2019)0167, Continuation of ongoing learning mobility activities under the Erasmus + programme in the context of the UK's withdrawal from the EU

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

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



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 education. Following the Commission communication of 30 May 2017 on a renewed EU agenda for higher education ([COM\(2017\)0247](#)), Parliament adopted on 12 June 2018 a resolution on modernisation of education in the EU^[8]. Concerning higher education, this resolution calls for the creation of a European Education Area and encourages Member States to invest more in higher education and to foster cooperation between higher education, the world of work, industry, research communities and society as a whole.

C. The Bologna Process

Parliament has shown a long-standing interest in the consolidation and progress of the Bologna Process. In 2012, it adopted a resolution^[9] stressing the importance of the Bologna reforms for the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and for the objectives set in the Europe 2020 strategy.

In 2015, Parliament discussed the implementation of the Bologna Process^[10]. 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.

In April 2018, Parliament adopted a resolution on the implementation of the Bologna Process^[11]. It requested that the next 2018 EHEA Ministerial Conference in Paris provide a critical assessment of the process. The resolution stressed the need to improve the social dimension of education, with concrete opportunities for access to higher education for students with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds. It advocated accessible and equitable mechanisms for the allocation of mobility grants and allowances. It also called for the EU and the Member States to increase their education budgets in order to guarantee that public higher education is free and accessible to all.

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[8]Texts adopted, [P8_TA\(2018\)0247](#).

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

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

[11]Texts adopted, [P8_TA\(2018\)0190](#).

