Creating a European education area by 2025: Midterm review of progress

The European education area (EEA) is set to become a common space for quality inclusive education and lifelong learning across borders for all EU citizens. The work towards completing the EEA by 2025 has given fresh impetus to education and training policy at EU-level. A midterm review of the EEA's implementation, based on the findings of the European Commission's 2022 progress report, is currently underway. In this context, the Commission and the Parliament are hosting a joint event on 10 October 2023.

Background

The overall approach to making the EEA a reality was laid out in the 2020 Commission communication on achieving the EEA by 2025 ('EEA communication') and two 2021 Council resolutions: on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the EEA and beyond (2021-2030) ('strategic framework resolution') and on the strategic framework's governance structure ('governance resolution'). The five strategic priorities for reform and EU cooperation set as part of this approach are to:
a) improve quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training;
b) make lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all;
c) support the green and digital transitions in and through education and training;
d) enhance competences and motivation in the education profession; and
e) reinforce EU higher education.

The 2021 strategic framework resolution stated that the achievement and further development of the EEA would be the strategic framework's overarching political objectives and would happen over two work cycles: a first (2021-2025), which should enable the creation of the EEA by 2025, and a second (2026-2030), which would further develop the EEA. The Council also asked the Commission to publish a full report on the EEA in 2025. On the basis of the 2025 evaluation report, the Council would review the strategic framework and make any necessary adjustments for the 2026-2030 cycle, so as to adapt to the reality and needs of the EEA and any other major developments in the EU.

The European Commission's 2022 report on progress to achieve the EEA by 2025

In November 2022, the Commission adopted its progress report on completing the EEA by 2025. The report, comprising a Commission communication accompanied by a staff working document (SWD), analysed in particular key actions, governance, investment and mobilisation of EU funds, and work on EU-level indicators. The 2022 Education and Training Monitor complementing the report took stock of progress to attain EU-level targets in education and training, and examined key policy trends in the Member States.

The report noted that steps had been taken on all 40 EU-level EEA actions, which were either under preparation or in the process of being implemented. Annex I of the SWD provided an overview of the state of play for all of them. For instance, out of the 14 strategic EEA initiatives, the Commission had already proposed eight and the Council had adopted most of these, including on blended learning for high quality and inclusive education, micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability and learning for the green transition and sustainable development. Other significant actions to help policy reform and cooperation between education and training institutions – such as the Erasmus+ teacher academies – had been initiated at Commission level. Although the report pointed to some positive trends in education, such as the decreasing number of early school leavers and the rising tertiary educational attainment rate, it also highlighted the lack of equity in education and teacher shortages as systemic challenges to be addressed.

As work towards building the EEA continues, on 18 April 2023 the Commission presented two proposals for Council recommendations: on key enabling factors for successful digital education and training, and on
improving the provision of digital skills in education and training. The Commission is also expected to adopt a proposal for a Council recommendation on learning mobility by the end of 2023.

Interim evaluation

The Commission’s interim evaluation of the EEA, covering the 2021-2024 period and to be followed by a report on the EEA’s completion in 2025, will assess progress towards achieving the EEA, on the basis of following criteria: a) the continued relevance of the strategic priorities; b) the effectiveness of the measures taken; c) the efficiency of EU and national activities aimed at establishing the EEA; d) the internal coherence of the approach towards creating the EEA and external coherence with other policies and strategies with similar and/or complementary objectives; and e) the EU added value achieved by cooperation and EU-level actions aimed at setting up the EEA.

The midterm review process being conducted by the Commission, involves Member States, EU institutions and stakeholders, including social partners and civil society. The aim is to take stock of progress made and draw lessons from the first years of the work on establishing the EEA, aiming to build momentum for the period up until 2025. The joint reflection process is focusing on issues raised by the 2022 progress report. In June 2023, the Commission launched a call for evidence, with 15 September 2023 as the deadline for the feedback period. In addition, further targeted consultations and an online public consultation are planned in 2024. Once the online public consultation closes, the Commission will put forward a factual summary report. Moreover, it has started preparing the launch of an external evaluation support contract that will include a study to feed the 2025 evaluation report with evidence.

The Commission’s evaluation report on the EEA, to be adopted in 2025, will take into account the results of the interim evaluation, including the consultation activities (the 2023 midterm review process, the 2024 online public and further targeted consultations) and the external evaluation support study. The outcome of the consultation activities will be presented in a synopsis report prepared as an annex to the evaluation report. The evaluation report will prepare the next phase moving beyond the completion of the EEA and focusing on its further development up to 2030. Based on this report, the Council will review the strategic framework and identify potential areas for adjustment for the 2026-2030 period.

Parliament position

The European Parliament has dedicated a number of debates to the EEA and addressed parliamentary questions on relevant topics to the Commission and the Council. In a resolution of November 2021, Parliament stated that the EEA could and should play a crucial role in improving access to and quality of education, and called for it to serve as a milestone in the recognition of diplomas and qualifications across the EU. Parliament requested the development of a comprehensive strategy and common framework on citizenship education with a European dimension, and emphasised the need to foster a critical European memory. It also underlined the importance of establishing academic freedom as a core principle of the EEA.

While stressing the need for adequate funding for the establishment, implementation and development of the EEA, it also called for the creation of a dedicated financial instrument in the next multi-annual financial framework to further develop the EEA and facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications.

In a May 2022 resolution, Parliament welcomed the Commission proposals to develop a European approach to micro-credentials, individual learning accounts and learning for environmental sustainability as a step towards the EEA. In its resolutions, Parliament has also stressed the need for greater recognition of teachers and for support for their professional development and improvements in their working conditions.

The European Commission and the European Parliament are hosting a joint midterm review event to evaluate the progress made in building the EEA and reflect on the remaining key challenges for the period up to 2025. The event will take place on 10 October 2023 in Brussels. Participants will include representatives from EU institutions, Member States and the wider education and training community. The event’s agenda reflects the findings of the Commission’s 2022 report on progress to achieve the EEA by 2025 and focuses on citizenship education, supporting teachers, boosting equity and inclusion in education and training, and automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad.