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## 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, and promoting cooperation between higher education institutions.

### 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 amending the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) did not change the provisions on the role of the EU in education and training. Article 165(1), in Title XII of the Treaty, states: ‘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’. Article 165(2) states that Union action is to be aimed at:

- Developing the 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 the Member States;
- Encouraging the development of distance education [...].

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 employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health’.

Moreover, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union states: ‘Everyone has the right to education’ (Article 14).



## OBJECTIVES

### A. The European Education Area

In a [communication](#) published in September 2020, the Commission outlined a 'European Education Area', which is to be fully established by 2025, in order to improve the level of education and training of European citizens and develop their sense of belonging to the European Union. As regards higher education, the main objectives of the European Education Area are:

- Increasing the rate of 30 to 34-year-olds with tertiary education to 50% by 2030 (2020 rate: 40.3%);
- Establishing networks of European universities with legal status and awarding European degrees;
- Reinforcing Erasmus+, the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport in Europe, to make it more inclusive;
- Introducing a European Student Card initiative to facilitate student mobility;
- Establishing automatic mutual recognition of degrees and learning periods across the Member States (on the basis of the Lisbon Recognition Convention).

### B. The Bologna Process

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 and in neighbouring regions, culminating in the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference Declaration of March 2010. To date, 49 countries are members of the EHEA.

### C. The renewed EU agenda for higher education

In 2017, the Commission published the [renewed EU agenda for higher education](#). It focuses on four priority areas:

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

## ACHIEVEMENTS

### A. Erasmus+

The aim of the [Erasmus+](#) programme is to invest in education, training, youth and sport in Europe through a single funding programme. Erasmus+ combines previously separate sectoral and cross-cutting policies in the areas of higher education (Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Jean Monnet), school education (Comenius), vocational



education and training (Leonardo da Vinci), adult learning (Grundtvig) and youth (Youth in Action). Sport was included for the first time in 2014. The programme is structured around three key actions across the targeted sectors:

- Learning mobility of individuals;
- Cooperation between institutions and exchange of good practices;
- Support for policy reform.

Within the overarching architecture of Erasmus+, higher education assumes a central role. In the period 2021-2027, a minimum of 34.6% of the total budget of the Erasmus+ programme is reserved for higher education. 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.

2018 saw the launch of the 'European Universities' initiative, under which, with the support of the Erasmus+ programme, the creation of networks of higher education institutions in different Member States is promoted with a view to developing common strategies, enabling students to study in several EU countries and awarding European degrees. Following the first calls for projects, 41 European universities were selected, involving 279 higher education institutions from all Member States as well as four non-EU countries participating in the Erasmus+ programme.

On 22 October 2021, the Commission adopted a [new framework](#) of inclusion measures for the Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps programmes 2021-2027. This framework aims to facilitate access for people with fewer opportunities and to remove the obstacles that may prevent access. It supports providers of vocational education and training that wish to organise learning mobility activities for vocational education and the training of learners and staff. Cooperation is also fundamental for the new framework and includes small-scale partnerships, which broaden access to the programme.

## **B. [Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions](#)**

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) support the mobility and training of researchers. They are part of the EU's Horizon Europe (2021-2027) Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and are structured around five sub-actions. In the area of higher education, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions have become the main EU programme for doctoral training. They fund joint doctoral training ('Doctoral Networks' sub-action) and promote transnational, intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobility through postdoctoral fellowships ('Postdoctoral Fellowships' sub-action) as well as co-funding other regional, national and international programmes ('Cofund' sub-action). They also facilitate the secondment abroad of researchers and of administrative and technical staff involved in research and innovation ('Staff Exchanges' sub-action). Lastly, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions support the [European Researchers' Night](#) series of public events taking place across Europe in September every year to promote the work of researchers (as part of the 'MSCA and Citizens' sub-action). The programme seeks to remove real and perceived barriers between academia and other sectors, in particular businesses. Compared to the previous generation of the



programme, Horizon Europe focuses on simplifying and improving success rates, and allocates a budget of around EUR 6.6 billion to MSCA.

## ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Parliament has an increasing influence on European policy-making in the area of higher education.

### A. Erasmus+

In its [resolution](#) of 14 September 2017, Parliament recognised the extremely positive impact of the Erasmus+ programme, in particular for increasing opportunities for labour market integration and encouraging active citizenship and a sense of European identity. However, with less than 5% of Europeans able to benefit from Erasmus+ it stressed that the new programme should be more open and accessible and that it should focus more on vocational education and training, lifelong learning and non-formal and informal education. It also drew attention to difficulties with implementing the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which are an obstacle to mobility, and called for the creation of a European Student eCard to enable students to access services at European level. On 13 March 2019, with Brexit approaching, Parliament also adopted a [resolution](#) on the continuation of ongoing learning mobility activities under the Erasmus+ programme in the context of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU. On 15 September 2020, a [resolution](#) was adopted to strengthen the environmental dimension of the Erasmus, Creative Europe and European Solidarity Corps funding programmes, and in particular to integrate the environmental dimension into the Erasmus+ Higher Education Charter.

In May 2021, Parliament and the Council adopted [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/817](#) establishing the Erasmus+ programme for the period 2021-2027. With a budget of EUR 26.6 billion (compared to EUR 14.7 billion in the previous period), the new edition of the programme aims to increase the participation of people with fewer opportunities owing, for example, to disability, geographical remoteness or poverty. Erasmus+ will support lifelong learning for adult learners. Administrative formalities will be simplified and access to structural funds will be possible thanks to a 'Seal of Excellence' for projects not selected under the programme. Lastly, the programme will contribute to the EU's climate objectives through measures to reduce its climate footprint.

### B. Links with employment

Parliament has always taken an interest in higher education and its links with employment. In 2012, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on modernising Europe's higher education systems, calling on higher education institutions to integrate lifelong learning into their curricula and to adapt to new challenges by creating new fields of study reflecting the needs of the labour market. Following the Commission [communication](#) of 30 May 2017 on a renewed EU agenda for higher education, Parliament adopted on 12 June 2018, a [resolution](#) on modernisation of education in the EU. Concerning higher education, the 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 a [resolution](#) of 28 April 2015 on the implementation of the Bologna Process, it stressed that the Bologna Process is helping to improve the quality of education systems and facilitating the comparability of higher education establishments by providing quality assurance systems for the recognition of degrees, thereby increasing the attractiveness of higher education in Europe.

In April 2018, Parliament adopted a new [resolution](#) on the Bologna Process. It called for a critical assessment of the process at the European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference in Paris in May of that year. The resolution stressed the need to improve the social dimension of education by providing specific opportunities for access to higher education for students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It advocated accessible and fair mechanisms for allocating 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.

For more information on this topic, please see the [website](#) of the Committee on Culture and Education.

Olivier Yves Alain Renard / Kristiina Milt  
04/2023

