

POSITION

EUA response to the European Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025

October 2020

On 30 September 2020, the European Commission published a [Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025](#), which outlines key EU actions in education for the next five years. It covers six dimensions: quality of education and training, inclusion and gender equality, green and digital transitions, teachers and trainers, higher education and geopolitical dimension. The European University Association (EUA) welcomes the Communication as an acknowledgement of the vital contribution of education to Europe's identity, its future, and the sustainability and long-term resilience of its societies.

It is encouraging that the Communication acknowledges the key role that education plays in knowledge-based societies by supporting social cohesion and inclusion, contributing to economic competitiveness and individual fulfilment, as well as contributing to addressing the sustainability challenge. Societal engagement is central to the university mission. Universities contribute to the green and digital transformations and respond to the sustainability challenge.

European collaboration is vital to ensuring that education systems innovate and transform to fulfil the variety of purposes assigned to them. Universities collaborate across Europe and internationally in many ways. EUA strongly believes that this diversity of collaboration models must be nurtured and harnessed to strengthen the European Higher Education and Research Areas as [the Association stated in its position on the European University Initiative](#).

EUA supports the Communication's holistic approach to education, which considers different levels and sectors. This approach is important in enabling collaboration between different actors, ensuring smooth transitions and flexible learning paths in view of lifelong learning. EUA appreciates, however, that universities and higher education play a key role in the Communication and that several actions are envisaged to strengthen the close cooperation of universities. Their success and impact will, however, depend on the active engagement of all universities in Europe. This is where EUA comes into play. With its vital role in shaping these actions, it should be closely involved in their discussion and development.

Against this backdrop, EUA puts forward the following recommendations to guide the further development of the European Education Area:

FOCUS ON WHERE EUROPEAN APPROACH WILL BRING ADDED VALUE

EUA appreciates the high level of ambition for European collaboration outlined by the Communication. Given the central role of education in facing Europe's challenges, it will be important to make real, impactful, and positive change in the coming years. This will only be possible by focusing common European efforts on actions with strong European added value. This is essential given that the EU's role in education is limited to supporting member states' actions, developing a European dimension, and fostering quality education. To realise the ambitious agenda, the support of and systematic dialogue with EU member states for common policy priorities will be crucial.

Cooperation, mobility and dialogue across Europe's higher education systems is rightly at the centre of the proposed policies. In times of Covid-19, EUA believes that, for example, the strategic dialogue on enabling factors for successful digital education envisaged in the updated [Digital Education Action Plan](#), released in parallel to the European Education Area Communication, has high potential. For other initiatives, such as a European Degree or a potential European legal statute for university alliances, further elaboration is needed to see what the added value would be.

ENSURE POLICY COORDINATION AND SYNERGIES WITH EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

An effective European Education Area requires education policies to be intrinsically linked to other EU policies, such as research and innovation, digitalisation, social affairs and employment. Synergies need to be ensured, for example with the European Commission's Industrial Strategy for Europe, the European Digital Strategy, the New Skills Agenda, and the updated Digital Education Action Plan. Importantly, there are two more frameworks that are crucial to universities:

The [Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area](#) are well-established and already work as a framework for co-operation encompassing 48 European countries, including all EU member states, the European Commission, and European-level sector representative organisations such as EUA. The close alignment of EU actions in higher education with the Bologna Process will be essential for the success of the European Education Area, for example regarding its approaches towards recognition and quality assurance.

From a university perspective, closer links are also needed with the European Research Area. While the Communication acknowledges that higher education institutions connect these two areas, EUA notes that the link is much more explicit and elaborated in the [Communication on the European Research Area](#). Yet, there is a need to develop coherent EU policies and programmes that create real synergies between research, education, innovation and service to society in the "knowledge square". The aim should be to maximise the potential of these key university missions recognising their interlinkages and to raise their quality in a mutually beneficial manner.

EMBRACE DIVERSITY AND FOSTER INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The concept of diversity and inclusiveness must be approached in a wider manner in the European Education Area policies, going beyond the current focus on the gender dimension, similar to the Erasmus+ Programme's definition of disadvantaged groups. Promoting inclusion and equality must reflect societal diversity and ensure equity considering multiple issues and factors. This is yet another example of why it is crucial to build on the work already done in the context of the Bologna Process on the social dimension of higher education.

Making education systems more inclusive needs to be a priority across Europe. European collaboration should foster mutual learning and exchange on this topic, both at the policy level and between educational institutions and actors through projects in the framework of EU programmes such as Erasmus+. Inclusion should also be further embedded in the Erasmus+ mobility action, both for intra-European and international exchanges.

RECOGNISE THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

EUA is pleased that the Communication acknowledges the ability of cooperation in education to "address existing and emerging global challenges" and to serve as an "instrument of soft power" with geopolitical importance. European policies and funding programmes have been instrumental in contributing to the global visibility and recognition of European higher education institutions, and of the European Union itself.

Partnerships and collaboration with third countries and regions are a key feature of European higher education, and crucial for the quality of its education and research. European higher education has much to share, but also much to gain in collaboration. It will be important to have a more seamless transition between exchange and cooperation inside and outside of Europe and to ensure that this is reflected in the next generation of funding programmes for education and research.

This considered, EUA looks forward contributing to the European Commission's upcoming "Communication on a Global approach to research, innovation, education and youth".

STEP UP INVESTMENT AND ALIGN PROGRAMMES

More ambitious investments are a must in higher education and research, both at the national and the EU level. Higher education systems with adequate resources, efficient incentives, and enabling regulatory systems are essential for universities to deliver their missions and to adequately respond to the ambitious agenda presented in the Communication. The proposal to organise regular joint exchanges between EU finance and education ministers, to develop a common understanding of investment needs and exchange about efficient and effective approaches to investment, is a step in the right direction.

As a key stakeholder contributing to EU policies and benefiting from the EU programmes, the university sector offers its support to the Commission in the improvement and simplification of funding rules. Consistent alignment of rules, both between the current and next generation of EU programmes, as well as throughout the broader EU, national and regional programme portfolio, is a crucial aspect of enhanced efficiency.

ESTABLISH A TRANSPARENT GOVERNANCE WITH SYSTEMATIC INVOLVEMENT OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

It is vital that representative bodies of key stakeholders, such as university associations with a broad and diverse membership, are systematically involved in the European Education Area governing frameworks and serve as full partners in a structured dialogue with political decision makers and provide evidence. This is of particular importance for higher education, as the institutional autonomy of universities is a core value.

EUA notes the two-stage approach towards putting the European Education Area governance in place by 2025, with structures similar to the current Education and Training 2020 framework – which will continue until a fully-fledged new governance framework will be in place. In this respect, it is important to strengthen the links with the European Research Area governing structures. Moreover, it is crucial that governance and decision making are transparent and systematic in the years before the final framework is set up.

EUA looks forward to further contributing to the development of the European Education Area and sustaining efforts to shape fit-for-purpose policies that can support Europe's universities in fulfilling their missions.