The next steps to achieve the European Education Area's potential

A response to the interim evaluation of the European Education Area
27 June 2024

The European University Association believes that the European Education Area (EEA) and its initiatives have successfully prompted reflection and action across universities and systems, both on a more consequent implementation of existing reforms and on the development of forward-looking European policies for higher education. That said, it would be premature to fully assess some of the specific initiatives, as they are still at a development, or even definition stage.

A systematic follow up from the EU member states on reforms agreed at European level, as well as more systematic communication and cooperation with the higher education sector, will be key to the success of the EEA. Provided that EU level policy discussions translate into implementation of reforms at national level, there is significant potential for the further development of the EEA to the benefit of the higher education sector as a whole.

Context

With the announcement of the EEA in 2017, the European Union and its member states prioritised collaboration and coordination of education reforms. As such, they put forward education as a means to address the multiple challenges and pressures experienced by European societies and economies.

Coinciding with the Covid-19 crisis, the 2020 Communication on "Achieving the European Education Area by 2025" then focused on investment in skills and a holistic and inclusive approach to education. In addition, the Communication set the goal of enhancing education's quality across Europe, with due consideration for equality, inclusion and gender, as well as the green and digital transitions.

The European University Association (EUA), represents over 870 universities, national rectors' conferences and university associations in 49 European countries. In the present statement, EUA shares its observations and recommendations on the EEA. EUA already published a first position 2020 in response Communication on "Achieving the European Education Area by 2025.

1. *Initiating debate and experimentation on higher education*

Achievements

The EEA has been successful in elevating education, including higher education, on the EU's policy agenda. EEA initiatives have also triggered debate and reflection within the higher education sector itself, as well as with and among EU and national policy makers. The European Strategy for Universities and the European Universities Initiative have encouraged both the higher education sector and national authorities to probe and reassess existing reforms.

To be worked on

The EU and its member states should continue the present initiatives, but also embed related discussions in the wider framework of higher education reforms. There are examples of several systems making efforts to eliminate regulatory obstacles and administrative hurdles for international cooperation. This should not be reduced to bending rules and granting exceptions to the benefit of individual universities engaged in flagship initiatives. Rather, it must seek to make transnational higher education cooperation less bureaucratic and burdensome, and thus more attractive for the entire sector and beneficial to students and wider society. Moreover, this approach should extend to other EEA and European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms where implementation needs to be boosted.

2. *Recognising universities' full potential to contribute to the European project*

Achievements

The emphasis that the EEA puts on universities as institutions that drive and enable quality education, research, and innovation, in systematic interaction with society and economy, is particularly important. Focusing on institutions also brings necessary recognition of the diversity of university missions and their ability to facilitate exchange and cooperation, within and beyond institutional boundaries, across disciplines, national borders, and with other sectors.

Recognising universities' ability to facilitate exchange and cooperation also aligns well with the EEA's horizontal priorities. For example, inclusion, digitalisation, and greening are key priorities for society and economy, including for higher education and research. Higher education is part of this wider transformation process and supports it through inter- and transdisciplinary education, research, and innovation, in consideration of its technological, economic, political, and social implications, across Europe and in international collaboration. This ability has been demonstrated during several crises over the past decade, not least the Covid-19 pandemic.

To be worked on

It is important to ensure that tasks and priorities related to innovation are not just handed over to higher education institutions. Rather, they must come with full recognition and parity of esteem for diverse institutional missions and academic careers - enabling the best possible synergies between education, research, and innovation. In addition, institutions can only engage if they are granted appropriate levels of autonomy and funding.

In this regard, the goal for the next years, until 2030, must be to create a strategic, transparent and smooth system of transnational university cooperation that benefits the entire university sector and builds on best practices from within and beyond alliances under the European Universities Initiative. This is crucial to promote high quality in education and research, and thereby unleash the potential of European universities in contributing to Europe's sustainable future and its international competitiveness.

This is why EUA is calling on European and national policy makers to make a substantial leap forward in supporting transnational university cooperation, including the alliances under the European Universities Initiative, through policy reform and funding based on a long-term vision.

3. *Providing education to citizens, at different stages of life and career*

Achievements

The EEA has also brought attention to micro-credentials. These are already provided in various forms by many, though not all, higher education institutions, and in the past have received little, if any, attention in European and national education policies. The more systematic integration of micro-credentials into the European education systems and their alignment with existing European higher education policies and instruments is highly welcome. This helps to achieve a shared and better-defined understanding of the concept, better recognition and application, and tangible benefits for learners.

To be worked on

EEA measures should prevent overly narrow definitions and overregulation of micro-credentials, as this hinders rather than fosters recognition and flexible use and makes them less attractive and accessible for learners, institutions, and employers.

Europe should share its emerging practices in micro-credentials, and their impact on and consequences for degree programmes and institutions. Systematic monitoring and assessment at institutional and system level must replace speculation.

Importantly, micro-credentials recall the urgent need for a more systematic approach toward lifelong learning (LLL), and the contribution that higher education can provide[1]. This concerns citizens and the labour force, who have to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for the green and digital transformation, including artificial intelligence, and considering demographic changes and migration. This should draw on existing measures, such as Individual Learning Accounts. However, it must first and foremost focus on a European strategy and action plan for LLL, including education, training, employment, and social policies. An approach similar to that which is currently used for enhancing transnational higher education collaboration could be applied for LLL, thus enabling learning from policy and practice experimentation across member states.

4. *Enhancing synergies with the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area*

Achievements

Synergies and cooperation between the EEA and ERA are of high importance for universities, as well as for economy and society.

In addition, it is welcome that, while suggesting new avenues for higher education reform, the EEA builds on, and contributes to the work of the Bologna Process and the EHEA.

To be worked on

A dedicated Bologna Process Task Force provided recommendations on how to achieve more synergies between the EEA, ERA, and EHEA in 2021, and occasionally, joint meetings took place. However, there seems to be a lack of more recent follow-up.

[1] The European benchmark is that by 2025, at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning over the previous 12 months.

Coordination and collaboration between the European Commission Directorates-General respectively in charge of education and research could be further enhanced, for example in exploring academic careers in a more holistic fashion. The EU should act to support attractive and sustainable careers that value education, research, and innovation.

Synergies between the EEA and the EHEA could be more explicit and systematic. This would help to address persisting concerns that the EEA would develop completely new parallel approaches, for example for recognition and quality assurance.

5. Enhancing the global dimension of the EEA

Achievements

The intention of the EEA to strengthen through education links with the rest of the world, through the Team Europe approach and the enhancement of Erasmus+ is very much welcome. European higher education has a lot share and a lot to gain from exchanges with partners around the globe.

Internationalisation is high on the agenda of universities. European funding and policies enjoy considerable attention among higher education institutions within and outside of the European Union. Erasmus+ as an enabler for international collaboration has been an important catalyst for sharing knowledge and bringing institutions and people together. The impact of Erasmus+-funded initiatives usually exceeds the actually funding duration of the projects, and goes beyond specific disciplinary content. As such, Erasmus+ contributes to institutional and system-level development and reform – both in partner regions and in Europe. As Erasmus mobility includes exchanges with third countries, short-term credit mobility has also become a global currency.

To be worked on

While Erasmus+ is very visible to and fully embraced by the higher education sector, but there is less awareness for the potential of the Global Gateway and its initiatives. With their ability to work across borders and sectors in large interdisciplinary consortia and networks, universities are in a good position to provide a major contribution.

More could also be done to enhance the link and lower the hurdles between intra-European and international cooperation actions. This should be considered in the next generation of funding programmes for higher education and research, towards "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"[2], including for the European University alliances[3].

Such actions should remain flexible, while contributing to the programme's horizontal priorities of inclusion and diversity, democracy and civic engagement, digital transformation and environment and climate action. Such actions should also enable institutions and their members to work with diverse partners in and outside of higher education, in Europe and internationally. EUA has pointed to these opportunities in its Recommendation for the interim evaluation of Erasmus+.

[2] EUA response to the European Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 30 October 2020.

[3] The future of the European Universities Initiative, EUA Position, 27 April 2020.

6. *Involving the sector*

Achievements

The EEA has the stated intention of "ownership and active involvement of Member States, EU institutions and stakeholders, as well as education and training institutions, teachers, trainers and students"[4]. This is very important, as many of its reforms depend on the proactive contribution of the sector. Noteworthy efforts have been made to involve universities in consultations about EEA initiatives.

To be worked on

While there has been much more consultation of the sector than in the past, notably on the European Universities Initiative, this point should be improved with regard to other actions and initiatives. For example, for the Erasmus+ interim evaluation – an issue of central importance and interest for the European higher education sector, but also for citizens - the schedule and modalities have been kept uncertain for months, without any explanation. A more systematic consultation of, and cooperation with universities' international offices could have helped to overcome and partially avoid many of the challenges currently faced with Erasmus+ online tools.

As the largest umbrella organisation for European universities, EUA appreciates being part of several formal working groups of the EEA, as well as other stakeholder consultations. To make the work of these groups more effective in the future, it is important to set out clearer timelines and foresee enough time to allow for consultation of members.

EUA looks forward to providing further input to consultations on both the EEA and Erasmus+, in consideration of the diverse views and experiences of its membership.

[4] Progress towards the achievement of the European Education Area, Staff Working Document, Council of the EU, 2022.