European Education Area
midterm review process report

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1.   Political context and objective of the European Education Area midterm review process

Over the past years, EU Member States, EU institutions and the wider education and training community have joined forces to build a **common space for high-quality learning across borders for all Europeans – a genuine European Education Area**. The [Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025](#) of September 2020, the [Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)](#) of February 2021 and the [Council Resolution on the strategic framework governance structure](#) of November 2021 set out concrete actions and governance mechanism towards realising this shared ambition.

To take stock and keep momentum to achieve the European Education Area (EEA), the Commission decided to devote 2023 to a **process of listening, dialogue and joint reflection** with the EU Member States, EU institutions, the education and training community, social partners and civil society. The Commission's [European Education Area Progress Report](#) from November 2022 took stock of the ongoing EU initiatives and trends on progress to attain the EU-level targets in education and training, and set out the tasks ahead of the 2025 milestone. The **midterm review** has provided an opportunity to jointly reflect on progress, as well as on the challenges that still lie ahead and how they can be addressed. The midterm review process represents an important contribution to the evaluation of the European Education Area.

The **objective of this report** is to summarise key policy messages for action in the coming years to lay down the foundational elements of a genuine European Education Area. These messages came from the various consultations and events under the 2023 European Education Area midterm review process. The findings of this report will feed the discussions at the European Education Summit on 30 November 2023, which will conclude the midterm review process.

Regarding the **report's structure**, section 2 provides an overview of the main consultations and events that have taken place under this midterm review process. Section 3 summarises the main messages for action in 2024, 2025 and beyond, coming from these consultations and events. Conclusions are provided in section 4.

2. Consultations and events with stakeholders

The European Education Area midterm review process has involved **all the levels of the European Education Area strategic framework governance[1], the wider education and training community, as well as the general public.** Exchanges took place in particular in the following fora:

– Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council;
– Education Committee;
– High Level Group on Education and Training and its Coordination Board;
– Directors-General meetings;
– Advisory Committee on Vocational Training;
– European Education Area strategic framework Working Groups, the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks, and other Commission expert groups such as the Expert Group on supportive learning environment and well-being at school;
– Presidency conferences;
– Events in the framework of the Learning Lab on quality investment in education and training;
– Targeted events organised by the Commission on implementing the already adopted initiatives or on co-creating the remaining initiatives on topics such as addressing teacher shortages, developing European Universities alliances, updated learning mobility framework, developing a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, apprenticeships in VET, quality assurance in VET, establishing the Centres of Vocational Excellence, Education for Climate Coalition, skills for green and digital transition, or increasing women's participation in STEM;
– Events organised by civil society, such as the Lifelong Learning Platform's event for dialogue between stakeholders and policy-makers organised in June 2023;
– A European Education Area midterm review event organised by the Commission jointly with the European Parliament on 10 October 2023.

Furthermore, stakeholders expressed their views in **several public consultations**:

– Call for evidence as part of the EEA interim evaluation,
– Call for evidence and public consultations and citizen panels on learning mobility to feed the Commission's proposal for the Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move' – learning mobility opportunities for everyone;
– Public consultation within the EU Youth Strategy interim evaluation; and
– Public consultation in the framework of the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 interim evaluation.

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[1] Council Resolution on the governance structure of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), 2021/C 497/01.

3. Main messages

This section summarises the main messages for action in 2024, 2025 and beyond to achieve the European Education Area. The first part of the section provides key overarching messages from exchanges and consultations of horizontal nature. The second part provides main messages from discussions and consultations on specific issues.

3.1. Overarching messages

This sub-section summarises the main messages of horizontal nature from the EEA midterm review event organised by the European Commission jointly with the European Parliament on 10 October 2023, the Council Resolution 'The European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond' from May 2023, the Lifelong Learning Lab event that was organised by the Lifelong Learning Platform in Girona in June 2023, and the call for evidence under the EEA interim evaluation.

EEA midterm review event organised by the European Commission jointly with the European Parliament in Brussels on 10 October 2023

'The European Education Area has a pivotal role to play for promoting our European way of life and an economy that works for people. It is among the drivers of Europe fit for the digital age and the Green Deal. Its purpose is to push for more equality, more democracy, more Europe for the sake of us all.'

Roberta Metsola
President of the European Parliament
(through a video message)

Iliana Ivanova
European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth

'To make the European Education Area a reality, we will focus going forward on having systems, tools and measures in place to empower our teachers and learners, having the ability to make sure we reach everyone, and having the power to celebrate and preserve the values that move us to work together.'

'The European Education Area must be fair and equitable for all. We must take care of our teachers – their training, well-being and motivation in order to reduce the shortages of teachers'.

José Manuel Bar Cendón
State Secretary for Education, Spain,
Presidency of the Council of the EU

Sabine Verheyen
Member of the European Parliament,
Chair of the Committee on Culture and Education

'Inclusivity is at the core of the European Education Area. The European Education Area aims at eliminating educational disparities and ensuring that education is accessible to all regardless of their background, gender or ability. This commitment strengthens social cohesion and reduces inequality in education.'

'In order to build the European Education Area, we must address the digital divide. We must ensure not only that every student has access to the necessary technological tools but also that they are equipped with the skills to use them effectively. For this, we need above all investments in infrastructure and teacher training.'

Emil Boc
European Committee of the Regions

'Only strong public investment can secure equity, inclusiveness and general quality provision of education and training.'

Elisa Gambardella
President, Lifelong Learning Platform

The exchanges at the EEA midterm review event underlined that:

- Quality education needs to be accessible to all Europeans, no one must be left behind.

- Commitment and close cooperation involving EU institutions, Member States (national as well as regional and local authorities), the education and training community, social partners and civil society are crucial for making the European Education Area a reality.

- Close cooperation of all key actors and strong governance are vital for the European Union, in a rapidly changing world, to promptly react and anticipate challenges and crises.

- In the coming years, the focus should be put on implementation at all levels and on robust monitoring.

- Citizenship education needs to be enhanced to engage young people and encourage them to participate in society.

- Addressing teacher shortages and increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession should be a priority in the coming years.

- Achieving a genuine common space to learn across borders will be possible only when the remaining barriers to mobility will have been removed. Further efforts are required to ensure automatic recognition of education and training qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad.

- To address the digital divide, access to digital tools and equipment with the relevant skills should be ensured for all Europeans.

- A shift towards a learner-centred approach in education and training, based on learning outcomes and well-being, will help build a space for high-quality learning for all Europeans. Such an approach requires increased flexibility of learning pathways and bigger respect in society for the pathway of vocational education and training. It requires also close cross-sectoral cooperation and optimisation of all learning environments, including non-formal and informal learning.

- In the context of an increasing number of priorities to be funded, effective use of EU and national resources for education and training needs to be ensured. At EU level, this can be accomplished also through further simplification and synergies between different funds and programmes.[2]

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[2]   More information on the outcomes of the EEA midterm review event discussions is provided in section 3.2.

Council Resolution 'The European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond'

In this Council Resolution, the Council agreed that focusing on implementation at both national and European level and robust monitoring would be key for the remaining period of the first cycle under the strategic framework till 2025.

To achieve the European Education Area, the Council stressed that particular focus should be given to:
- improving equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training and the acquisition of key competences, including basic skills;
- enhancing the teaching profession and addressing teacher shortages, promoting professional development, mobility opportunities, working conditions and well-being of teachers as key factors in increasing the attractiveness of the profession;
- removing the remaining obstacles to mobility while encouraging inclusive, sustainable and balanced mobility in the EU, including by achieving automatic mutual recognition in education and training;
- fostering life-long learning, including adult learning, upskilling and reskilling, with a particular emphasis on skills and competences for the green and digital transitions.

Lifelong Learning Lab event organised by the Lifelong Learning Platform in Girona on 26-27 June 2023

Stakeholders considered that the current EEA priorities remain relevant but need to be elaborated and reinforced in view of emerging challenges. In terms of priorities for the 2026-2030 cycle of the EEA strategic framework, they suggested to increase focus on diversity, inclusion and equity in education and training, lifelong learning, mental health and well-being, as well as on green skills and a holistic approach to learning for sustainability. Concerning EEA initiatives, stakeholders reported to have engaged mostly with initiatives on inclusion (Pathways to school success), digital education and skills, as well as higher education (European Universities Alliances, European approach to micro-credentials), Jean Monnet actions, and the proposal for a Council Recommendation on learning mobility. They support the idea of a future EU-level target on equity and inclusion in education, as well as targets on green skills/learning for sustainability and lifelong learning.

Call for evidence under the EEA interim evaluation

The call for evidence was open from mid-June to mid-September 2023. The overall feedback was positive, welcoming the progress made towards building the EEA, the governance structures such as expert and working groups, and the plan to launch an interim evaluation of the efforts towards the creation of the EEA. The priorities of the EEA were confirmed as still being very relevant, requiring implementation and focus also in the future. In general, there was a strong message on the need for continued development of the EEA until and beyond 2025.

The main suggestions for further improvements were:
- In relation to the objectives of the European Education Area:
  - Equity and inclusion should be further promoted (including people with disabilities and/or with an ethnic/minority background), as well as active citizenship and democracy education across all education sectors.
  - Teachers should be given more attention, such as through supporting initial teacher education and continuing professional development including on digital and intercultural competences, or improving their access to digital tools, working conditions and mobility.
  - Work on digital education should remain a priority, e.g. through further development of education materials, tools and platforms, digital inclusion, and on learning for sustainability.
  - There is a need for increased focus on basic skills, teacher and student mobility, higher education, vocational education and training, adult learning and lifelong learning.
- In relation to governance and engagement:
  - Co-creation at local, regional, national and European level should be strengthened, including as regards the involvement of the civil society sector;
  - Participatory approaches should be promoted; teachers and students should be given a voice in the development of the EEA.
  - The role of the High Level Group on education and training (HLG) should be strengthened and the Group should hold more strategic debates.
- As regards funding and investment:
  - Quality and sustainable investment at all levels should be ensured.
  - Procedures for the use of EU funding should be simplified.
  - More visibility on how different funds support EEA actions should be ensured.

3.2. Specific messages

This sub-section summarises the main messages on specific issues that the events and consultations under the midterm review identified as key for achieving the European Education Area.

Implementing the reinforced governance

In May 2023, the Council[3] called for:
- preparing a policy agenda in education and training for a period of 18 months;
- better dissemination of findings and more synergies between the Working Groups, Director-General formations and the High Level Group on Education and Training;
- supporting the education dimension in EU social and economic governance processes such as the European Semester.

The April 2023 High Level Group meeting concluded that there was no need for adjustments of the Working Groups' focus (mandates should be kept stable but flexible). For better dissemination of outputs and transparency of information, the Commission announced plans for creating dedicated Working Groups' webpages linked to the EEA portal, which are now operational.

In their input paper of September 2023 on the Working Groups, the Lifelong Learning Platform appreciated high quality, timely and transparent information and support provided by the Commission to the Working Groups. The input paper calls for increasing the effectiveness of existing online collaboration tools, introducing various facilitation techniques, preserving in-person meetings and increasing synergies between different Working Groups.

Boosting equity and inclusion at all levels and sectors of education and training

The Directors-General for Schools meeting in March underlined the importance of the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success and of its systemic and comprehensive approach. The need for early detection and intervention to prevent school failure and dropouts, for high-quality and inclusive early childhood education and care, for targeted support for learners at risk (including gifted and talented students), and for specific support to schools in socio-economically disadvantaged environments was also highlighted.

The Policy debate on reading and its importance for learning, equity and active participation in society held at the Education Council in May emphasised the importance of addressing the promotion of reading in an inclusive way and agreed on the need to focus on children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and address specific challenges of children with migrant background and with learning disabilities. The importance of stimulating reading from an early age, and of making best use of digital solutions was highlighted, as well as the role of libraries and librarians and teachers. There was a strong overall support and call for continued EU level action.

The Council Recommendations on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training and on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education

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[3] Council resolution on The European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond, 2023/C 185/08.

and training adopted by the Council on 23 November 2023 call on Member States to develop or update national strategies or approaches for digital education and skills, including appropriate measures for 'priority or hard-to-reach groups'. They also call for promoting inclusive education by safeguarding the accessibility of digital education content and technologies for learners and teachers with disabilities and providing specialised equipment and solutions for learners with special educational needs. The Commission will support Member States' efforts towards digital inclusion, ensuring that all individuals and communities can contribute and benefit from the digital transformation. This will support also the implementation of the Declaration on Commitment on women in digital, including in promoting gender-responsive teaching of digital skills in primary and secondary education. The Commission will help identify innovative scalable teaching practices to address institutional and cultural barriers to girls' aspirations and access to ICT studies and careers in the Union.

Reflecting on the implementation of the 2022 Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success, the discussions at the EEA midterm review event on 10 October 2023 highlighted that reliable and complete data on all learners, coupled with effective monitoring and evaluation, are crucial for effective and sustainable inclusion policies. Targeted measures are necessary, addressing the needs of all groups of learners who are more vulnerable to exclusion. School segregation remaining a key barrier to equity, the discussions called for aligned and coordinated efforts of various governance levels and well-designed desegregation policies. The key role of a generous, caring, inclusive school culture was highlighted, as well as the need for enhanced collaborative practices in and around schools.

More flexible, inclusive and learner-centred teaching, learning and assessment are essential, respecting the learning paths of individuals. Adequate support to teachers and school leaders (through enhanced opportunities for training and professional development, networking etc.), funding for educational support staff and multidisciplinary teams in schools and universities, and teacher well-being should be prioritised, as well as promoting teacher diversity. The key role of initial teacher education was also highlighted to prepare teachers for work in diverse classrooms and shaping the school culture. Student participation in schools and universities' decision-making as well as prioritising students' well-being are essential. Gender equality remains an issue and should also be further addressed.

The Working Group on Equality and Values, the Working Group Schools and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education have joined forces and concentrate their work on the need for more flexible systems of support to learners, to better address a variety of needs, including for learners with disabilities. As a result of this work, an issue paper on the different topics covered in relation to special educational needs will be published in autumn 2024.

The Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care will continue exchanges to support Member States in creating inclusive early childhood education and care systems, in particular through effective monitoring and evaluation.

The Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training focused on promoting gender equality and on anti-discrimination. The Issue Paper on gender equality in and through education addresses issues such as gender gaps in education, non-traditional education and career pathways, textbooks and learning materials, or gender-based violence. The Issue Paper on tackling all forms of discrimination in education and training focuses on challenges in relation to tackling discrimination and prejudice based on racial or ethnic origin, religion or beliefs, disability and sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and sex characteristics. It also includes specific sections dedicated to tackling territorial and social inequalities in and through education, as well as addressing multiple discrimination and intersectionality. Examples of inspiring projects and practices will be transferred into a compendium publication to be published at the end of the Working Group's mandate.

Tackling teacher shortages and increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession

The policy debate at the March 2023 Education Council on teacher shortages and the challenge of attracting, upskilling and retaining qualified and well-trained teachers and trainers showed a very broad consensus among Member States about the importance of the topic. When discussing root causes and key factors to address this challenge, many Member States pointed to the critical role of good working conditions, including well-being at work, the level of pay, the reputation of the teaching profession and the careful selection of candidates in combination with high-quality initial and continued training. In respect of EU-level cooperation, many Member States were in favour of offering better mobility opportunities to teachers and expressed support for the work under the European Education Area and Erasmus+, notably in relation to mutual learning and the launch of the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies.

The October EEA midterm review event underlined that formal education needs to be the driver that creates a mutual understanding and integrity of the EU. It needs to bring people together and let them feel united. The role of teachers is very important: they are the voices and faces that look after our children, and they teach values and principles to the next generations. Teachers need a level of autonomy and leadership that emphasises schools as learning organisations. They need to be considered as drivers for change and innovation through learning by doing. Teachers need decent working conditions and should be mostly teaching and doing less administrative tasks. The system should allow teachers to conduct research and dive into practice, including through mobility and job shadowing in other EU countries. The goal should be to create a culture of innovation, collaboration and transnational exchanges among teachers, including by providing the necessary training, incentives and institutional support. The teaching profession has evolved. There is a need to ensure that teachers get adequate initial education and continuous professional

development. The Erasmus+ Teacher Academies offer a way to answer the complex issues that teachers face, with the European strength of exchanges of best practices. The Academies are a way to create a European pedagogical culture. More should be done to make this initiative known by teacher bodies.

A frequent issue is that the teaching career is relatively flat, and not flexible enough. It would be important to develop further relevant career frameworks for teachers, both to help teachers feel ownership of their careers, and as a 'marketing tool' for attracting new teachers. Learning mobility between EU Member States should become a standard part of teacher education and continuous professional development, and easily accessible for those interested. Allowing teachers to get breaks in their careers and come back to the profession would also be a great advantage for the teaching sector. It would be important to discuss and design a more structured career and salary progression in the teaching world. This would be relevant to attract teachers and address teacher shortages and ageing. It would be relevant to create teachers' communities and build trust among teachers fostering the culture of learning from each other, as part of nurturing their well-being.

Enhancing European citizenship education

The Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training produced the Issue Paper on citizenship education capturing the key learning points from exchanges on this topic. The paper highlights different challenges and points for attention such as the ones related to the curriculum and content of citizenship education, teaching and teacher education, learning approaches and teaching methodologies, assessment and evaluation, and challenges related to the parents/caregivers and community. Some of the identified challenges will be discussed further by the Working Group in 2024 and 2025.

Youth participation is a long-standing priority of EU youth policy cooperation. The 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy focuses on youth participation under it's 'Engage' core area and the European Youth Goal #9 'Space and participation for all'. Enhancing youth participation through non-formal and informal learning, youth work and volunteering contributes to civic engagement and active citizenship, and complements European citizenship education in formal education and training settings. The public consultation under the EU Youth Strategy interim evaluation gathered over 200 responses. The feedback is currently being analysed and will inform further work at EU level.

The main achievements of the 2022 European Year of Youth were the creation of more spaces for youth participation, particularly for young people with fewer opportunities, and the progress in cross-sectoral cooperation and mainstreaming of a youth perspective in other policy areas, including education and training. Consultations throughout 2023 have stressed the need to further develop these areas. Building on the achievements of the Year, the Commission will come forward with proposals to continue strengthening youth participation in a Communication on the European Year of Youth legacy that is planned to be adopted by the end of 2023.

The Spanish Presidency conference on the contribution of education to the promotion of common European values and democratic citizenship, held on 4 October in Madrid, highlighted the key role of education in upholding the values that unite us as Europeans. It stressed the need to enhance citizenship education to engage young people and encourage them to participate in society. The discussions revealed that promoting debate and discussion is the best way to build consensus on citizenship education, which should also include learning about the origins and functioning of the EU. When teaching democratic citizenship, a right balance is needed between transmitting knowledge and values and promoting critical thinking. To this end, adequate teacher training, support of families and participation of students and the education community is key.

The October EEA midterm review event highlighted that the main challenges facing citizenship education today reflect social, political and economic challenges of current society, such as decline of trust in public institutions, politics and disengagement, rising diversity of our societies, war and climate change. Addressing these challenges requires a proactive (pre-emptive) rather than a reactive approach. Citizenship education cannot just be taught – it must be reflective and practiced, understood holistically and expansively across the continuum and different types of education and in horizontal relations. It is not just about learning, but also about experiencing democratic life, culture, community. Because of deficient civic infrastructure and low civic literacy, not all citizens are given the opportunity to actively participate in and learn about civic life ('civic deserts'). Citizenship education needs to be able to address also non-citizens.

The event's exchanges further highlighted that teaching in a prescriptive, transmissive way is to be avoided. Instead, teaching should foster curiosity and allow for critical reflection. It is not just about giving opinions but also about supporting multi-perspectivity. It is not about giving the answers of what common values are, but understanding the significance and the meaning and how they affect peoples' lives. Curricula need to be supported by democratic school culture and developed in co-creation by students and educators, as part of a whole school approach involving communities and parents. Active and responsible participation of students can be fostered through citizenship education projects. In this respect, fostering understanding of the role and complementary contribution of civil society organisations in delivering citizenship education needs to be further explored. More networking opportunities and funding for civil society are needed. Teacher education needs to encompass not only initial teacher education but also continuous professional development.

Digital citizenship is more than the ability to use digital tools. It is about respectful, safe and responsible engagement in different digital environments. More attention should be given to the European dimension of citizenship education in the national curricula (what does it mean to be a European citizen, what rights and duties does it entail). Also, there is a need for better data on the knowledge of EU citizenship, not just self-reporting. Democracy and education need one another. Democratic society is needed for educational life and education can support democracy through multi-perspectivity, dialogue and listening across difference.

Co-creating the remaining EEA initiatives

- **Proposal for a Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move' – learning mobility opportunities for everyone:**
  - The call for evidence and the open public consultation, open from February till May 2023, generated over one thousand replies from learners, educators, academic institutions and NGOs, and other respondents. The input from the consultations fed into the Commission proposal for the Council Recommendation on learning mobility. The public consultation allowed to identify the main obstacles to learning mobility with aspects specific to each education sector, and to point to recommended actions to incentivise learning mobility. Incoherent systems and actions implemented by different Member States and at the EU level were identified as the main obstacle. The need to increase inclusiveness of the various mobility actions was highlighted too, as well as the need to further raise awareness of and promote green travel options, and to ensure that virtual exchanges are not used as a substitute for physical mobilities. On apprentice mobility, there was an overall consensus that short mobility experiences are easier to implement. In addition, efforts need to be increased when it comes to providing information, guidance and support in all stages to increase motivation in particular for learners and SMEs.

  - The Commission also engaged 150 citizens in a European Citizens' Panel on Learning Mobility which deliberated in March and April 2023. The 21 recommendations adopted by the panel cover a wide variety of topics from multilingualism, mobility beyond educational institutions and information sharing, to the inclusion of all groups and greener mobility programmes.

  - In addition, numerous targeted consultations with stakeholders were organised. The Commission consulted with stakeholders at large events or various steering group meetings, expert group meetings, working groups including hearings with social partners, Erasmus+ National Agencies' events, the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training, the Higher Education Working Group, and in meetings of Directors General for Schools.

- **promoting automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad**:
  - The Commission's report from February 2023 on progress towards implementing the 2018 Council Recommendation states that automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad requires further efforts. While progress has been made towards implementation in several Member States, only a few Member States have systems in place that can be assessed as fully automatic.

- The [May 2023 Council Conclusions](#) reaffirm the commitment of Member States to making automatic mutual recognition a reality. They call on Member States to fully implement the Bologna and EU transparency tools, as well as to undertake more ambitious actions, especially in upper secondary education. The Conclusions also highlight that the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and outcomes of learning periods abroad is one of the fundamental building blocks of fostering learning mobility and creating the European Education Area. The Conclusions stress the need for more coherence in recognition decisions at Member State and higher education institution level. They invite the Commission, in close consultation with Member States, to explore how the expertise of the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs) can be used to expand automatic mutual recognition of qualifications in upper secondary education and training in both general education and VET, on top of higher education.

- In higher education, discussions on achieving automatic recognition have taken place in the Working Group on Higher Education and meetings of Directors-General for Higher Education, as well as with stakeholders, in particular the ENIC-NARIC network of recognition information centres. There is strong support for further action in this area, in particular with regard to linking quality assurance and recognition. In this regard, in accordance with the Commission's 2024 Work Programme, the Commission will propose a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System, as part of a higher education package that includes a blueprint for a European degree and action to strengthen academic careers, in 2024.

- The October EEA Midterm review event highlighted that there is a need for a paradigm shift, a mentality change, regarding achieving, and communicating about, automatic recognition. There is a political ambition at EU level to make automatic recognition a reality. It should be matched with a coherent and holistic set of policies and actions, which improve transparency but still allow for diversity. Many tools are already in place and can be applied; it is thus a matter of political will, trust and implementation at Member State level.

  Automatic recognition is a pillar of free movement, a precondition for credit or degree mobility, and as such supports the objectives of mobility, such as internationalisation and intercultural understanding. Erasmus+ contributes to improved standards regarding recognition of learning outcomes, while the European Universities are trailblazers in structural mobility. The role of Erasmus+ in contributing to strengthened automatic recognition must be valued and strengthened, while automatic recognition is a pillar for a smoother, more inclusive Erasmus+. There is a need to ensure that automatic recognition is learner-centred and seen as a right. Support measures should be in place to make automatic recognition competence-

based, flexible and make sure individuals are aware of their rights, including the right to appeal.

- **work towards a European quality assurance and recognition system:**
  - In accordance with the Commission's 2024 Work Programme, the Commission is carrying out consultations, studies and surveys of stakeholders and Member States in order to present a proposal for a **European Quality Assurance and Recognition System** in 2024. The goal is to move further towards fit-for-purpose quality assurance for deep transnational cooperation between higher education institutions, such as European Universities alliances, based on well-developed quality culture at institution and alliance levels. By strengthening the link between quality assurance and automatic recognition, this will boost the full implementation of the 2018 Council Recommendation on automatic recognition and facilitate mobility.
  - The 2020 Council Recommendation on VET introduced the concept of **EQAVET peer reviews** at VET system level. The first round of EQAVET peer reviews from 2021 to 2023 showed the added value of these peer reviews to improve quality assurance arrangements at national level, to enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements and to reinforce trust between the Member States. The second round of peer reviews was launched in September 2023 to consolidate the instrument.
  - Concerning the **European Universities** initiative, the Commission discussed in numerous targeted consultations the co-development of the monitoring framework of the European Universities initiative, as well as possible avenues for an investment pathway for the next period 2028-2034. These took place with the Rectors and coordinators of the European Universities alliances, as well as with higher education stakeholders and Member States. They highlighted the need for a balanced mix of qualitative and quantitative questions to assess the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative so far, against its policy goals and vision. Also, stakeholders emphasised the key principle of respecting the diversity of the European Universities alliances, and to combine contextualised and objective insights and account for diverse approaches. It was also stressed that the criteria comprising the diverse dimensions of the monitoring framework are not to be seen as key performance indicators that apply to each alliance but are there to assess the initiative as a whole.

    Based on the data collected by the alliances, the Commission will work on the development of a report on the outcomes of the European Universities initiative. This will constitute an essential evidence base for funding post-2027. As for the investment pathway, the objective is to facilitate a more comprehensive funding approach, complementing the educational dimension

with support across all alliances' missions, seeking for synergies with national and regional funding. Discussions focused on the needs and possible avenues.

21 European Universities are also involved in the 10 Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects on a joint European degree label and legal status for alliances, which aim to explore avenues towards a possible joint European degree and legal status for alliances of higher education institutions.

- The aim of piloting the **joint European degree** label is to allow higher education institutions and national authorities to examine, test and facilitate on a voluntary basis its delivery, based on a common set of co-created criteria. The outcomes of the policy experimentation projects will feed into the discussion on the possible pathways towards a joint European degree. The objective of a joint European degree is to encourage and make it easier for higher education institutions, engaged in transnational cooperation, to design and offer joint programmes and award joint degrees, in accordance with the EU and Bologna instruments. The objective is also to take further steps to recognise the value of innovative transnational learning experiences and to increase the visibility, attractiveness, and reputation, both in Europe and beyond, of joint European degree programmes.

- **digital education and training:**
  - The discussions in the Working Group on Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) pointed to a lack of data availability on the state of digital education and revealed that there is still a lot of work to be done in Member States to create comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems. The members of the Working Group also emphasised the need of further work on artificial intelligence in education and training.
  - The focus in the coming years should be on the implementation of the Council Recommendations on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training and on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training adopted by the Council on 23 November 2023. This will include the development of guidelines around informatics and quality of digital education content, the collection of data through the Digital Education in Europe survey and further promoting the exchange of best practices, peer learning and cooperation.

- **making the 2021–2027 Erasmus+ programme more inclusive, digital and greener**:
  A public consultation in the framework of the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 interim evaluation (combined with the final evaluation of the 2014–2020 programme) was launched in mid-September and will be open until 8 December 2023. Its

outcomes will be reflected in the implementation of the programme in the coming years.

Exploring the feasibility and value-added of further EU-level targets under the EEA

In May 2023, the Council[4] called on the Commission to pursue work, with the expert opinion of the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks, on proposals for possible indicators or EU-level targets in the areas of inclusion and equity, of the teaching profession as well as of learning for sustainability, and to report back to the Council.

At the Lifelong Learning Lab event organised by the Lifelong Learning Platform in Girona in June, stakeholders expressed support to the idea of a future EU-level target on equity and inclusion, as well as on learning for sustainability.

An EU-level indicator in the area of inclusion and equity was proposed by the Commission as part of its November 2022 EEA Progress Report. The Eurydice report on diversity and inclusion in schools in Europe published in October 2023 and the PISA 2022 data that will be available in December 2023 will be used to gauge whether or not the EU-level indicator lends itself to 2030 target setting.

An indicator dashboard on the attractiveness of the teaching profession is used in the 2023 Education and Training Monitor, to be published on 30 November 2023, instead of a single EU-level indicator. The Commission does not currently foresee proposing targets in the area of the teaching profession.

The Commission launched in April 2023 a request for expertise to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework for monitoring learning for sustainability, and to compare it against the available data. EU-level and country-level recommendations will follow in early 2024.

Ensuring quality investment and promoting education policy evaluation

Education and training are key drivers of EU competitiveness. In her 2023 State of the Union speech, the President of the European Commission has highlighted that 8 million young people are neither in employment, education or training, and that skills shortages are reaching record levels. This has become a key bottleneck for economic growth in the European Union. Therefore, investing in education and skills needs to be a priority for the Union in the years to come.

In this political context, discussions including those in the framework of the Learning Lab events highlighted the importance of ensuring the most effective use of resources put at the disposal of the Member States for investment and reforms in education and training through the Recovery and Resilience Facility and Cohesion Policy funding.

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[4]   Council Resolution on The European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond, 2023/C 185/08.

The focus in the coming years should be on promoting education policy evaluation in all EU Member States through the Learning Lab to identify policies and investments that boost education outcomes and equity and thus EU competitiveness.

Concerns were expressed that the challenge of preserving investment in education and training in the years to come as competition for public funding among various policy sectors is likely to increase. This will be monitored closely.

Strengthening the geopolitical dimension of the European Education Area

Exchanges in particular at the High Level Group on Education and Training and the EEA strategic framework Working Groups, in which since September 2023 representatives of Ukraine are also members, provided an important contribution to supporting Member States in helping to ensure the continuity of education of displaced learners from Ukraine, in the spirit of a true Team Europe approach. The exchanges at the High Level Group have contributed also to improving the collection of quality data to inform decision-making, help design effective policies, support mutual learning and coordinated action at EU level.

The Western Balkans represents a key geopolitical priority for the European Union, and education has a key role to play in their path towards EU integration, as outlined in the 2021 Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. In the coming years, it will be important to support the Western Balkans in the implementation of the enhanced partnership and ensure progress towards quality higher education institutions in the context of the European Universities Initiative.

The 'Study in Europe' project and platform will continue to implement a Team Europe approach to enhance Europe's attractiveness as a study/learning destination, and strengthen the international dimension of higher education in the EU. Online and face-to-face study fairs worldwide and networking events will continue to be organised, with the aim of strengthening the profile of the entire range of European higher education on the world stage and allowing the different actors at EU and national level to assess better their strategic orientations and planning, the coherence between their national strategies and EU objectives, and the level of complementarity of EU and MS activities.

4.   Conclusions

The consultations under the 2023 European Education Area midterm review process emphasise that to make the Area a reality, close cooperation among the European Commission, other EU institutions, the EU Member States, the education and training community, social partners and civil society is needed. The focus in the coming years should be on:

- implementation at EU, national and local levels;
- boosting equity and inclusion at all levels and sectors of education and training and the acquisition of key competences, including basic skills;
- enhancing European citizenship education;
- enhancing the teaching profession, addressing teacher shortages, promoting professional development and mobility opportunities for teachers;
- promoting and enhancing digital education and skills for all;
- removing the remaining obstacles to mobility including by achieving automatic mutual recognition;
- making a joint European degree a reality;
- ensuring adequate and effective use of EU and national financial resources; and
- promoting education policy evaluation and robust monitoring.

Implementing the reinforced governance under the strategic framework will contribute to the above objectives. Strong governance will also help anticipate and swiftly respond to future challenges and crises.

Consultations with key actors will continue in 2024, as part of the evaluation of the efforts towards the achievement of the European Education Area. A range of consultations will be carried out, including targeted consultations and the open public consultation on the European Education Area that the Commission will launch in 2024. The Commission will publish the evaluation report in 2025. The report will provide evidence base for further action at EU level as part of the 2026–2030 cycle of the EEA strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training.