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From: Secretary-General of the European Commission,  
signed by Mr Jordi AYET PUIGARNAU, Director

date of receipt: 1 October 2020

To: Mr Jeppe TRANHOLM-MIKKELSEN, Secretary-General of the Council  
of the European Union

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PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on  
achieving the European Education Area by 2025

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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN  
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on achieving the European Education Area by 2025**

{SWD(2020) 212 final}

Education is essential to the vitality of European society and economy. The European Education Area aims to bring to the education and training communities the support they need to fulfil their fundamental mission, in challenging and exciting times - President von der Leyen

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In her Political Guidelines, Commission President von der Leyen committed to making the European Education Area a reality by 2025. Education is the foundation for personal fulfilment, employability, and active and responsible citizenship. The right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning is proclaimed in the European Pillar of Social Rights as its first principle. The Union is resetting its growth strategy, based on sustainability, with green and digital transitions as its transformative drivers. Education is at the heart of the European way of life, strengthening social market economy and democracy with freedom, diversity, human rights and social justice.

In July, the **European Council** agreed an unprecedented recovery package to counter the effects of COVID-19 on our economies and societies, and to promote Europe's strong recovery and the transformation and reform of our economies. In that context, investing in education, training and the effective use of skills will be crucial to support Europe's economic and social prosperity.

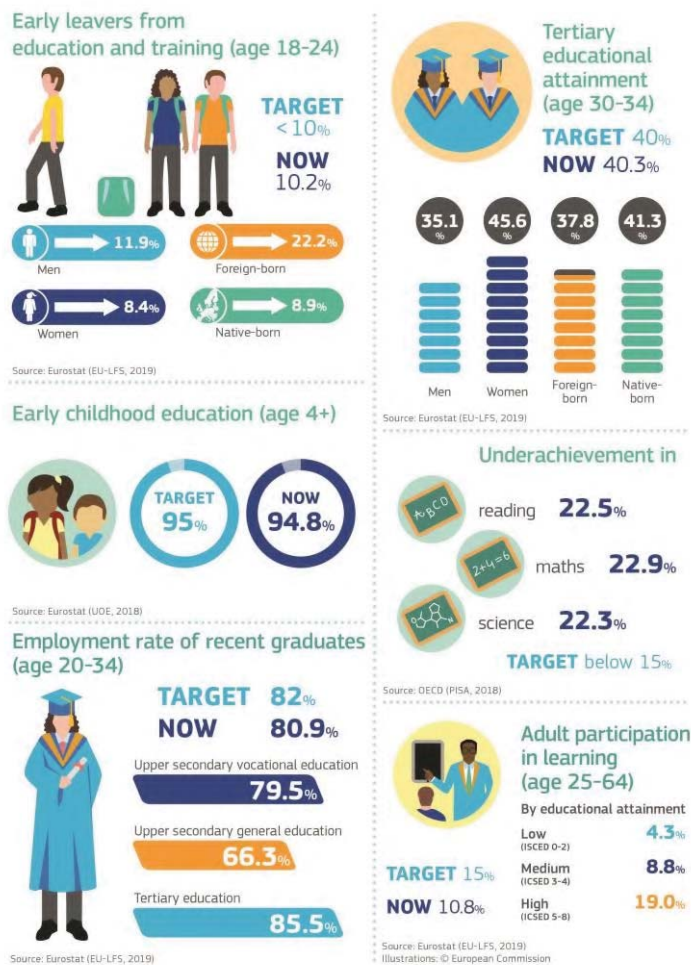
The Covid-19 pandemic has major impacts on education and training systems in Europe. It is exposing over 100 million Europeans, who are part of the education and training community, to new and challenging realities, ways of learning, teaching and communicating. It is essential to prevent the health crisis from becoming a structural barrier to learning and skills development impacting on young people's employment prospects, earnings, as well as equality and inclusion for the whole of the society. Member States seek cooperation at EU level in their responses to build resilient and future-looking education systems, setting the foundations of a European Education Area.

This Communication presents a reinforced approach to ensure the achievement of a European Education Area by 2025. The European Education Area ties in with Next Generation EU and the long-term budget of the European Union for 2021-2027.

In setting the stage and taking the necessary measures for recovery and resilience, people-centred policies are more vital than ever. Early childhood education and care, schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, research, adult education, as well as non-formal learning have a key role to play. Such policies need to develop a holistic approach to education and training and recognise its intrinsic value providing an all-round grounding to ensure the fullest contribution to and participation in society.

The European Education Area is rooted in decades of education cooperation at EU level. The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (**ET 2020**) helped

building trust and mutual understanding that supported the first European Education Area initiatives<sup>1</sup>, national reforms, and facilitated the education and training community's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.



#### Achievements of European cooperation in education and training

Cooperation until now achieved already significant results with empowering teachers, improving general education, adapting to the digital transformation, or setting new principles for improving VET. In addition, the ET 2020 set common EU targets (“benchmarks”) and provided a broad range of mutual learning and policy support tools that encouraged Member States to focus efforts on the most pressing priorities. In 2020, as illustrated above, the following results have been achieved:

<sup>1</sup> Developed in the Staff Working Document.

- Almost 95% of children attend early childhood education from the age of 4. This extremely important phase of education can now pull its full weight on quality standards, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Tertiary educational attainment of young adults had a massive expansion over the past decade, bringing the EU even beyond the 40% target set in 2009. Higher educational attainment correlates with better chances to find and maintain work, higher earnings, and greater participation in democratic life.
- The proportion of youth leaving education without an upper secondary diploma and no longer in training declined from 14% in 2009 to 10.2% in 2019 and hence practically met the EU target of 10%. This achievement helps combat the low skill trap for young adults.
- The EU did not achieve its target to reduce the share of 15-year-olds achieving low levels of reading, maths and science to less than 15% by 2020. The EU as a whole is lagging behind in all three domains: more than one in five 15-year olds cannot complete simple tasks in these subjects, and the results are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status.
- The employment rate of recent graduates rose to 80.9% in 2019, signalling a steady recovery from the record-low 74.3% registered in 2013 and nearing the 82% EU target.
- In part hindered by the fallout from the financial crisis, adult participation in learning did not reach 15% target but has risen to 10.8% in 2019, with large differences between Member States.

The New Strategic Agenda for the EU for 2019 – 2024 adopted by the European Council on 20 June 2019 stresses that Member States “*must step up investment in people’s skills and education*”. At their first-ever joint policy debate on 8 November 2019, Ministers of Education and Ministers of Finance agreed that investing in education, skills and competences is a necessity for all Member States and it should be a strategic priority for the EU.<sup>2</sup> For some Member States, the immediate challenge is ensuring an adequate level of investment in education and training. For others, the main issue is spending efficiently and effectively.

The Erasmus+ programme has been instrumental in scaling up successful practices and enhancing cooperation for national reform, and in financially supporting the implementation of EU-level actions, such as underpinning the EU commitment to promoting citizenship, fundamental freedoms, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. The European Structural and Investment Funds made funding available to carry out systemic national reforms. The Structural Reform Support Programme has provided technical support to Member States’ reforms of the education and training systems.

The importance of these activities received highest political recognition, which raised the European ambition in the field of education. In the Rome Declaration of March 2017, EU

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<sup>2</sup>The Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area calls on the Member States and the Commission “to promote cooperation and sharing of evidence of the benefits of investing in education and training, as improved knowledge, data and analysis regarding the benefits of efficient public investment in education and training can help Member States to develop more inclusive, effective and responsive education and training systems, while avoiding additional administrative burdens on the Member States”.

Leaders pledged to work towards a Union where “young people receive the best education and training and can study and find jobs across the continent”<sup>3</sup>. The European Pillar of Social Rights jointly proclaimed by EU Leaders at the 2017 Gothenburg Social Summit establishes, as its first principle, quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning<sup>4</sup>. The European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017<sup>5</sup> stressed that “education and culture are key to building inclusive and cohesive societies, and to sustaining our competitiveness” and identified a number of priority work strands – in line with the Commission vision for the European Education Area<sup>6</sup>. The Commission took this mandate forward in the initial European Education Area initiatives across a number of areas<sup>7</sup>.

Efforts to establish the European Education Area will work in synergy with the European Skills Agenda<sup>8</sup>, the renewed VET policy<sup>9</sup> and the European Research Area to harness knowledge, making it the foundation of Europe’s recovery and prosperity, based on shared principles of inclusion, mobility and innovation. These initiatives, together with the new EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025<sup>10</sup> will help foster a smooth transition from school to academic studies, VET, as well as work and make lifelong learning a reality. They will also promote a gender equal workplace culture and help combat racism and all forms of discrimination, including gender stereotyping.

Building on these achievements and in line with the Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area of November 2019<sup>11</sup>, this Communication sets out a vision to achieve the European Education Area by 2025 and presents the concrete steps to deliver on this ambition.

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<sup>3</sup> The Rome Declaration (2017) <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/03/25/rome-declaration/pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights_en)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> COM(2017) 673 final

<sup>7</sup> Developing European Universities; making it easier for young people to study abroad with a new services developed as part of the European Student Card Initiative; making qualifications and learning abroad automatically and mutually recognised across Member States; improving language teaching and learning; embracing common values; strengthening quality early childhood education and care systems; setting out a new strategic framework for youth; tracking the employability and further learning path of graduates; supporting the acquisition of key competences; and strengthening digital learning through the Digital Education Action Plan

<sup>8</sup> Commission Communication “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”, COM(2020)274 final, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>

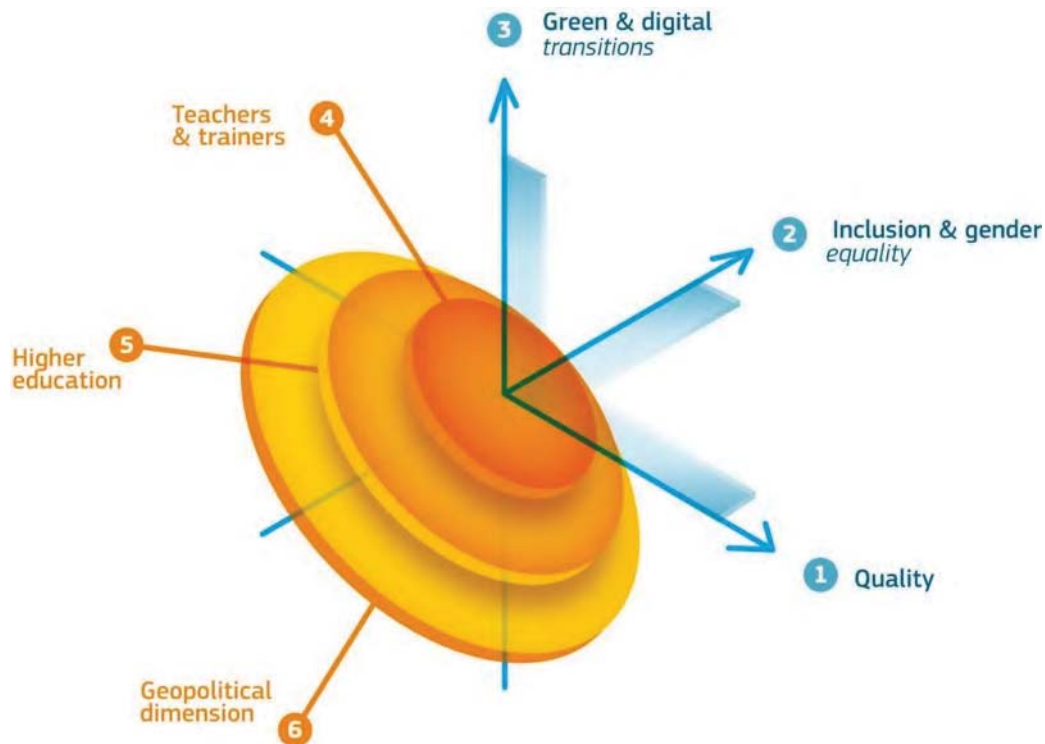
<sup>9</sup> Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, COM(2020)275 final.

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_20\\_357](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_357)

<sup>11</sup> Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems, OJ C 389, 18.11.2019, p. 1, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13298-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

## 2 AN AMBITIOUS EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

The Commission proposes to consolidate ongoing efforts and further develop the **European Education Area along six dimensions**.



### 2.1 Quality:

Quality education equips young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to thrive in life and to cope with the manifold challenges they will face. At EU level, the vision for quality in education includes:

- Mastering of basic skills, including digital competences, which is a prerequisite to thrive in life, to find fulfilling jobs and to become engaged citizens<sup>12</sup>. In 2018, the EU average underachievement rate – the proportion of pupils who fail to complete basic mathematics, science and reading tasks, according to OECD’s PISA survey – stood at 22.5% in reading, 22.9% in mathematics and 22.3% in science. Over the 2009-2018 period, performance in science and reading deteriorated at EU level, while remaining stable in mathematics. In 2019, a fifth of young persons in Europe reported not to have basic digital skills.<sup>13</sup> Yet, some EU countries have been able to improve their performance over time, putting in place structural education reforms, increasing school autonomy, tackling inequalities from early years and investing in teachers. Failure to

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<sup>12</sup> For the crucial role of basic skills, see the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning, OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1

<sup>13</sup> [Digital Economy and Society Index 2019](#)

achieve these basic skills, which are necessary for further learning, creates skills gaps that have major consequences throughout peoples' lives and require remedial adult learning measures.<sup>14</sup>

- Mastering transversal skills such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and civic engagement through transdisciplinary, learner-centred and challenge-based approaches.
- Promoting the dual freedom for learners and teachers to be mobile and for institutions to freely associate with one another in Europe and beyond. Learning mobility and cooperation across borders are strong drivers for enhancing the quality of education and training institutions. However, many educators and learners are still facing a wide range of obstacles when they embark upon transnational mobility experiences. They may not have sufficient information and guidance on learning mobility, or are not sufficiently prepared when it comes to language learning or may face accessibility challenges. There can be financial obstacles, lack of portability of student support systems, lack of full recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications obtained during mobility, difficulty to combine mobility with curricula requirements, discouraging learners and educators to exercise this freedom to move. Future learning mobility will also have to be more environmentally sustainable and ready to embrace digital challenges and opportunities.
- Fostering language learning and multilingualism. Being able to speak different languages is a condition for studying and working abroad, and fully discover Europe's cultural diversity. It enables learners and teachers to benefit from a genuine European learning space. Valuing and mobilising learners' linguistic backgrounds.
- Supporting teachers in managing linguistic and cultural diversity in school is a key element of fostering quality in education, notably by redressing persistent deficiencies in reading literacy. Such an approach also supports increasing education outcomes of pupils and youth with a migrant background.
- Bringing a European perspective in education shall provide learners with an insight in what Europe at large and the Union in particular means in their daily life. This European perspective is complementary to the national and regional perspectives, and should be addressed in a dynamic and plural way, encouraging the development of critical thinking.
- Maintaining education and training institutions as safe environments, free of violence, bullying, harmful speech, disinformation and all forms of discrimination.

## **2.2 Inclusion and gender equality:**

Education is failing to reduce inequalities linked to socio-economic status, despite the fact that the highest performing education systems are those that put a premium on equity.<sup>15</sup> Across Europe, the educational experiences of individuals follow social patterns. Students

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<sup>14</sup> Hanushek, E.A. and Woessmann, L., *The Economic Benefits of Improving Educational Achievement in the European Union: An Update and Extension*, European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE), Analytical Report No. 39, 2019

<sup>15</sup> Underachievement in EU27 level lies at mere 9.5% among pupils coming from the top quarter of the socio-economic index. However it is as high as 36.4% among pupils coming from the lowest quarter on the socio-economic scale (PISA 2018, Joint Employment Report 2019)



from disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented among underachievers. Underperformance in reading and early school leaving is on average higher among boys than girls<sup>16</sup>. Rural areas are falling behind and students with a migrant background<sup>17</sup> fare worse at school. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted even more starkly the importance of inclusion and fairness in education and has shown the relevance of geographical location of students and families. To turn the tide, in the European Education Area:

- Educational attainment and achievement should be decoupled from social, economic and cultural status, to ensure that education and training systems boost the abilities of every individual and enable upward social mobility. Early childhood education and care play a critical role in this regard<sup>18</sup>. It is also important to cater for the educational needs of pupils with high learning potential in an inclusive way.
- Education systems at all levels should comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- VET systems, which can support young people to manage their entry to a changing labour market and ensure that adults participate in programmes tailored to the twin green and digital transitions, should be more agile, resilient and future-proof, in line with the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on VET.
- Robust and inclusive lifelong learning strategies should allow those who have left early to re-enter education, and those who need it should be able to access higher education and VET programmes to acquire or update skills that the jobs of tomorrow require, also for older age.
- Cross-border cooperation should be strengthened, in youth work, as well as in the domains of sport and culture, to promote non-formal learning including their link to formal education.

On average in the EU, women have higher educational attainment levels than men, and lower rates of early leaving from education and training. Yet there is a persistent gender gap in some scientific fields of study, often those leading to better-paid jobs. Despite achieving greater digital literacy scores in education surveys<sup>19</sup>, in 2018 women represented 26% of students in engineering, manufacturing and construction; and only 18% in ICT studies<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, women are still underrepresented in decision-making positions in higher education. In the European Education Area, education and training systems should consider the following:

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of correlates of learning outcomes and neither employed nor in education or training (NEET) status among young men and women, please see OECD (2015). *The ABC of Gender Equality on education: Aptitude, Behaviour*. Paris: PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264229945-en>, page 32: ‘For example, educational attainment, literacy proficiency and field of study jointly determine the likelihood that 16-29 year-olds will find themselves neither employed nor in education or training.’ OECD (2015). *The ABC of Gender Equality on education: Aptitude, Behaviour*. Paris: PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264229945-en>

<sup>17</sup> The concept of “people with a migrant background” includes both immigrants and their native-born children (the so-called “second generation”). The OECD PISA definition for pupils with a migrant background comprises all foreign-born students (both EU and non-EU), as well as native-born students with foreign-born parents.

<sup>18</sup> Elaborated in the Staff Working Document.

<sup>19</sup> This refers to the computer and information literacy score in the International Computer and Information Literacy Study 2018 (ICILS) survey. More at: <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/icils/2018>

<sup>20</sup> Data for ISCED 5-8, source [educ.uea.eu/enra03](https://educ.uea.eu/enra03)

- Developing a better gender sensitivity<sup>21</sup> in education processes and institutions. Boys and girls have equal access to education, but the new frontier of gender equality in education is to equip all boys and girls with equal respect and proper conditions to become fulfilling adults in schools and universities. Sexist behaviours and sexual harassment affect primarily girls and young women and hamper their educational experience. The educational setting is a unique opportunity to provide the basis for boys and girls to become adults respecting fully their own identity and that of their peers.
- Challenging and dissolving gender stereotypes, especially those that constrain the choices of boys and girls for their field of study, but also all those that can be conveyed in education and training practices and learning materials. Traditionally male- or female- dominated professions are to be further opened up to persons of the under-represented sex.
- Working towards a proper gender balance in leadership positions, including in higher education institutions.

### **2.3 Green and digital transitions:**

Education and training policies and investments geared towards inclusive green and digital transitions hold the key to Europe’s future resilience and prosperity. According to the Commission’s Summer Forecast, the EU economy would contract by 8.3% in 2020 and grow by around 5.8% in 2021. The unemployment rate in the EU would rise from 6.7% in 2019 to 9% in 2020 before declining again to 8% in 2021.<sup>22</sup> Young people entering the workforce at this time will find it harder to secure their first job. While short-time work schemes, wage subsidies and support for businesses should help to limit job losses, the Covid-19 pandemic will have a severe impact on the labour market. Digital literacy is a must, the more so in a post-Covid-19 world. Practically all further learning and jobs in all sectors will require some form of digital skills, yet on average two in five Europeans aged 16-74 are lacking these skills.<sup>23</sup>

The transition to an environmentally sustainable, circular and climate-neutral economy has significant employment and social impacts.<sup>24</sup> Citizens expect their governments to make the protection of the environment a priority when planning recovery measures put in place to surmount the economic and social consequences of Covid-19 crisis to promote the transition to a greener and more digital world.<sup>25</sup> It is only with the right skills and education that Europe can have a sustained economic recovery geared towards the green and digital transitions, while showing global leadership by example, strengthening its position in global competition,

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<sup>21</sup> According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, gender sensitive policies and programmes are those that take into account the particularities pertaining to the lives of both women and men, while aiming to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality, including an equal distribution of resources, therefore addressing and taking into account the gender dimension.

<sup>22</sup> European Commission (2020) Summer 2020 Economic Forecast: A deep and uneven recession, an uncertain recovery, DG ECFIN

<sup>23</sup> Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI): <https://digital-agenda-data.eu/charts/analyse-one-indicator-and-compare-countries>

<sup>24</sup> Commission Reflection Paper “Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030”

<sup>25</sup> According to an IPSOS poll carried out in 16 major countries around the world in May 2020, three in four people expect their government to make protection of the environment a priority when planning a recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

and staying faithful to its commitment to a just transition. To deliver on the transformative ambition:

- There is a need to enable a profound change in peoples’ behaviour and skills, starting in the education systems and institutions as catalysts. Actions should be geared towards changing behaviour, boosting skills for the green economy, fostering new sustainable education and training infrastructure and renovating existing buildings (‘renovation wave’), thereby creating conducive environments for this change<sup>26</sup>.
- The green transition requires moreover investments in education and training to increase the number of professionals who work towards a climate-neutral and resource-efficient economy.
- Effectively supporting sustainability transitions through integrating environmental sustainability perspectives across natural and human sciences, and supporting shifts in skills, methods, processes and cultures.
- Education and training at all levels should equip people with the digital skills, but also other competences, such as entrepreneurship and learning to learn, which are needed to navigate in the labour market transformed by technological change.

#### **2.4 Teachers and trainers:**

Teachers, trainers and educational staff are at the heart of education. They play the most important role in making education a fruitful experience for all learners. Millions of teachers across Europe had to adapt rapidly to school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They remained on the frontlines of the response to ensure that learning continued, innovating distance learning for their students in confinement. Without teachers and trainers, no innovation, no inclusion and no transformational education experiences for learners can take place. The vision for the education profession within the European Education Area is one of highly competent and motivated educators who can benefit from a range of support and professional development opportunities throughout their varied careers. Within the European Education Area, teaching and training should be valued professions:

- There is a need for a highly competent, enthusiastic and committed professional workforce. This starts with overcoming teacher shortages. Most EU countries face a shortage of teachers, either across the board or in specific subject areas such as STEM or teaching pupils with special needs. As about one third of the teaching population will retire in the next decade, retention and regeneration needs primary focus.
- The teaching profession as such needs to be revalorised, in social and, in some Member States, also in financial terms. Only one in five lower secondary school teachers consider their profession as valued by society and about half of them indicated a high administrative burden as a stress factor in the profession.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The European Green Deal, COM(2019) 640 final

<sup>27</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/volume-1-2019-education-and-training-monitor.pdf>

- Teachers and trainers need continuous opportunities for professional development. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) showed that a significant number of teachers express the need to develop their competences for teaching students with special needs, use of digital technologies, and teaching in multilingual and multicultural classrooms.<sup>28</sup>
- International mobility of students, teachers and teacher trainers should become part of teacher education to broaden the access to the diversity of quality teaching approaches to meet the needs of pupils.

## **2.5 Higher education:**

Student and staff mobility has progressively opened up higher education and strengthened the basis for structured cooperation. The Bologna process played a driving role for internationalisation and mobility. The added value of mobility is clear: evidence shows that a study-abroad experience helps significantly career prospects. 80% of Erasmus+ graduates are employed in less than 3 months after graduation. However, only 5% of students can have the Erasmus+ experience. Financial concerns remain one of the most frequent reasons for students not to study abroad, followed closely by concerns about recognition of learning. With the 41 European Universities pilots, more than 280 higher education institutions across the EU are experimenting and testing new models of deeper and more ambitious cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

The higher education sector has demonstrated its resilience to cope with change during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the crisis also sharpened the challenges as regards digitalisation, innovative pedagogies, inclusion and well-being, students, researchers and staff support, mobility and funding. The European higher education systems should aim at:

- Closer and deeper cooperation between higher education institutions, which could lead to more joint curriculum development and common courses and would enable learners to move more easily between education systems in different countries thereby developing a pan-European talent pool, including in cutting-edge scientific disciplines and technologies such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and high performance computing.
- A policy framework across borders that allows for seamless transnational cooperation, which will enable alliances of higher education institutions to leverage their strengths, pooling together their online and physical resources, courses, expertise, data and infrastructure across disciplines.
- Higher education institutions as central actors of the “knowledge square”: education, research, innovation and service to society, playing a key role in driving the Covid-19

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<sup>28</sup> [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/talis-2018-results-volume-i\\_1d0bc92a-en#page1](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/talis-2018-results-volume-i_1d0bc92a-en#page1)

<sup>29</sup> European Universities are transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and sustainable cooperation. They mobilise multi-disciplinary teams of students and academics through a challenge-based approach, in close cooperation with research, business and civil society. European Universities will pool together their online and physical resources, courses, expertise, data and infrastructure to leverage their strengths and empower the next generations in tackling together the current challenges that Europe and the world are facing. They promote all forms of mobility (physical, online, blended) as well as multilingualism via their inclusive European inter-university campuses.

recovery and sustainable development in Europe while helping education, research and the labour market to benefit from talent flows.

- Automatic recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad for the purpose of further learning, quality assurance of joint transnational activities and the recognition and portability of short courses leading to micro-credentials. This would allow Member States to go deeper and faster in their cooperation, as compared to what they are able to do now in the context of the Bologna process. The European Education Area can act as a motor for the Bologna process, inspiring and supporting other member countries of the European Higher Education Area to benefit from a similar path.
- A stronger focus on specialised education programmes in advanced digital skills such as in cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and high performance computing as there is an acute lack of experts in these fields.

## **2.6 Geopolitical dimension:**

Cooperation in education has gradually become an important instrument for the implementation of EU external policies as an indisputable instrument of soft power. The Union's exchange programmes help people to connect worldwide, reaching out to a large number of stakeholders, including civil society. They help projecting a positive image of Europe in the world, spreading its messages and fundamental values. They contribute to shaping the relationship of the EU with other countries and regions. High-quality international cooperation in education and training is also vital to address existing and emerging global challenges. It is essential for the achievement of the Union's geopolitical priorities and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The change in the global order (e.g., the rise of China, retreat of the US from the multilateral order) calls for strengthening European international cooperation, including in education. Promoting European interests and values will be necessary. In the international dimension of the European Education Area, reciprocity, level playing field, as well as ethical and integrity standards will be a central part of the roll-out of ambitious partnerships with partner countries across the globe.

Internationalisation has become more and more pronounced not only in higher education, but also in primary and secondary schools. Some European students also spend part of or their whole education outside the EU. However, a huge untapped potential remains in other education sectors, in particular for VET and the sector of youth. Tertiary education should receive particular attention given its importance in shaping the thinking of the next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs in partner countries across the globe. Each year several hundred thousands of students from third countries come to the EU to pursue tertiary education. EU law<sup>30</sup> ensures a transparent and coherent legal framework for international students to come to

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<sup>30</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing.

the EU. Collaboration between education institutions both within and outside the Union helps to attract the best talent worldwide, and to promote peer learning and joint international research and innovation projects.

In Africa, the Western Balkans and the Neighbourhood countries in particular, the ongoing process of reforming education, training and research systems aims at boosting youth employment, entrepreneurship, green and digital skills, and should strengthen prosperity, stability and security. Widening the association of non-EU countries to the European Education Area, especially those of the Western Balkans, is an integral part of the vision to achieve by 2025.

Over the past two decades, the Erasmus+ programme has created and cemented links between the European Education Area and the rest of the world. Each year, Europe's universities exchange some 50,000 students and staff with universities in other parts of the world.<sup>31</sup> International partnerships have facilitated the development of innovative curricula and joint degrees, fostered joint research and innovation projects. This has contributed to making Europe an attractive destination, boosting innovation and job creation. Similarly, capacity-building actions have been instrumental for the internationalisation of higher education systems in partner countries, hereby supporting socio-economic reform and democratic consolidation.

### **3 MEANS AND MILESTONES**

Complementing initiatives under way since 2018, the Commission will propose a number of new initiatives to deliver, together with the Member States and the stakeholders, an ambitious European Education Area by 2025, along the six dimensions presented in the previous section<sup>32</sup>.

#### ***3.1 Lifting quality in education***

Lifting quality in education requires coordinated efforts tailored to the challenges of each system. EU wide targets orient action by Member States and their education ecosystems to focus on skills' levels, and increase participation and attainment. Exchange of experience and peer support at EU level aims at offering insights to Member States' policymaking. In particular:

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<sup>31</sup> Today's 130 Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree programmes provide over 2,500 EU-funded scholarships per year for students worldwide to study an integrated master programme at two or more European universities. At the institutional level, Capacity-Building for Higher Education partnerships develop new teaching, boost skills and improve higher education governance in the EU's neighbouring countries and in developing or emerging economies further afield. The 150 projects selected each year lever higher education as a driver for wider societal and economic development, and dovetail effectively with the EU's development and cooperation policy.

<sup>32</sup> The financing of certain initiatives may be subject to the adoption of the basic acts of the respective programmes and will be implemented in accordance with their rules.

- The Commission will support Member States in the **identification of effective policy reforms** that support better achievement in **basic skills**. This will specifically concern curriculum and assessment, as well as the capacity of institutions and staff to be innovative and develop their learning approaches and environments. The Commission will also support **cooperation between European stakeholder organisations, teachers associations and teacher education providers** to work together and provide input to policy recommendations on **innovative and multi-disciplinary teaching and learning approaches for basic skills**. National action can take advantage of other sources, such as the European Structural and Investment Funds or the resources available within the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
- The Commission plans to accompany the strengthened Erasmus programme by updating the **learning mobility framework**. It will enable that more learners and teachers can overcome obstacles and benefit from a mobility opportunity. The revised framework would address a triple challenge: (i) ensuring opportunities for a much wider variety of participants, (ii) green and digital mobility, including by blending online and physical exchanges, (iii) encouraging balanced mobility.
- To foster **multilingualism**, stakeholders at national, regional and school level are invited to further implement the *2019 Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages*, including in VET. Through the future Erasmus programme funding and peer learning activities, the Commission will aim to support Member States to promote the so-called ‘language aware schools’, ultimately strengthening proficiency in the language of schooling among pupils with diverse backgrounds.<sup>33</sup> The Erasmus programme intends to continue to support language competences in a lifelong learning perspective by providing opportunities for teaching and learning mobility periods abroad, but also by supporting further cooperation between education and training providers at all levels.
- Fostering **transversal skills** such as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and civic engagement are key for the next generations of students, researchers and innovators to build a resilient society<sup>34</sup>. The future Erasmus programme aims to provide a wide range of opportunities for learners at all levels to develop these skills, notably by offering more opportunities for education and training institutions to develop in cooperation with their knowledge ecosystems more transdisciplinary, learner-centred and challenge based approaches. The European Structural and Investment Funds can support actions to develop such skills at regional and national level.
- The Commission will gather education stakeholders and Member States representatives to stimulate peer learning and the development of a **European perspective in education**. It aims to work on widening and strengthening the **Jean Monnet Actions** through bringing them closer to schools with a view to promoting the European way of life, sustainability and EU values<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> As described in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages. OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 15

<sup>34</sup> The European Skills Agenda envisages actions to enhance the validation of transversal skills.

<sup>35</sup> Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing 'Erasmus': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, Commission proposal for a regulation establishing 'Erasmus' - COM(2018) 367 final

- In order to build democratic education environments free from bullying, harmful speech and disinformation, the Commission plans to continue through the Erasmus programme to support Member States and stakeholders in implementing the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching*.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2 *Making education and training more inclusive and gender sensitive*

The Commission will convene Member States experts and stakeholders through dedicated platforms for **mutual learning and cooperation** to support sex disaggregated data collection and innovation for inclusive and gender equal education, responding to the policy needs of Member States. This should help focus national and EU investment on groups and areas in greatest need.

For the new programming period, particular attention will be paid to inclusion, equality and diversity in the **Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps Programmes**. It will set out a multi-faceted approach to making the programme more inclusive, including through the introduction of more flexible and accessible formats; support measures to help prepare and accompany participants; and financial measures to support those who would find it difficult to participate in the programme.

In addition, the following initiatives would contribute to boost the inclusive dimension of education:

- The **Pathways to School Success** initiative would help all pupils reach a baseline level of proficiency<sup>37</sup> in basic skills. The initiative will have a special focus on groups that are more at risk of underachievement and early school leaving. Building on the 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving, the Commission will work with the Member States to co-develop a **policy guidance on reducing low-achievement and increasing secondary education attainment**. It will build on the four pillars of i) monitoring (allowing tracking and targeted action), ii) prevention (in particular for groups at risk), iii) early intervention (for pupils already showing difficulties), and iv) compensation (for those who have already had bad results and need a second chance).<sup>38</sup> The Commission will also mobilise the European Semester. It will provide tailored policy support to Member States in their efforts to raise competence levels, with a special attention to decoupling educational attainment from socio-economic background. The initiative will contribute to the prevention of

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<sup>36</sup> OJ C 195, 7.6.2018, p. 1

<sup>37</sup> A baseline level of proficiency refers to Level 2 in the OECD's PISA survey, which defines proficiency bands on a 6-point scale. Level 2 proficiency in reading corresponds to a level at which 'readers begin to demonstrate the competencies that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life as continuing students, workers and citizens'. Underachievers in PISA are those pupils who fail to reach Level 2, which is the minimum proficiency level necessary to participate successfully in society. The relation between the concepts of baseline level and underachievement informs the EU targets on underachievement in basic skills and on underachievement in digital competence.

<sup>38</sup> Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving, OJ C 191, 1.7.2011, p. 1. .



youth unemployment and the Commission will ensure close coordination with the actions envisaged in the recent proposal on a reinforced Youth Guarantee<sup>39</sup>.

- The Commission will convene an expert group to develop proposals on strategies for creating **supportive learning environments for groups at risk of underachievement<sup>40</sup> and for supporting well-being at school**. This will include addressing: gender specific challenges such as gender stereotypes in education and educational careers as well as boys' underachievement; and bullying and sexual harassment. In the latter context, women and girls should also be supported to develop self-defence against online violence. For action at national level, Member States can take advantage of several funding instruments, European Social Fund or the resources available within the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
- As participation in early childhood education and care is an important determinant of later basic skills' acquisition, the Commission will support Member States in the implementation of the European quality framework for high quality early childhood education and care systems.<sup>41</sup> To better prepare children to succeed in educational contexts throughout life, in 2021, the Commission will make available a tool-kit, drawing on exchange of best practice and the input of experts and stakeholders, for inclusion in early childhood education and care and an overview of core competences of staff in this area. The Commission is also working on a Child Guarantee.
- To boost the inclusiveness and quality of VET systems, as announced in the European Skills Agenda, the Commission plans to support the establishment of **50 Centres of Vocational Excellence with Erasmus programme funding**. The centres of vocational excellence will become reference points for both initial training of young people as well as continuing up- and reskilling of adults.
- Higher education and VET systems need to adapt to strengthen their key role in supporting lifelong learning and reaching out to a more diverse student body. This requires a thorough change in mindset, culture and structure. The Commission will work with Member States towards this objective, and plans to provide support with the Erasmus programme and other EU funds and instruments. In addition, as set out in the Skills Agenda, the Commission will work towards the development of a **European Approach to micro-credentials**, to help widen learning opportunities and strengthen the role of higher education and vocational education and training institutions in lifelong learning by providing more flexible and modular learning opportunities. They are useful not only for professionals, but can also complement the curriculum for students at Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels. A growing number of adults, with or without a higher education degree, will need to reskill and upskill through more flexible alternatives than a full degree in order to overcome the gap between the learning outcomes of their initial formal qualifications and emerging skills needs in the labour market. The need for more flexible and inclusive learning paths has increased as the student population is becoming more diverse and the learning needs more dynamic. While a growing number of higher education institutions, including European Universities, are already working on the development of these micro-

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<sup>39</sup> Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Bridge to Jobs – A reinforced Youth Guarantee, COM(2020)277 final.

<sup>40</sup> The Commission will continue further developing specific initiatives for disadvantaged groups, including the Roma, migrants and refugees.

<sup>41</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood and Care Systems, OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4

credentials, a common definition and a common approach on their validation and recognition is lacking. In this context, as announced in the Skills Agenda, the Commission plans to present a proposal for a **Council Recommendation in 2021**. The purpose of the recommendation would be that European actions will support building trust in micro-credentials across Europe and aims at having all the necessary steps in place by 2025 for their wider use, portability and recognition.

- **Non-formal learning, including volunteering** helps gain life and professional skills and competences. These skills and competences need to be fostered, valued, and recognised in full<sup>42</sup>. The European Solidarity Corps has fully integrated the learning value and the recognition of this into its objectives and operations. There are however still barriers to cross-border volunteering mobility, including recognition of learning outcomes among employers. Building on the review of the existing 2008 Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers<sup>43</sup>, the Commission will provide updated policy guidance in 2021 to address the legal, financial and administrative barriers that still hinder youth cross-border volunteering and solidarity. It will help further enhancing the inclusiveness, quality and recognition of the cross-border experiences under the future European Solidarity Corps programme.
- Governments together with stakeholders should foster **gender equality** across all sectors of education and training, including through ensuring access to quality education for boys and girls, women and men, in all their diversity.
- Governments together with stakeholders should foster inclusive education across all sectors of education and training in accordance with the commitments of Member States and the EU towards the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- The Commission plans to help strengthening research, including with support from **Horizon Europe**, exploring the role of **gender in education and training policy**, as well as the links between gender, education and social and economic success.
- Dedicated modules under the Teacher Academies would help find solutions to effectively **foster gender sensitive teaching in schools**.
- A **new agenda for higher education transformation** will promote gender balance in academic careers and study choice, as well as integration of a gender equality dimension in curricula by universities. Actions under the new agenda will pay special attention to women in decision-making positions at higher education institutions.
- The Commission will propose dedicated working streams in the European Education Area enabling framework to develop **policy guidance on gender equality in education and training**. This will include guidance on how to develop gender-sensitive education processes. The Commission's work on evidence, studies and analyses supporting the European Education Area will address the gender dimension.

### ***3.3 Supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training***

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01) and its recent evaluation, SWD(2020)121.

<sup>43</sup> Council recommendation of 20 November 2008 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union, OJ C 319, 13.12.2008, p. 8

To achieve the twin transitions, the Commission recommends prioritising actions to help people acquire knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society and economy. Funding programmes supporting the green and digital transitions, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Just Transition Fund can also be used to support education and training in implementing their main objectives; Member States are encouraged to carefully consider the possibilities and put forward suitable proposals. Likewise, hands-on digital experience in education and training for all will help people contribute and thrive in a hyperconnected society.

- The Commission will launch by the end of 2020 an **Education for Climate Coalition** to mobilise expertise, provide resources for networking and support creative approaches with teachers, pupils and students. In synergy with the European Climate Pact, it will be a link between bottom-up initiatives and EU level action, supporting pledges and concrete actions to change sustainability behaviour across the EU.
- To help integrate the green transition and sustainability into school, higher education and professional training, the Commission will propose a **Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability** in 2021. This will provide guidance for schools, higher education institutions and teachers on how to cooperate and exchange experiences across Member States on environmental sustainability education. The Commission will also propose a **European Competence Framework** to help develop and assess knowledge, skills and attitudes on climate change and sustainable development, which could be linked to the Council Recommendation.
- The Commission will promote the **greening of education infrastructure**. Education infrastructure represents on average 8% of education and training expenditure in EU countries. Nevertheless, most school and many university buildings are not equipped to face the demand for new competencies and pedagogies, or they do not meet today's energy standards, and there is a significant potential to improve green areas on school premises to encourage interaction and learning. The Commission intends to work with the European Investment Bank, including through the InvestEU programme,<sup>44</sup> to enable Member States to tap into all available sources of financing both digital and physical infrastructures development for education and training, as well to build the capacities needed to benefit from them.
- The **“Researchers at Schools”** initiative is aimed at bringing science to schools, by allowing young researchers supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions to engage with teachers and pupils on climate change, sustainable development, digitalisation, health and other issues covered under the European Green Deal.
- To address the digital skills gap<sup>45</sup> in a lifelong learning perspective and strengthen the digital capacity and resilience of Europe's education and training systems, the Commission is proposing today a new comprehensive approach to digital learning and

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<sup>44</sup> Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the InvestEU Programme COM/2018/439 final

<sup>45</sup> Digitalisation is a revolution for how we live, teach, learn, work and communicate. In the European Education Area, education and training have to become fully digital-proof to make the most of new technologies and teaching and learning methods. At the same time, Europe's education systems will play a crucial role in alleviating the risks and harnessing the opportunities of new technologies and artificial intelligence. In 2019, 56% of the EU population aged 16-74 reported to have at least basic digital skills, leaving close to a half of the population without the skills for the majority of today's jobs.

education at the European level, under the new **Digital Education Action Plan**. It contains ambitious actions addressing two strategic priorities: promoting the development of a European digital education ecosystem and enhancing digital competences and skills for the digital transformation.<sup>46</sup>

- The forthcoming **Digital Europe Programme** envisages funding for advanced digital skills in fields such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, high performance computing to support the Member States need for digital experts.
- In cooperation with the **European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)** and its Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs), and with other parts of Horizon Europe, scale up the workshops on digital and entrepreneurial skills (40,000 students) and organise short placement schemes for female students in digital and EU STEM-related areas in the different economic sectors.
- In line with the proposals, the future **Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps programmes** will be greener and more digital. Virtual and blended mobility could complement physical mobility. Green and digital topics are supposed to receive priority in cooperation projects with their forward looking and strategic character. The programmes would streamline the digital dimension within the mobility and cooperation actions and intend to support climate-friendly means of cooperation and project execution. Further initiatives like incentives to carbon-friendly physical mobility travel would complement the measures

### **3.4 *Enhancing competence and motivation in the education profession***

National policy makers and experts stressed the potential for EU level cooperation to strengthen the education profession. On that basis, the Commission will launch a number of initiatives to better support the competence development and career paths of teachers, trainers and school education leaders, and to support the attractiveness of the education profession. These initiatives will help improve professional development opportunities and the recognition of individual competence development achieved in different contexts. They will promote the diversification of career opportunities for teachers, trainers and school leaders and benefit personal, school and system development. In addition, they will improve the quality and number of learning mobility of teachers and embed mobility as an integral part of their initial and continuous education. Moreover, these initiatives will encourage cooperation between teachers, teacher education providers and research based teacher education. Finally yet importantly, these initiatives will support the convening power of teachers to share their own experiences and reach out to society, to make their voice better heard. In pursuit of these goals:

- The Commission plans to launch **Erasmus Teacher Academies** within the new Erasmus Programme in 2021 to create networks of teacher education institutions and teacher associations. Over time, the Academies will create communities of practice, notably on initial teacher education and continuous professional development to

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<sup>46</sup> One example is the support provided to teachers, pupils and parents by the EU funded European network of [Safer Internet Centres](#) in the Member States and by the EU [betterinternetforkids.eu](#) portal with educational resources to protect and empower minors online.

inform national and European teacher education policies and support innovation in teachers' practice. These networks will provide teachers and students with learning opportunities on pedagogical matters of common concern. Dedicated modules will address issues such as engaging in dialogue with society, education for sustainable development, or teaching in multilingual classrooms. The Erasmus Teacher Academies will take advantage of structural partnerships and joint programmes between institutions and other teacher education providers and associations, with cross-border training and learning as a regular feature. 25 Erasmus teacher academies should be developed by 2025.

- The Commission will develop a **European guidance for the development of national career frameworks during 2021-2022**, thus supporting the career progression of school education professionals. This will be carried out through mutual learning between countries as they adapt and put into effect the concept of a coherent Framework for School Education Careers.<sup>47</sup>
- As part of its work on a future mobility framework and in tune with the Erasmus Teacher Academies, the Commission will work together with Member States and stakeholders a **policy framework for increasing the number and quality of learning mobility of teachers** in Europe based on their actual mobility needs.
- By 2021 the Commission will establish a **European Innovative Teaching Award** to recognise the work of teachers (and their schools) who make an exceptional contribution to the profession. This initiative will build on good practice such as the European language label, the Jan Amos Comenius prize, as well as the eTwinning national and European prizes.

### **3.5 Reinforcing European higher education institutions**

Higher education institutions in Europe are at the heart of both the European Education Area and the European Research Area and particularly well placed to connect them together. To ensure full synergies between these, the Commission is committed to support Member States and higher education institutions in **creating a policy framework allowing for seamless and ambitious transnational cooperation between higher education institutions** in Europe. This will build on the experiences of the European Universities alliances selected under the Erasmus+ programme also supported under Horizon 2020.

The objective is to provide incentives for the more than 5.000 higher education institutions across Europe to adapt to the post-Covid-19 conditions and train the future generations in co-creating knowledge across borders, disciplines and cultures for a resilient, inclusive and sustainable society. The Commission will work together with the higher education sector and Member States to co-create incentives for an accelerated transformation of higher education institutions in Europe in an open and inclusive manner.

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<sup>47</sup> As developed under ET2020 –“A framework for teacher and school leader careers” of European Commission (2020) Supporting teacher and school leader careers: a policy guide. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6e4c89eb-7a0b-11ea-b75f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Such a transformation will focus on **connectivity** among higher education institutions, but also with their surrounding ecosystems and society, so that all four missions of universities are covered: education and research, leading to innovation and service to society. **Inclusion** will also be a key objective to ensure accessible higher education institutions, open to a diverse student and researcher body, and offering more opportunities for lifelong learning. Thirdly, the transformation will address **digital and green readiness and resilience** to support universities in their efforts to build, reinforce and strengthen digital and green capacity and digital tools. In line with the Digital Education Action Plan, it will strengthen the digital skills and competences' needs of students, staff and researchers. Because higher education is key to achieve the European Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals, the transformation will support the integration and mainstreaming of learning and training for sustainable development across all disciplines and all levels through an interdisciplinary and challenge-based approach, of which **innovation** will be a crucial component. Apart from innovation linked to research, it is equally important to ensure innovation in student-centred learning and teaching and more flexible and modular learning and career pathways. Actions under the Digital Europe Programme will support cooperation between academia, research and business in specific digital areas, with a view to reinforcing these ecosystems to attract, train and retrain talents.

For this purpose, the Commission will launch this year an online public consultation, complemented with targeted consultation events. This will initiate the co-creation of a **transformation agenda for higher education** by the end of 2021.

The following concrete initiatives will support this transformation agenda:

- The Commission's objective is to engage in the **full rollout of the European Universities initiative** under the Erasmus programme in synergy with Horizon Europe, the Digital Europe Programme and other EU instruments. Based on outcome of the experiences of the European Universities alliances that started in 2019 and 2020, the Commission will work together with Member States and the higher education sector to optimise the vision of European Universities and to **address concrete obstacles** encountered to allow Higher Education sector to deliver on their high ambitions.
- With support of the EU STEM Coalition,<sup>48</sup> the Commission will help promote the development of new higher education curricula for engineering and ICT based on the STEAM<sup>49</sup> approach. In line with the actions announced in the European Skills Agenda, it will explore ways and means to make the STEM fields more attractive to women. This will help increase both the gender balance of students and academia staff and the pool of skills and competences in this highly needed area.
- In this context, the Commission will also examine together with the Member States and stakeholders the development of a **European Degree** that could provide a framework to ease the delivery of joint degrees of Universities alliances such as the

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<sup>48</sup> The EU STEM Coalition is an EU-wide network supported by the Erasmus Programme that works to build better STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) education in Europe.

<sup>49</sup> See the Staff Working Document.

European Universities. Such a European degree is a foundational element to allow students at all levels and across all disciplines to choose what, where and when to study within the members of a transnational University alliance, following a pedagogical sound guidance.

- Higher education institutions should facilitate a more effective delivery of modular joint programmes. Apart from formal requirements to diplomas issued, this also concerns accreditation and quality assurance. For its part, the Commission will enhance the implementation of the necessary transparency tools together with the National Academic Recognition Information Centres, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other key stakeholders. This work will build on successful Erasmus+ projects like the database of external quality assurance reports, the usage and promotion of the digital Diploma Supplement, the creation of the on-line course catalogues and databases of study programmes and the development of new technologies like blockchain to assist the implementation of the automatic recognition for further learning. A genuine European Recognition and Quality Assurance System will ensure that external quality assurance safeguards the autonomy of higher education institutions and at the same time maintains public trust for automatic recognition for further learning within and across Member States. For this purpose, the Commission will **review the Council and Parliament Recommendation on Quality Assurance**<sup>50</sup> in cooperation with the Member States and the higher education sector.<sup>51</sup>
- In close cooperation with Member States and the higher education sector, the Commission will explore the necessity and feasibility of a **legal statute for alliances of universities** such as the European Universities. If justified, actions to facilitate such deeper and sustainable cooperation between education institutions from different Member States may follow from 2023 onwards. Possible action may include solutions for cross-border cooperation linked to financing, accreditation, quality assurance, student and employment relations, and infrastructure management. The possible use of existing national and European statutes, such as the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, will be scrutinised to see whether they could be fit for purpose with adjustments, or whether others solutions would be needed.
- **The European Student Card Initiative**, identified in the **European Council** conclusions of 14 December 2017 as one of the key actions to further “*promote student mobility and participation in educational and cultural activities*”, is an important step in achieving the objectives of the European Education Area and making it as easy as possible for students across Europe to be mobile. Through its two key components, the Erasmus+ Mobile App and the digitalisation of the student mobility management, the initiative constitutes a real revolution for the simplification of the way universities manage the student mobility. By creating a digital one-stop-shop through the **Erasmus+ Mobile App**, students will have an easy and secure access to all the information and services they need before, during, and after their mobility

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<sup>50</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60

<sup>51</sup> Qualifications frameworks, credit systems, quality assurance instruments that make the skills, competences and qualifications of learners understandable and comparable.

abroad.<sup>52</sup> They will be able to apply for a mobility, choose the courses to follow, receive automatic recognition of credits earned abroad, get faster access to services such as library, transport, accommodation and have an easy access to information on events and activities organised by the local union of students or local branches of pan-European student organisations. Contributing to the goals of the European Student Card initiative<sup>53</sup>, a framework for trustworthy exchange of identification data across borders in line with the eIDAS Regulation on electronic identification and trust services will be enabled by the **EU Student eCard** platform.

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The initiative aims at making the management of mobility easier, more efficient and greener for higher education institutions. It will digitalise all the administrative steps and connecting universities' various interoperable IT systems across the Erasmus+ programme countries, eventually achieving a paperless Erasmus+ mobility and in full respect of General Data Protection Regulation. The initiative also promotes a strong European student identity by enabling universities to add a 'European Student' hologram and unique card number to their existing student cards so that their mobile students can access student services and discounts while abroad. With the support of the Erasmus programme, Digital Europe and Connecting Europe Facility programmes, the Commission will start a gradual rollout of these services starting with Erasmus students in 2021, with the aim of benefitting all mobile students in Europe by 2025.

- In line with the Council Recommendation on promoting **automatic mutual recognition** of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad<sup>54</sup>, a qualification awarded in one Member State should be valid in any other Member State for the purpose of accessing further learning activities. For this purpose, the Commission will continue providing support to the Member States for putting in place the conditions that will **make automatic mutual recognition possible by 2025**. This also entails close cooperation with the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC), supported by the Erasmus+ programme. Erasmus+ has funded the creation of a Technical Support Team for the NARIC network that will encourage the implementation of automatic recognition. It will provide assistance to the recognition network with capacity building, trainings and sharing of best practices on automatic recognition. In 2022, the Commission will report on the progress of the implementation of the Council Recommendation, based on Member's States contributions.
- Under the Skills Agenda, the Commission will support Member States and higher education institutions using the standard European tools available in **Europass** to issue authentic digital credentials, including digital diploma and micro-credentials.

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<sup>52</sup> As a result of the successful piloting phase started in 2018, currently over 2000 higher education institutions are involved in the testing of the digital mobility management; the Erasmus+ Mobile App has been downloaded and installed more than 85.000 times; and around 2.3 million European Student Cards have been produced with the European Student Hologram.

<sup>53</sup> Commission Communication on Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture - The Commission's Contribution to the Leaders meeting in Gothenburg COM(2017) 673 final

<sup>54</sup> Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1



Digital credentials issued through common European tools can facilitate recognition, make admission and recruitment processes more efficient and reduce fraud.

- Feedback from the graduates after they finish their education is essential for ensuring that the knowledge, skills and competences acquired by students are of high quality and relevant for today's and tomorrow's world of work. The feedback from surveys is useful not only for universities who can adapt their curricula and teaching, but also for policy makers aiming to improve employability of graduates, tackling skills gaps and skills mismatch and promoting social inclusion, accessibility and mobility, and support higher education institutions in developing their curricula. This is the essence of the **European graduate tracking initiative**, set in the *2017 Council recommendation on tracking graduates*.<sup>55</sup> The initiative has seen many countries establish or enhance their mechanisms for monitoring the study and employment outcomes of graduates. In 2022, the Commission will take stock of progress made in implementing the recommendation, with the expectation to see 80% take-up by the end of 2024. To enhance the European dimension, the Member States have been working collaboratively to ensure comparability of data and many of them will be surveying graduates with a jointly agreed set of questions in order to be able to compare results. The Commission expects to achieve European-wide implementation of graduate tracking by 2025. This initiative could not only help universities but inform the design of EU policies to support higher education institutions in developing the right skills for the green transition.
- Horizon Europe and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology will have a key role in supporting the research and innovation dimension of the European Universities alliances and building knowledge ecosystems. In addition, data-intensive analytics and machine learning should play their role in support of decision-making and learning in the European Education Area, while respecting data protection and privacy standards. In synergy with the European Research Area, and with support from the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the Commission will launch initiatives to bolster the education and training contribution to Europe's innovation capacity.

### **3.6 Education as part of a stronger Europe in the world**

The European Education Area can contribute to the geopolitical goals of the European Union by strengthening its links with the rest of the world. International cooperation should play a stronger role to support education systems in partner countries.

In order to strengthen the role of education in EU external policies, also in view of the Covid-19 pandemic, the following actions could be envisaged:

- Action at EU level should be geared towards creating a **Team Europe approach**, fostering greater cooperation with EU Member States on the external activities of education and training institutions in different parts of the world thereby

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<sup>55</sup> Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates, OJ C 423, 9.12.2017, p. 1

**strengthening the positioning the EU as a partner in education at global level<sup>56</sup>.**

This would be implemented in respect of the EU competences and the decision-making procedures, including the voting rules, established by the EU Treaties. The EU by itself is a relatively small player, but the EU and its Member States account for more than half of all international cooperation to education, including basic education, secondary education, VET and higher education. Education and training therefore have an integral role as a convener of Team Europe. This includes a closer alignment of European international cooperation actions on education, including the Erasmus+ programme and the EU contribution to global education initiatives, with the EU priorities at bilateral, regional and global level. The EU will also continue helping children affected by humanitarian crises to have access to safe, quality, and accredited primary and secondary education through education in emergency projects. The EU will be promoting equality in access to quality education at all levels by maintaining funding for education in emergencies at 10% of the humanitarian aid budget. Such an approach can create stronger synergies between education and the rest of the EU partnership agenda.

- In addition to physical mobility, the EU should support the digital path of internationalisation of education providers, in particular higher education and vocational training institutes, by increasing digital opportunities of staff, teachers and students including through online courses and blended learning models.
- The EU should also strengthen cooperation with **strategic global partners** (e.g., China, Japan, US), while better safeguarding the Union's interest, know-how and values, and promoting reciprocity and level playing field.
- An **expanded international dimension of the Erasmus programme** could be a major tool to foster the global dimension of the European Education Area. The Erasmus programme should be increasingly used in a targeted way to attract talent to EU higher education institutions and to use the alumni networks to strategically engage with young and future leaders in partner countries. Strong emphasis should be placed on cooperation with the neighbourhood and particularly with Africa, supporting the implementation of the EU's comprehensive Africa strategy contributing to the region's economic recovery by supporting the ongoing process of reforming education, training and research systems.
- The Commission will further open up to the world actions such as **Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees** to strengthen international partnerships and ensure that European higher education becomes ever more attractive. This should help further promote the internationalisation, attractiveness and global competitiveness of universities in Europe.

International milestones will include **increasing participation in mutual learning and cooperation arrangements**. In addition to the ongoing participation of those European Free Trade Association countries that are members of the European Economic Area<sup>57</sup>, also the

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<sup>56</sup> Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19, JOIN(2020) 11 final

<sup>57</sup>Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway are fully associated (*programme countries status*) to the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020).

Western Balkans should be fully associated to the European Education Area and the Erasmus programme<sup>58</sup>, in accordance with the applicable conditions and procedures.

#### 4 AN ENABLING FRAMEWORK TO ACHIEVE THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA BY 2025

For the European Education Area to become a reality by 2025, an **enabling framework** will be put in place.

##### 4.1 *Tasks of the European Education Area enabling framework*

The enabling framework will help achieve the European Education Area in the following ways:

- First, it will enable Member States, the EU and the wider education and training community to deliver on initiatives put forward in this Communication to achieve the European Education Area. Based on strengthened guidance from the Council, it will boost flexible cooperation methods and strengthen synergies with other initiatives in education and training, including the European Research Area and the Copenhagen and Bologna Processes. In addition to the European Education Summits and engagement actions under the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan, such as the Education for Climate Coalition or the Digital Education Hackathon, the Commission will promote regular outreach activities and campaigns to foster stakeholders' engagement at local and regional level.
- Second, the enabling framework will **identify targets and indicators to guide and monitor progress towards the European Education Area**. Besides tracking progress on existing targets, it is necessary to develop with all stakeholders a new approach to indicators and targets for the European Education Area along its six dimensions. The Commission will continue to work with Member States and wider education and training community to collect comparable evidence and develop indicators with a view to fostering evidence-based policymaking in achieving the European Education Area.
- Third, the enabling framework will foster integration of education and training in the **European Semester** to reinforce Member States' capacities to recover from the Covid-19 crisis. The European Semester will set the broader context in which progress toward achieving the European Education Area will be reviewed alongside other social and economic policies. It will also bring on board evidence and analysis on how education and training interact with other policies, to help inform the country specific recommendations. In cooperation with the Council, the Commission will explore new options for voluntary Member State input into the Semester, such as through voluntary peer reviews. The enabling framework will be key to guiding funding support through the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Commission's Technical Support Instrument (former Structural Reform Support Programmes). The significant funding available through the Recovery and Resilience Facility will in addition

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<sup>58</sup> North Macedonia and Serbia are already fully associated (*programme countries status*) to the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020).

provide major support to education reforms and investments in education, from infrastructure and construction to trainings, digital devices or the funding for open educational resources. The Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021 has highlighted the need for unprecedented investments in upskilling and reskilling and made this one of the seven flagship investments.

- Fourth, the enabling framework will **lay the groundwork for setting up a fully-fledged governance framework for the European Education Area by 2025**, while fully respecting the Member States responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems. This new governance framework will require a high-level political steer to take decisions in a complex ecosystem. For this to happen, the new governance framework should strengthen the EU's strategic objectives and help connect to global initiatives, including those in the UN or OECD contexts. It should bring increased efficiency and effectiveness for ministries and experts when it comes to their engagement at EU level. And finally, it should help foster effective solutions and policy reforms on the ground. Linked to this, the Commission will help intensify work on investment as part of the European Education Area. This will include fostering debate at high-level political fora, such as joint exchanges between EU finance ministers and EU education ministers, as well as with other institutions, such as the European Investment Bank and the European Parliament. At technical level, an expert group on quality investment in education and training will support this process, helping to maintain focus on national and regional investment. The Commission will also provide specific support to local, regional and national authorities to facilitate mutual learning, analysis and sharing of good practices on investment in education infrastructure.

#### **4.2 Description of the enabling framework**

In the period until 2025, the Commission proposes that the **European Education Area enabling framework maintains all the tried and tested mutual learning arrangements of the ET 2020**, such as the working groups, Directors-General formations, peer learning instruments, with funding support in particular from the Erasmus programme. Other relevant governance bodies, such as the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training, should also be involved.

To rise to the increasingly complex and fast-moving demands of digital society and economy, the European Education Area enabling framework will facilitate engagement and interaction within the wider education ecosystem, favouring a good balance between online and face-to-face meetings.

The main features of this enabling framework would be:

- The Council is invited to organise regular joint discussions between the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council and other Council configurations to help take a whole of government approach to education and training, and to strengthen the

contribution of education and training to the EU political priorities<sup>59</sup>, while support work on education within the European Semester.

- A Steering Board for the European Education Area to take stock and ensure momentum of all these initiatives leading to the achievement of the EEA. Its composition and working methods should be defined with Member States by the end of June 2021.
- Enhanced structured work between the Commission, the Member States and with stakeholders to co-create policy and funding actions, including through bottom-up initiatives and stronger use of EU funds.
- A permanent European Education Area Platform as a public gateway to its actions and services. The Platform will ensure transparency and access to information, and provide an easy-to-access space with information on the enabling framework activities and outputs. The Platform will also include an interactive platform to support Member State and stakeholder cooperation and exchanges.

### **4.3 Tracking progress**

Evidence shows that EU targets leverage educational issues on the national agenda and foster the monitoring of progress. They are key reference points for the European Semester and guiding EU funding. As a means to continue tracking progress on education and training, the Commission proposes a set of **targets to be reached by 2030, coinciding with the SDGs timing**. The time scale provides Member States with the time needed for the introduction and implementation of the necessary policy reforms and investments, and for their impact to become visible.

These targets should be based on internationally comparable data, based on individual country aggregates and an EU weighted average. They shall be monitored in a sex-disaggregated way. The Commission invites the Council to set the commitment for the EU as a whole to achieve the following targets by 2030<sup>60</sup>:

- The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%.
- The share of low-achieving eight-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15%.
- At least 98% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.
- The share of people aged 20-24 with at least an upper secondary qualification should be 90%.
- The share of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 50%.

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<sup>59</sup> Including the Future of Europe Conference, the European Green Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

<sup>60</sup> The Staff Working Document lays out the data sources for these targets.

In addition, as presented in the Skills Agenda, by 2025, 50% of the adult population in the EU should participate in learning every year.

The proposed European Education Area targets and those on adult learning, VET and employability presented in the Skills Agenda and the proposal for the Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training complement and mutually reinforce each other, while covering the full spectrum of education and training. The Commission will regularly review progress toward these sets of targets and, where necessary, propose their extension and revision for 2030.

The Commission will publish the European Education and Training Monitor every year to review the situation in achieving the European Education Area across all sectors of education and training. The Monitor will include country profiles, progress on the EU targets, taking into account EU and country objectives and offering a compass for policy reforms. It will consistently analyse data by gender, socio-economic status, special educational needs, and minority or migrant background.

The European Education Area targets should be accompanied by a range of analytical and peer-learning tools, which will measure progress through internationally comparable and regularly gathered data. Monitoring of education and training in the EU will also consist of other quantitative and qualitative indicators, as well as studies and research results. The Commission will work with the Member States, experts, stakeholders and international partners to develop indicators in areas which are not covered by existing international data collections, but which emerged as priority objectives of the European Education Area.

To take stock of progress toward achieving the European Education Area by 2025, debate the following steps and give fresh impetus, the Commission will publish a **European Education Area Progress Report in 2022** and organise a **mid-term review event together with the European Parliament in 2023**. A full report from the Commission on the European Education Area will follow in 2025.

## 5 CONCLUSION

As presented in this Communication, the success of the European Education Area shall hinge on the legacy of cooperation, a renewed commitment to pursue common objectives, and a robust framework to make it happen and become a reality by 2025. The Commission invites the Council to endorse the six dimensions underpinning the European Education Area, its means and milestones, and its proposed enabling framework until 2025. The European Education Area provides a perspective for the future of education and training in the European Union. It identifies key issues and sets out ways forward in line with the principle of subsidiarity and in full respect of Member States' competences for education and training at national, regional and local level. Education and training will be a key driving force for achieving a recovery geared on the Green and Digital transitions. Furthermore, work on the European Education Area will help contribute to the geopolitical positioning of the EU and its Member States.

The Commission is fully committed to achieving the European Education Area by 2025 and calls upon the other European institutions, Member States, the education and training

community and all those for whom education matters, to join forces and rejuvenate together the power of education to shape a sustainable and generous world.