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HIGHER EDUCATION

In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, higher education policies in Europe are essentially decided at the level of the individual EU Member States. The role of the EU — as in education, vocational training, youth and sport policies in general — is therefore mainly a supporting and partly a coordinating one. While any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States is explicitly excluded, the EU can take action under the ordinary legislative procedure and by means of incentive measures. In addition, the Council can adopt recommendations on a proposal from the Commission. The main objectives of Union action in the field of higher education include: supporting mobility of students and staff; fostering mutual recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between higher education institutions and developing distance (university) education.

LEGAL BASIS

Education — and in this context also higher education — was formally recognised as an area of EU competency in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992.

While the Lisbon Treaty has not changed the role of the EU in (higher) education as such, it has provided for an enhanced status of this policy area and a potentially greater role for the EU than before. This takes place through what has been described in the relevant literature as a horizontal ‘social clause’, with Title II, Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) stating that ‘in defining and implementing its policies and actions, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of [...] a high level of education [and] training’. The prominence of (higher) education as a concern for European policies is further corroborated in Title II, Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which enjoys the same legal force as the Treaties, with the guarantee of a ‘right to education’^[1].

Article 165(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that ‘the Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity’. In Article 165(2) of the TFEU it is stated that Union action is to be aimed at ‘encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study, promoting cooperation between educational establishments and developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States’.

[1] See in particular Article 14(1): ‘Everyone has the right to education and to have access to continuing and vocational training’.

OBJECTIVES

A. Objectives pursuant to the Treaties of the European Union

On the basis of the EU's long-term commitment to making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving both the quality and the efficiency of education and training, and enhancing creativity and innovation, Article 165(2) TFEU specifically enumerates the objectives of Union action in the field of Education, Vocational Training, Youth and Sport. The following aims are of particular relevance to the field of higher education:

- developing a European dimension in education;
- encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging, inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study;
- promoting cooperation between educational establishments;
- developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of Member States; and
- encouraging the development of distance education.

B. Current priorities in education and training

The Europe 2020 strategy has raised European political interest in higher education^[2]. Focused on 'smart', 'sustainable' and 'inclusive' growth, the goals of Europe 2020 are to be achieved through more effective investment in education, research and innovation. Among the key targets is a considerable increase in the number of young people completing third-level education (at least 40% of 30-34 year-olds by 2020)^[3]. This ambitious goal was pre-formulated in the Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) strategic framework, adopted by the European Council in May 2009, which builds on its predecessor, the Education and Training 2010 (ET 2010) work programme, and provides common strategic objectives for the Member States, including a set of principles for achieving these objectives^[4]. In addition to the Member States' own political initiatives, the EU actively supports the priorities of the Bologna Process, which, since its inception in 1999, has worked towards more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe, culminating in the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference Declaration of March 2010.

After the acceptance of the Europe 2020 strategy, in 2011 the Commission focused on the potential of European higher education systems in its communication 'Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems'^[5]. The Commission recognised that the responsibility for delivering reforms rests with Member States and higher education institutions (HEI), but still called for the reforms needed in some key areas such as research and employment. A series of key policies to be implemented is suggested, together with a list of decisions to be taken by the Commission in the years to come.

[2] See the Europe 2020 strategy paper, published in March 2010 (COM(2010) 2020) (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>). For additional information see the Commission's website: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

[3] The second key target in the field of higher education is reducing the rates of early school leavers to below 10%.

[4] See OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2 (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:EN:PDF>). Annex I, outlining the envisaged 'European benchmarks', states with regard to higher education that: 'given the increasing demand for higher education attainment, and whilst acknowledging the equal importance of vocational education and training, by 2020, the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%'. Ibid., p. 7.

[5] (COM(2011) 0567).

In 2016 the Commission reaffirmed the importance of higher education^[6] for skills formation, the importance of mobility for formal and non-formal learning and the need to modernise higher education in order to comply with the qualifications required for future jobs.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A. The Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)

Formally adopted in December 2013^[7] and in application since 1 January 2014, the central aim of Erasmus+ is to invest in Europe's education, training, youth and sport through a single integrated programme. Erasmus+ combines previously separate sectorial and transversal policies in the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP, 2007-2013) in the fields of higher education (Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, bilateral programmes with other countries or continents), school education (Comenius), vocational education and training (Leonardo da Vinci), adult education (Grundtvig), youth (Youth in Action), and European integration studies (Jean Monnet). In addition, sport is included for the first time. LLP had a total budget of EUR 7 billion, and the Erasmus programme involved an annual basis of 300 000 teachers and 230 000 HEI students. Erasmus+ now has a budget of EUR 14 billion, and cooperation is possible both among Member States and between Member States and third countries.

Erasmus+ aims to restructure and streamline activity around three key actions across the targeted sectors:

1. learning mobility of individuals;
2. cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices;
3. support for policy reform.

Within the overarching architecture of Erasmus+, higher education assumes a central role. A minimum of 33.3% of the total budget for Erasmus+ is earmarked for higher education. Two million higher education students are expected to participate in mobility programmes during the period from 2014 to 2020. Erasmus+ not only supports the mobility of students and staff in higher education, but also funds Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees and Erasmus+ Master Loans.

B. Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA)

Part of [Horizon 2020](#) — the EU framework programme for research and innovation —, the MSCA supports research training and career development focused on innovation skills. The programme funds worldwide and cross-sector mobility that implements excellent research in any field. As regards higher education, MSCA grants encourage transnational, inter-sector and interdisciplinary mobility. The MSCA will become the main EU programme for doctoral training, financing 25 000 PhDs and post-doctoral research projects. In addition to fostering mobility between countries, the MSCA also seeks to break the real and perceived barriers between academic and other sectors, especially business. The MSCA also funds the [European Researchers' Night](#), a series of public events that take place across Europe each year on the fourth Friday in September to promote the work of researchers.

[6] 'A new skills agenda for Europe. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness', (COM(2016) 0381).

[7] OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 50.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Given the limited competences of the EU in the field of higher education, Parliament's role has mainly been to foster close cooperation between Member States and strengthen European dimensions wherever possible. Thanks to its increasing political importance over recent decades and facilitated not least by the general trend towards Europeanisation following on from the Bologna Process, Parliament has managed to exert a growing influence on the shaping of higher education policies in Europe.

Parliament has successfully worked for an increase in the budget available for existing programmes in the field of higher education, including Erasmus+, and has been a keen advocate of shifting the priorities of EU funding in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) to what it considers to be more future-oriented expenditure, such as that in the field of higher education.

Throughout the years Parliament has always been interested in higher education and its link with employment. In 2010 Parliament adopted the resolution 'University Business Dialogue: a new partnership for the modernisation of Europe's universities'^[8], calling for dialogue between higher education institutions (HEIs) and businesses in all fields of study and recalling the importance of lifelong learning and mobility, fostering research and sharing best practices.

Following the aforementioned Commission communication of 2011, in 2012 Parliament adopted a resolution on 'modernising Europe's higher education systems'^[9], calling on HEIs to integrate lifelong learning into their curricula once again, to adapt to new challenges by creating new fields of study reflecting the needs of the labour market and to promote gender equality in higher education. In this resolution Parliament also insisted that Member States should reach the target of investing 2% of GDP in education.

The European Parliament has shown a long-standing interest in the consolidation and progress of the Bologna Process. The 2011 report on the contribution of the European institutions to the consolidation and progress of the Bologna Process resulted in a European Parliament resolution^[10] which stressed the importance of the Bologna reforms for the creation of the EHEA and for the objectives set in the Europe 2020 strategy.

In 2015 Parliament discussed the implementation of the Bologna Process^[11]. Members considered that the Bologna reforms contributed to the improvement of the quality of educational systems and to the attractiveness of higher education in Europe. The Bologna Process also made higher education structures more comparable, providing quality assurance systems in the recognition of diplomas. The Members of the European Parliament also called on HEIs, public administrations, the social partners and businesses to hold an ongoing dialogue on facilitating and enhancing the employability of graduates. They also called for further development of a wide range of skills and new models for learning, teaching and assessment.

Parliament is now working on an implementation report on Erasmus+ ([2015/2327\(INI\)](#)) which will analyse the first years of implementation of the programme, underline its successes and suggest changes to improve the second part of the multiannual framework programme.

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[8]OJ C 161 E, 31.5.2011, p. 95.

[9]OJ C 258, 7.9.2013, p. 55.

[10]OJ C 251 E, 31.8.2013, p. 24.

[11]OJ C 346, 21.9.2016, p. 2.