



Communication on the European Education Area by 2025

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Executive summary

Everything and nothing - this may be intentionally severe but it is the briefest summary of the European Commission's communication. **Everything** because of the universal claim to make a "European Education Area" appreciably evident in all sectors of education by 2025. **Nothing** is not unjustified because the communication does not draw any lines between it and other recent and related documents of the European Commission on education and therefore it is extremely difficult to assess its significance and political weight. The claim of being universal is not tenable because the communication focuses strongly on initial vocational education and training in the first instance and in the second instance **it completely ignores teaching social skills and the task of education and training in civil society.**

AK most certainly sees the communication of the "European Education Area" as following on from [ET 2020](#), the strategic framework for European cooperation on education and training. **The basic and generally positive response of AK is primarily due to the hope that the following criticisms will be accepted as constructive criticism:**

The "right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning" in accordance with the first principle of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) must be anchored more firmly as a major goal of the European Education Area.

The vision of introducing a **common European (university) certificate** and a **legal framework for university alliances** is ambitious, although it is not evident in which way and how far these should be legally binding. These goals are welcome insofar as they encourage transparency in national systems and hence promote mobility among those in education and training in Europe.

Regarding the **comments on the digital transformation**, the focus lies on teaching IT skills in schools, without addressing the **situation of young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds** and **schools with a particularly high**

percentage of disadvantaged groups. The digital divide must be combatted through investing in IT infrastructure and teachers.

The certification of training courses that are not considered a self-contained and full qualification must **not lead to modularisation of initial vocational training.** The introduction of European **micro-credentials** must be viewed very critically and should, if at all, **only happen under the supervision of official bodies responsible for transparency and quality.**

AK welcomes the proposal of the Commission that Member States should continue their cooperation in the current environment. **However, it is decidedly unsatisfactory that the communication does not mention the social partners once and only involves them indirectly through the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training.** Therefore AK calls for the **representatives of the social partners to be directly involved in creating the European Education Area at the European level.**

Instead of the original call for Member States to set the **benchmark to finance the European Education Area at 5% of GDP**, less specific language has now been used.

The AK's position

Starting point, background and overall situation

In her [political guidelines of 16.07.2019](#) President von der Leyen talked of the European Education Area within the following context: **“The best investment in our future is the investment in our people. Skills and education drive Europe’s competitiveness and innovation. But Europe is not yet fully ready. I will ensure that we use all the tools and funds at our disposal to redress this balance. I am fully committed to making the [European Education Area](#) a reality by 2025.”**

Over one year later, on 30 September 2020, the communication on “achieving the European Education Area by 2025” was published. Goal: To ensure that all young people have the best opportunities for education and training and consequently for good employment throughout Europe. In its press communication the Commission also talks of a vision. Measured against the challenges, this description of the future project of educational policy is appropriate for several reasons. Although the quality of the systems for education and training, for encouraging pupils and teachers, the development of the European Higher Education Area, equal opportunities, to name but a few of the main topics, have always determined the activities of former schemes, the digital and ecological changes of recent years have prompted new measures and solutions as a matter of growing concern. However, what has put this draft under totally unprecedented pressure was and remains the coronavirus crisis, which will have a major impact on education and training systems in Europe. For example, the risk of socioeconomic disadvantages hindering access to education and training due to COVID-19 is already evident and the continued development of systems overall has to overcome major conceptual uncertainties.

The precursor scheme ET 2020

The “European Education Area” scheme is based on several decades of cooperation and experience at European level in the field of education. The precursor to that scheme, which is formally still in place, was elaborated in 2009 and is called [ET 2020 \(Education and Training 2020\)](#) - the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training up to 2020. Four strategic goals were formulated:

1. Implementation of lifelong learning and mobility;
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship
4. Encouraging innovation and creativity.

At the same time quantitative benchmarks were set for the implementation of these goals. These are not values which are valid within one country only: they are European averages which every Member State should actively help to achieve.

The legal framework

When Member States participate in the various educational schemes of the EU and implement European goals, they do so within their own national system. Because according EU law, responsibility for the particular form of general education and vocational training lies with Member States. The European Commission proposes goals which have to be negotiated. The European Union supports the implementation of the agreed goals through its support programmes (subsidies) and through coordinating actions. It follows a policy of promoting, supporting and complementing (principle of subsidiarity) without harmonising legal systems in any way. Member States can choose how far they wish to follow European educational policy within their own sphere of action.

Communication on the European Education Area 2025

The [Communication on the European Education Area](#) promises better access to quality education and vocational training - irrespective of the social and economic background of pupils and students. As a result, this will promote individual mobility between the different national education systems and in addition the transnational mobility of pupils and students. Spending periods abroad is to become the norm and the mutual recognition of school and university certificates throughout the EU is to be simplified.

In this type of scenario, it should be an accepted fact that young people speak two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. Digital and ecological change must be taken into consideration as a cross-cutting principle so that all other education and training measures lead to employment that is realistic, futureproof and safeguards the future of young people. Ultimately people are fully aware of their European identity and the cultural heritage of Europe in all its diversity.

Current and new processes will be consolidated and refined in the European Education Area based on **six dimensions**:

- Quality in education and training
- Inclusion and gender equality
- Green and digital transitions
- Teachers and trainers
- Higher education
- Geopolitical dimension.

An **enabling framework** is envisaged to develop these six dimensions. (It remains to be seen whether an official German translation will be available). In view of expectations, however, it must be a **multi-functional framework** because the tasks include setting goals and indicators as guidelines as well as measuring progress. General education and vocational training are to be integrated further in the European Semester to provide feedback on how education can interact more with other areas of policy and it is intended to help safeguard financial resources as well as identify new ones, to name but a few. A **permanent platform for the European Education Area** will keep stakeholders and Member States informed of ongoing activities.

A **European Steering Committee** for the enabling framework will be defined by the Member States by mid-2021 because the enabling framework will

be the precursor to a later, fully fledged governance framework as of 2025.

The policy of tracking targets by determining shared quantitative markers for the whole of the EU will be continued. Newly defined aims will supplement the aims of the [European Skills Agenda](#) published on 1 July 2020 to boost employment. The underlying data must be comparable internationally and be based both on the values of the individual Member States as well as on a weighted European average. The Commission therefore recommends that the **European Union as a whole should undertake to track and achieve the following targets by 2030:**

- 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%.

The previous trend of these benchmarks can be found in condensed form in the [publication Education and Training Monitor 2019](#).

It should be noted that an indicator from the Skills Agenda is also included: in 2025 at least 50% of all adults between 24 and 64 should have participated in formal or non-formal further training during the previous 12 months. The progress for all indicators will be published every year in the [Education and Training Monitor](#).

An initial progress report on the whole of the European Education Area is planned for 2022 and in 2023 a midterm review will be carried out in collaboration with the European Parliament. The final report of the European Commission will be published in 2025.

Tasks and elements of a multi-functional enabling framework

- Political support, cooperation and mutual learning, commitment
- Continuance of all working groups and mutual learning schemes from Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020)
- High-ranking steering board
- Fully fledged government framework as of 2025
- Goals and indicators
- Permanent European Education Area Platform as the gateway to the public
- Regular collective discussions of the Education Committee with other EU bodies
- Greater integration of education and vocational training into the European Semester
- Investing in the quality of education and vocational training
- Tracking targets and reporting

Critical statements of AK on EU policies

The right to education and vocational training and lifelong learning

The first principle of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), proclaimed in November 2017, reads as follows:

“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”

Although the European Commission sees the communication on the European Education Area as subordinate to this principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the latter only deals with or refers to this in fairly general terms. AK notes that the right to lifelong education and vocational training is not expressed as a benchmark or a main objective of the communication.

AK is an example of a national body in this sense which demands the right to in-company training or paid leave for one week’s training per year. It should be possible to obtain vocational qualifications free of charge as part of adult education which offers adults the possibility of obtaining secondary education certificates.

Transparency and mobility or harmonisation?

As part of the ways and means to develop the dimension “Higher education”, the European Commission, together with the Member States, wishes to investigate whether the **introduction of a common European (university) degree** and a **legal statute for university alliances** makes sense and is feasible. The aim would be greater transparency and mutual trust in national systems and greater mobility of students. The European Education Area is also intended to help achieve the geopolitical objectives of the European Union. Member States should cooperate more closely and support each other in the international activities of their educational institutions in the world outside the EU. This should position the EU as a global partner in education. From **2025 onwards the steering board** will assume an important role.

This new, **“fully fledged governance framework”** for the European Education Area will be composed of **top-level political representatives, probably ministers**. Never before has such a high-level body been proposed in an initiative on education. The influence of a group from within the circle of the Council Education Committee on a more or less loose alliance of national education systems, which is not called into question by the concept of the European Education Area, can only be assessed as very high. **Therefore, care should be taken that these developments do not encourage harmonisation, whether deliberately or not, that is contrary to the principles of a stimulating, supportive and complementary European education policy (see “The legal framework”).**

European micro-credentials: The risk of erosion to full initial vocational education and training

One of 12 actions on the [European Skills Agenda](#) (page 16) is the plan to introduce **European micro-credentials**. These are certificates or attestations for training that leads not to a full and self-contained qualification due to its limited scope, specialisation or non-formal character. The communication also supports European **micro-credentials** with the expectation that retraining will be upgraded, further vocational qualifications and partial qualifications will be given greater recognition, flexible routes to training and more modular training opportunities. At the same time, it cannot be denied that there is no common definition and there is **no attempt to ensure quality in the validation and recognition of these credentials**.

The **European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)** is alarmed by this proposal and has expressed [severe criticism of the introduction of micro-credentials](#) in relation to both collective bargaining and education

and training policy objectives. The reason is that many collective bargaining agreements across Europe are based on full and complete vocational qualifications that are recognised nationally. The trade unions are right to fear that upgrading partial or micro-credentials will deter people from participating in fully developed initial vocational training courses. But it is the task of vocational training to communicate the broadest possible knowledge, skills and abilities to people so they are prepared for permanent change in the workplace.

High-quality further vocational training with a complementary and modular approach is important; however, it has been proved that this type of training is preferred by people who have enjoyed in-depth basic vocational training, starting with education at higher secondary school level through to a university degree. In an initial discussion the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training called for agreement on a clear and general definition of micro-credentials. Their application does not seem particularly suited to initial vocational training, but rather to further vocational training and retraining for adults. The question of quality goes hand-in-hand with the question of the compatibility of credentials with the European and national qualifications framework (EQF/NQF) and the relationship of partial qualifications to full and complete qualifications.

Digital transformation along socioeconomic fault lines

The COVID crisis revealed how essential greater investment in IT skills and infrastructure is; and also that course material must be adapted for distance learning and that this in turn is dependent on the digital skills of teachers and pupils. However, it is clear that not all direct teaching can be replaced by digital means, particularly in the case of practical lessons (e.g. laboratory) or on-the-job training.

The focus of the communication on the digital and ecological transformation is on schools and there on imparting skills to pupils and teachers. An essential prerequisite for a just transition is being disregarded, namely, that the chances for a young person to obtain IT skills is dependent to a large extent on their social background. Indications and proposals are lacking on how socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, but also schools with a particularly large percentage of disadvantaged groups, can achieve equal access in terms of technology and teaching. The same applies to grants and advanced training for those with low formal qualifications.

The closure of schools due to the pandemic and the

shift to distance learning have once again clearly showed that in terms of infrastructure the digital divide also runs along social inequality lines.

Therefore, the communication should require Member States to invest more in the IT infrastructure of schools so that pupils can both develop and use IT skills equally, irrespective of their social background.

The role of social partners

The active participation of social partners is limited to the involvement of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT). This body, which advises the Commission, is composed in equal parts of representatives of the governments of all Member States and national social partners, meets only twice a year; this does not allow for continuous involvement in the development of the European Education Area.

Thus, the participation of the social partners should be stipulated expressly both at European level as well as at national level in the case of reforms.

Financing

In its announcement of the European Education Area in November 2017, the European Commission proposed that Member States should reserve 5% of GDP for their education systems. This goal should be further specified by a corresponding benchmark. However, the communication made no mention of this, probably in the expectation that countries did not want to pin down their budgets in terms of investment in education in view of the as yet unforeseeable effects of the pandemic. A coherent concept is lacking in the possibilities and considerations on financing currently proposed.



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About us

The Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour (AK) is by law representing the interests of about 3.8 million employees and consumers in Austria. It acts for the interests of its members in fields of social-, educational-, economical-, and consumer issues both on the national and on the EU-level in Brussels. Furthermore, the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour is a part of the Austrian social partnership. The Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour is registered at the EU Transparency Register under the number 23869471911-54.

The main objectives of the 1991 established AK EUROPA Office in Brussels are the representation of AK vis-à-vis the European Institutions and interest groups, the monitoring of EU policies and to transfer relevant Information from Brussels to Austria, as well as to lobby the in Austria developed expertise and positions of the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour in Brussels.