Education, vocational training and more generally lifelong learning play a vital role in both an economic and social context. The opportunities which the European Union (EU) offers its citizens for living, studying and working in other countries make a major contribution to cross-cultural understanding, personal development and the achievement of the EU’s full economic potential. Each year, well over a million EU citizens of all ages benefit from EU-funded educational, vocational and citizenship-building programmes.

The consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and of the Treaty establishing the European Community acknowledge the importance of these areas by stating that ‘the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action ... The Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States’. As such, the European Commission follows up on policy cooperation and work with the EU Member States, while funding various programmes.

Europe 2020 strategy

The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth put forward by the European Commission emphasises how the EU may improve its competitiveness and productivity during the period up to 2020. An Agenda for new skills and jobs is one of the seven flagship initiatives of this strategy: its goals include ‘equipping people with the right skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow’ and the initiative is designed to help the EU achieve its employment target whereby it is hoped that 75% of the working-age population (20-64 years) will be in employment by 2020.

One of the main means that may be used to improve productivity and competitiveness is investing in human capital (one aspect of which is investment in education and training). At the same time, the Agenda for new skills and jobs can also contribute towards two additional headline targets that form part of the Europe 2020 strategy, namely to reduce the early-leavers from education and training rate to below 10% and to increase the proportion of people aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education to at least 40%.

Policy: strategic framework for education and training (ET 2020)

Political cooperation within the EU was strengthened through the education and training 2010 work programme which integrated previous actions in the fields of education and training. The follow-up to this programme, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (later known as ET 2020), was adopted by the Council in May 2009. It sets out four strategic objectives for education and training in the EU:

- making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
• promoting equality, social cohesion and active citizenship; and
• enhancing creativity and innovation (including entrepreneurship) at all levels of education and training.

This ET 2020 strategy also sets a number of benchmarks to be achieved by 2020, including:

• at least 95 % of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education;
• the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10 %;
• the share of low-achieving 15 year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 %;
• the share of 30-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40 %;
• an average of at least 15 % of adults aged 25 to 64 should participate in lifelong learning.

Two supplementary benchmarks on learning mobility were adopted by the Council in November 2011, namely:

• by 2020, an EU average of at least 20 % of higher education graduates should have had a period of higher education-related study or training (including work placements) abroad, representing a minimum of 15 European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) credits or lasting a minimum of three months;
• by 2020, an EU average of at least 6 % of 18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational education and training (VET) qualification should have had an initial VET-related study or training period (including work placements) abroad lasting a minimum of two weeks, or less if documented by Europass.

Another benchmark on employability was added in May 2012:

• by 2020, the share of employed graduates (20-34 year-olds) having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year should be at least 82 %.

In 2014, recent progress was assessed and priorities reviewed: in November 2015 the Council adopted a set of six new priorities for the period 2016-2020 based on a joint report (2015/C 417/04) from the European Commission and the EU Member States. The priority areas for further work towards 2020 include:

• relevant and high-quality knowledge, skills and competences developed throughout lifelong learning, focusing on learning outcomes for employability, innovation, active citizenship and well-being;
• inclusive education, equality, equity, non-discrimination and the promotion of civic competences;
• open and innovative education and training, including by fully embracing the digital era;
• strong support for teachers, trainers, school leaders and other educational staff;
• transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning and labour mobility;
• sustainable investment, quality and efficiency of education and training systems.

Rethinking education

In November 2012, the European Commission presented Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes (COM(2012) 669 final), an initiative to encourage EU Member States to ensure that young people develop the skills and competences needed by the labour market. This Communication was developed in the face of increased competition from workers outside of the EU and increased youth unemployment within the EU, alongside sluggish economic performance. The Communication pays particular attention to combatting youth unemployment:

• developing world-class vocational education and training to raise the quality of vocational skills;
• promoting work-based learning including quality traineeships, apprenticeships and dual learning models to help the transition from learning to work;
• promoting partnerships between public and private institutions (to ensure appropriate curricula and skills provision);
• promoting mobility through the Erasmus+ programme (see below for more details).
Digital education action plan

In January 2018, the European Commission adopted a digital education action plan (COM(2018) 22 final). This included 11 initiatives to support technology-use and digital competence development in education, structured within three priorities:

- making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning;
- developing digital competences and skills;
- improving education through better data analysis and foresight.

Renewed agenda for higher education

In May 2017, the European Commission adopted a Communication (COM(2017) 247 final) on a renewed EU agenda for higher education, focusing on four priority activities:

- tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development;
- building inclusive and connected higher education systems;
- ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation;
- supporting effective and efficient higher education systems.

The Communication also proposed to streamline EU support for higher education by:

- creating a knowledge hub to enhance data quality, comparability, data collection and indicators and draw lessons from implementation of EU higher education data tools to date;
- strengthening the work of the Eurydice network and cooperation with the OECD to avoid duplication of efforts and benefit from joint work;
- simplifying student mobility by building on existing Erasmus+ projects for the electronic exchange of student data and explore the feasibility of establishing electronic student identification system;
- initiating a discussion on efficient support to students, staff, institutions and higher education systems.

Bologna and Copenhagen processes

Two policy processes are worth mentioning within the context of tertiary education and vocational training: the Bologna process put in motion a series of reforms to make European higher education more compatible, comparable, competitive and attractive for students, while the Copenhagen process was aimed at promoting and developing vocational education and training.

The main objectives of the Bologna process are:

- the introduction of a three-cycle degree system (bachelor, master and doctorate);
- quality assurance; and
- recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

Otherwise, one of the operational goals of the Bologna process is to remove the obstacles to student mobility across Europe, and more broadly support the mobility of students, teachers and researchers. The process set out plans to create a European higher education area (EHEA) and in March 2010 the ministers of the 47 participating countries adopted the Budapest-Vienna Declaration, officially launching the EHEA. Ministers meet every two or three years to reflect on the progress made: in April 2012 they released a communiqué from Bucharest (Romania) identifying three key priorities — mobility, employability and quality — while emphasising the potential for higher education to contribute to growth and jobs. In May 2015, they met in Yerevan (Armenia) and underlined a commitment to: enhance the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; foster the employability of graduates throughout their working lives; make education systems more inclusive; conclude the implementation of structural reforms to higher education systems (for example, establishing common degree structures and credit systems). In May 2018, the meeting in Paris (France) called for an intensification of cross-disciplinary and cross-border cooperation as well as the development of an inclusive and innovative approach to learning and teaching.
Since 2002, national authorities and social partners from European countries have taken part in the Copenhagen process. In June 2010, the European Commission presented its proposals for a new impetus for European cooperation in vocational education and training to support the Europe 2020 strategy (COM(2010) 296 final). In December 2010, in Bruges (Belgium) the priorities for the long-term strategic objectives for cooperation in vocational education and training were set for the period covering 2011-2020, alongside 22 short-term deliverables covering the period 2011-2014 which concentrated on specific national actions. The communiqué from Bruges concluded that European education and training systems needed to respond to current and future challenges by, among others: being flexible and of high quality; empowering people to adapt to and manage change by enabling them to acquire key competences; facilitating and encouraging transnational mobility (for both learners and teachers). In June 2015, ministers met in Riga (Latvia) to agree on a new set of deliverables covering the period 2015-2020. These included plans to implement reforms in the following key areas, namely, to:

- promote work-based learning;
- further develop quality assurance mechanisms;
- enhance access to vocational education and training;
- promote vocational education and training qualifications for all;
- strengthen key competences in vocational education and training and to provide more effective opportunities to acquire or develop these skills;
- introduce initial and continuous professional development for vocational education and training teachers, trainers and mentors in both school and work-based settings.

**Erasmus+**

The EU’s programme for education, training, youth and sport, referred to as Erasmus+, was adopted in December 2013. This programme covers the period 2014-2020 and has an overall budget of EUR 14.7 billion. Erasmus+ replaced (and integrated) several programmes:

- the lifelong learning programmes — Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig;
- the Youth in Action programme designed for young people aged 13-30 with the goal of giving them a sense of active European citizenship, solidarity and tolerance;
- international cooperation programmes — Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink and the programme for cooperation with industrialised countries.

With respect to education and training, the programme supports three main types of actions:

- learning opportunities and mobility for individuals, both within the EU and beyond, for example through study and training, traineeships, and teaching and professional development;
- institutional cooperation — for innovation and the exchange of good practices — between educational institutions, youth organisations, businesses, local and regional authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- support for policy reform — designed to promote the active participation of young people in democratic life.

It is expected that over 4 million people will benefit from Erasmus+, including around 2 million higher education students, around 650 thousand vocational training and education students, and around 800 thousand lecturers, teachers, trainers, education staff and youth workers. The opportunities offered by Erasmus+ extend well beyond the higher education sector, as the programme extends into a broad range of youth issues and sports across Europe.

In May 2018, the European Commission adopted proposals for the Erasmus programme for 2021-2027, involving a doubling of the budget to EUR 30 billion which it is expected should enable 12 million people to participate in the programme.
**Education and training statistics**

The measurement of progress towards the objectives described above requires a range of comparable statistics on enrolment in education and training, numbers of graduates and teachers, language learning, student and researcher mobility, educational expenditure, as well as data on educational attainment and adult learning. Education statistics cover a range of subjects, including: educational systems, educational attainment, educational finance, education personnel, learning mobility, languages, the transition from education to work, and adult participation in (lifelong) learning.

The standards for international statistics on education are set by three international organisations:

- the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) institute for statistics (UIS);
- the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD);
- Eurostat, the statistical office of the EU.

The main source of data is a joint UNESCO/OECD/Eurostat (UOE) questionnaire on education systems and this is the basis for the core components of the Eurostat database on education statistics; Eurostat also collects data on regional enrolments and foreign language learning.

Data on educational attainment and adult learning are mainly provided by household surveys, in particular the EU labour force survey (EU-LFS), which is complemented by an adult education survey (AES) and the continuing vocational training survey (CVTS).

**See also**

- All pages on education and training
- Education and training in the EU — facts and figures — online publication

**Dedicated section**

- Education and training

**Methodology**

- Education and training methodology

**Legislation**

- Education and training legislation

**External links**

- European Commission — Education and Training — Strategic framework for education and training 2020
- European Commission — Education and Training — Vocational education and training
- European Commission — Programmes — Erasmus+

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