Neth-ER
Netherlands house for Education and Research

Committing to the European Education Area

Inclusion, Strategy & Cooperation

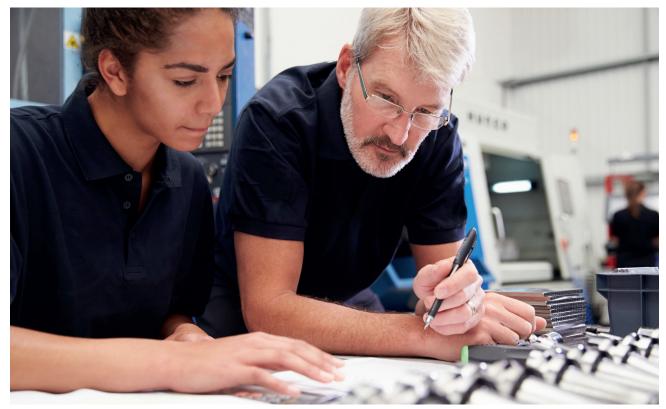Neth-ER position paper on the European Education Area

Committing to the EEA: Inclusion, Strategy & Cooperation

> **Four key actions** are necessary to make the EEA a reality:
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> 1. **Create inclusive and balanced learning mobility**
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> 2. **Boost skills development and LLL for European competitiveness**
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> 3. **Commit to recognition with the Treaty on Automatic Recognition between the Benelux and Baltic states**
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> 4. **Transform the EEA through strong and strategic partnerships**

Neth-ER is an association based in Brussels that represents eleven Dutch organizations involved in the field of education, research, and innovation. In 2020, Neth-ER published a position paper on the EEA[1], titled: 'Learning Europe: the European Education Area'. In this position paper, the Dutch association Neth-ER stresses its appreciation and the importance of the European Education Area (EEA). Neth-ER provides recommendations on four key topics for the EEA, in light of the 2024 public consultation and upcoming evaluation. Simplification of procedures and programs is a prerequisite to achieve an inclusive EEA.

[1]NETH-ER POSITION PAPER Learning Europe: the European Education Area October 2020

I. Learning Mobility

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Recommendations

- Provide adequate and transparent financial support
- Balance inflows and outflows of learning mobility in the higher education sector across member states
- Target vulnerable groups for inclusion through research and diverse mobility forms
- Develop a strategy to encourage green mobility on the long-term

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Match funding with ambitions

Funding should meet the ambitions in the new European framework for learning mobility, to achieve set targets in mobility, inclusion, and VET by 2030. Without adequate financial and administrative resources, reaching these targets becomes challenging. Institutions managing mobility flows demand increased transparency on funding opportunities and support mechanisms within the EEA. We need clear insights into required investments to enhance EEA's long-term strategies.

Balance learning mobility

Learning mobility is currently imbalanced in the higher education sector. Neth-ER appreciates the Commission's acknowledgment of balanced mobility in the framework[2] but urges further development of targeted measures and concrete proposals for member states. Coordination among member states is of utmost importance, for example on aspects such as quality of education and language policy.

The overarching objective should be universal accessibility to learning mobility in all education sectors. However, certain national policies currently stimulate inflows while others trigger outflows, resulting in an imbalance within higher education mobility flows. It must be noted that mobility in vocational education should be approached differently. The Commission should have simple and clear policies and instruments to support member states in obtaining insights into mobility flows. Neth-ER also looks forward to the outcomes from the Erasmus+ interim and final evaluation[3], which should be integrated into the EEA.

Conduct research for clear inclusion frameworks

Clear and simple frameworks are required to facilitate the practical actions for inclusive mobility, as noted in Neth-ER's position paper on Erasmus+ from 2023[4]. Neth-ER welcomes the new learning mobility framework and its increased attention for inclusion measures. But implementing inclusion measures on the ground proves difficult.

[2]Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION 'Europe on the Move' – learning mobility opportunities for everyone
[3]Erasmus+ 2021-27 interim evaluation & Erasmus+ 2014-20 final evaluation
[4]Neth-ER Position Paper Erasmus+ June2023

As studies from the Education and Training Monitor[5] and PISA[6] portray, there are great inequalities and barriers to inclusion, and teacher shortages across Europe make it difficult to implement changes. It is therefore essential that more research about vulnerable groups is conducted.

Firstly, to clearly define inclusion. Secondly, to identify the target groups which currently experience exclusion of mobility. Thirdly, to identify factors behind the exclusion from mobility. Inclusive learning mobility may also be promoted through group mobility as an efficient method due to the multiplier effect. Another way to inform targeted groups, is through recognizable role models. It would also be worth exploring how the European Disability Card could become part of Erasmus+. In all actions, institutions should receive adequate support in the administration and finances around inclusive mobility.

Advocate for diverse mobility forms

In the age of digitalization, the benefits of more diverse and blended forms of mobility opportunities should be embraced. Virtual or blended mobility may add to physical mobility and can thus enhance inclusion.

Short-stay mobility also has great potential to stimulate long-term mobility in the end. At the same time, other forms of mobility should not replace physical mobility. A remarkable initiative is internationalisation@home (I@Home), which allows institutions to integrate international dimensions of education without going abroad. I@Home stimulates the development of intercultural competences in various formats and brings internationalization to all learners in an inclusive way. Neth-ER urges the EEA to promote projects like these to amplify its impact on international mobility.

Take action for green mobility

The EU should increase actions for greener mobility forms, with regards to travel and competence learning, for example by exploring links with Interrail passes to reach Erasmus+ destinations. The current top-ups for green travel are positive, but they cannot be seen as a sufficient action to develop a greener mobility mindset under staff and students. Sustainable mobility should be encouraged with a long-term strategy that includes adequate financial incentives and rewards systems.

[5]Education and Training Monitor 2023 (europa.eu)
[6]PISA 2022 Results (Volume I) : The State of Learning and Equity in Education | PISA | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

II. European skills and talent development

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Recommendations

- Investing in lifelong learning is indispensable to tackle labor shortages
- Digital and green skills development should involve teachers and be inclusive
- Create a competence framework forEuropean citizenship education
- Research and knowledge are the foundation of a high-quality skills policy

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Integrate the Skills Agenda and lifelong learning

The Skills Agenda and lifelong learning are integral to tackle issues such as teacher shortages and labor shortages. The EEA must increase its attention to lifelong learning and green, digital and citizenship skills. As 2023 became the Year of Skills, we must use the momentum to ensure education institutions in combatting skills shortages and mismatches. Digital and green education cannot progress without the advancement of corresponding skills through lifelong learning. This demands investments in upskilling and reskilling for teachers and apprentices to manage digitalization and sustainability processes.

Promote a human-centred approach for digital skills

For the digital transition, the EEA should promote a human-centred approach to the integration of digital skills. Simplification is necessary in order to meet the needs of learners and teachers[7].

Tools such as the European Student Card Initiative (ESCI) are welcomed, but need to be simplified and optimized to become operable to their users. The Commission should invest more into the digitalization of mobility, but only on the condition that tools such as the ESCI are created to be more user-friendly. The Commission should be careful to assess its successes in the higher education sector, before introducing new tools to other education sectors. The new phase of the ESCI with the ESCI Router must be closely catered to meet user needs and facilitate the implementation of the ESCI. A human-centred approach also entails involving teachers in developing policies and guidelines. Including teachers in these processes would facilitate digitalization overall.

Develop GreenComp for its intended users

Neth-ER finds that the EEA should diffuse and promote the Green-Comp[8] framework to its intended users such as curriculum developers for better integration and visibility.

[7]Neth-ER > Onderwijs > From the Ground Up: Redesigning Education to Meet the Needs of Today's Learners
[8]JRC Publications Repository - GreenComp The European sustainability competence framework (europa.eu)

Institutions should explore the use of GreenComp to integrate green skills into curricula and in initial teacher education. They should be let free to implement such tools according to their progress and strategies. Neth-ER welcomes steps that have been taken within European cooperation projects such as the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies, with EduSta[9] as an excellent example.

Form a European strategy for STEAM skills

To support the twin transitions, the EEA must also invest in forming a European strategy for the development of STEAM skills (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics), to directly tackle employment shortages, gender imbalances and foster innovation and research. Especially from early ages on, it is important to encourage learners to pursue competences or careers in STEAM and tackle stereotypical gender roles. Furthermore, a European strategy should stimulate women participation in STEAM. The EU could utilize smart partnerships between primary and secondary schools and companies in the CoVE.

Develop competence framework for European values

European citizenship education must become an integral part of national education systems, through a potential competence framework for active and (EU) democratic citizenship education. Seeing the increasing role the EU plays in citizens' lives, member states should take action to promote European values in education.

The Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship[10] from November 2023 are a positive step into the right direction. The Jean Monnet Actions under Erasmus+[11] may be further deployed to spread knowledge about EU values and democratic citizenship, into all education and training fields

Maintain a strong research and knowledge infrastructure

Finally, it is vital to keep investing in a strong research and knowledge infrastructure for European skills for the twin transitions and democratic citizenship. Adequate and quality research lies at the basis of knowledge innovation and quality of education. Only with adequate investment in the knowledge and innovation infrastructure, education systems can effectively form policies for skills development. The Commission should also actively identify and foster synergies between the EEA, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). The EEA should make knowledge and education a strategic tool to strengthen European competitiveness.

[9]EduSTA draagt bij aan docentontwikkeling voor duurzaamheidsonderwijs
[10]Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship
[11]Jean Monnet Actions | Erasmus+ (europa.eu)

III. Mutual and automatic recognition

Recommendations

- Institutions and member states need to adhere to existing commitments

- Acknowledge institutional differences in a European approach to implementing microcredentials

- At least half of member states should affiliate with the Benelux-Baltic Treaty on Automatic Recognition by 2030

- Incorporate professional recognition in the EEA

Commit to quality education through binding agreements

Neth-ER finds that quality education in the EEA can be enhanced through commitment and binding agreements between institutions and member states. The Commission expresses disappointment at the lack of progress towards European automatic recognition. Despite steps towards a European approach, they report that the current reality has been far from these ambitions[12]. At the same time, it is necessary to increase awareness and transparency on the current actions for automatic recognition. ENIC/NARIC centres[13] provide useful tools to report the progress around automatic recognition from higher education institutions. While progress around de facto automatic recognition in the EEA should not be neglected, recognition requires more commitment and binding agreements from institutions and member states to fully implement this for all education levels.

Neth-ER strongly advocates for the streamlining of national and institutional policies for the mutual and automatic recognition of diplomas and qualifications. However, institutions must always have the ability to determine their own participation and make exceptions to automatic and mutual recognition to safeguard quality education. To foster quality education, Neth-ER asks for clarity around the relation between the EEA and other agendas. For example, the Bologna Declaration from 1999 and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) agenda and the EEA's agenda should become more streamlined and coherent. For this, the Commission should provide adequate support in resources and funding to institutions to deal with the subsequent administrative labor necessary for the implementation thereof.

[12]Progress report from the Commission to the Council on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual ecognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training
[13]ENIC (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) Networks

Streamline implementation for microcredentials

Neth-ER urges the streamlining of implementation measures between member states for microcredentials for increased recognition in the EEA. Microcredentials are a vital instrument for increased academic and professional recognition and lifelong learning. We are grateful for a common European approach to the implementation of microcredentials[14], which creates confidence in the journey towards mutual and automatic recognition. Neth-ER recommends exchanging best practices and dialogue between European, national and regional organizations to facilitate the creation of a common European approach to microcredentials and other qualifications. The implementation of microcredentials should also focus on acknowledging the different starting points of institutions to integrate microcredentials into their systems. It must be respected that there are several pathways to approach them, according to the needs, resources and priorities of institutions. Organizations active in sectors such as non-formal learning, vocational and higher education, adult education and lifelong learning operate in deviating ways. The Commission should keep the needs of institutions close in mind in these processes, and importantly stimulate cooperation between the different education and training fields for microcredentials.

Stimulate membership in the Treaty on Automatic Recognition between the Benelux and Baltic states

The Commission's progress report on the Council Recommendation for automatic recognition[15] calls for more binding initiatives to reach consistent implementation. Therefore, the Commission should stimulate member states and institutions to pursue legally binding membership in the Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications[16], signed by the Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg) and the Baltic (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) countries in 2021. The Treaty is a blueprint for the rest of the EU, as it brings together previous commitments made at the European level, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the ESG and EQF as preconditions for accession. Neth-ER believes it should be a European target to enlarge the number of participants to at least half of the member states to be affiliated with the Treaty by 2030. Neth-ER calls on the Commission and member states to fully embrace this promising Treaty as a way to finally implement automatic mutual recognition across the EU and as a leverage for improving the quality of the EU education system through the linking of the treaty with ESG, EQF and the Lisbon Convention.

[14]Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability
[15]Progress report from the Commission to the Council on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad
[16]Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications

Address professional recognition next to academic recognition

Given labor shortages in many member states, the EEA should also address professional recognition, next to academic recognition. In this, member states should seek similarities in national VET systems and professions through the exchange of best practices and professionalization of earlier initiatives such as EQAVET as a basis of trust. Neth-ER also highly anticipates a VET version of a multilateral agreement between countries for recognition. Member states can build on the commitments made as part of the Osnabrück Declaration of 2020 as the basis for cooperation.

Neth-ER welcomes the recent efforts of the Spanish presidency on recognition of professional qualifications and asks the Commission, member states and in-stitutions to take this work forward. The Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) should be used as a means to stimulate mutual recognition. Especially in sec-tors which actively use digital and green technologies, European cooperation and recognition are logical and prevent duplication. The usage of Europass can also be explored, on the condition that the digital tool improves in user-friendliness across member states. Mutual and automatic recognition of diplo-mas and qualifications are key to improving the quality of education and committing to the EEA.

IV. Inclusive cooperation

Recommendations

- Simplify the designs of CoVE and EUI and make them inclusive

- The Commission must develop CoVE and EUI long-term strategies

- Foster innovation in the EEA and include all stakeholders through an eco-systems approach

- All partnerships and initiatives are vital to make the EEA a strong tool for Europe's global competitiveness

Make CoVE and EUI more inclusive

Neth-ER advocates for a more inclusive design of the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) and the European Universities Initiative (EUI). It is important to strive for simple design of all programs and procedures as a prerequisite to inclusive cooperation. Institutions should be able to participate according to their ambitions. Policies must address the possibility of including more universities of applied sciences into the EUI and combat low success rates for the CoVE. Neth-ER asks for further advancement and ample involvement of students in these networks.

Develop clear long-term visions

The Commission should develop clear long-term visions for both initiatives and how these partnerships will benefit the quality of the education system as a whole. The diversity of interests of the EUI and CoVE must be taken into consideration. Institutions should be able to anticipate financial management related to these diverse networks in both the short and long term. This means the Commission should pay attention to spreading outcomes of these partnerships to other education institutions who do not participate, to create a multiplier effect. With clear expectations around the timeline and actions, institutions will be able to prepare strategic and financial plans to engage with partners within these networks.

Stimulate an ecosystems approach to European education

The EEA must stimulate an ecosystems approach to education to foster innovation. This means focusing on inclusive cooperation with all stakeholders, actively involving civil society, students and educators as well as business actors, research organizations, governments and societal organizations. In this way, education systems can prepare students for the fast-changing society and labor market and function as a driver of the transitions. Furthermore, all programmes and initiatives within Erasmus+ can contribute to innovation and the twin transitions, depending on institutional ambitions and strategies. Through coordinated efforts, the EEA and European education systems become a strong tool for Europe's global competitiveness.

Neth-ER | Netherlands house for Education and Research

The Netherlands house for Education and Research (Neth-ER) is the Brussels based association of eleven Dutch organisations active in research, innovation and education. These are:

ISO - Dutch National Student Association

JOB - Union of Vocational Students

KNAW - Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

LSVb - Dutch National Student Union

MBO Raad - Netherlands Association of Vocational Education Colleges

Nuffic - Netherlands organisation for the internationalisation of education

NWO - Dutch Research Council

TNO - Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research

NFU - Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres

UNL - Universities of the Netherlands

VH - Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences

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