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An EU strategy for modernising higher education – Questions and Answers

[MEMO/11/613](#) and [IP/11/1043](#)

Why is the Commission launching a strategy for modernising higher education?

A reform strategy for the modernisation of higher education is necessary and urgent, because, if properly supported, higher education can be the engine of Europe's competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion, and a key driver for growth and jobs in Europe.

In the European Union, education is principally a matter of national competence. But the challenges have a clear European dimension: this is the key message of the Europe 2020 strategy. Modernising higher education requires an EU-level contribution, in partnership with Member States.

In the global economy, Europe can only compete on the basis of knowledge, skills and capacity for innovation. Demand for people with high skills will continue to rise. 35% of all jobs in the EU will require high-level qualifications by 2020, but only 26% of the workforce currently has a higher education qualification. Europe needs to raise levels of quality too. Education programmes need continual updating, so that graduates have the types of knowledge and skills they will need to succeed, and to have the flexibility to adapt to a changing labour market. Higher education must be more closely aligned to the needs of the labour market, and more open to co-operation with business, including in the design of curricula, improving governance and injecting additional funding.

Higher education should also contribute to making the knowledge economy work better in Europe: creating effective links between education, research and business to produce innovation; and maximising the contribution of higher education to regional regeneration, including through Community funds.

Europe 2020 sent a clear message about the need to invest in growth-friendly areas such as education and research. Particularly in a time of financial constraints, funding must be efficient – freeing up higher education governance and investing in quality education to match labour market needs.

While many European Member States are prioritising the modernisation of their higher education systems, the potential of higher education institutions to contribute to Europe's prosperity, create growth and jobs, and fulfil their wider role in society is not yet fully realised. The Europe 2020 strategy for jobs and growth aims to help develop this potential by placing education at its centre and setting the target that by 2020, 40% of Europe's young people should have completed tertiary education.

What can the EU do to improve higher education in Europe?

Member States are first and foremost responsible for their own education and training systems, and higher education institutions are autonomous organisations in most countries. The EU plays a supporting role, working with Member State authorities in identifying issues, providing evidence of what works and what doesn't, setting joint targets and learning from each other.

Under the Europe 2020 strategy, Member States have agreed to report every year on the progress they are making towards the [shared European targets](#). The Commission will monitor progress made towards reaching the national targets for higher education attainment that the Member States have set to contribute to the overall EU target.

In addition, at the EU level, we provide funds to encourage institutions both in the EU and across the world to co-operate and to create more opportunities for students and staff to study, train or teach abroad. We also provide money for education and training through the Structural Funds. The EU also launches specific initiatives where it can achieve better results than Member States acting alone, such as the cross-border European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, which recognises periods spent studying or training abroad.

This combination of approaches has allowed the EU to contribute effectively to change at system and institutional level, as well as bringing benefits to individuals who benefit from funding for study and training abroad. This renewed reform agenda will give further impetus to this process. For example, as announced in this strategy, the Commission will:

- Develop a new **multi-dimensional information and ranking tool** for profiling higher education institutions, to improve the transparency of the higher education sector.
- Through its proposal for a new single funding programme for education, training and youth from 2014 (see [IP/11/857](#)), extend opportunities for all students to study or to follow a traineeship in another country.
- Launch, as part of the new programme, an Erasmus Masters' degree mobility **loan guarantee scheme**, to enable more students to find affordable finance to take their Masters degree in another Member State.
- Set up the **EU Skills Panorama** to improve intelligence on current and future skills needs.
- Improve data on **graduate employment** and on **learning mobility**, as a basis for better policies.
- Work with Member States and stakeholders to **analyse the impact of different funding approaches** on higher education.
- Propose a **quality framework for traineeships** to help students and graduates gain relevant experience and obtain better quality placements.
- Improve the **recognition of studies abroad** by strengthening the [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System](#) (ECTS) for recognising results from learning mobility.

How will this modernisation strategy contribute to meeting the 40% EU target for higher education attainment?

Increasing graduate numbers will require higher education to be more attractive to groups that are currently under-represented, such as those from low-income backgrounds and migrant groups. This includes making courses as relevant as possible to the needs of the labour market and creating new, more flexible ways to study, including distance, modular, or part-time learning.

Making it easier for students to move between higher education systems in different countries and to spend periods abroad (through "mobility windows" in course programmes) will make higher education more attractive.

Raising the proportion of young people in higher education also requires changes in school education to tackle early school leaving (see [MEMO/11/316](#)) and to ensure pupils receive adequate information and guidance about the higher education options open to them.

But raising participation will not be enough, if those who go to university are not able to complete their studies. Measures to reduce drop-out should include tailored guidance to inform study choices, more flexibility in moving between courses and adequate financial support, especially for those from lower income backgrounds.

How much does the Commission spend on education/training each year?

The budget for the EU's funding programmes in education and training which includes schemes such as the Erasmus mobility programme, is currently about €7 billion, over the seven year budgetary period (2007-13). Through 'Marie Curie Actions' the EU spends an additional €4.7 billion on training, mobility and career development of researchers.

In addition, investment from the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund, represents more than €72 billion for education and training and €60 billion for research and innovation during 2007-2013.

The Commission proposals for the next budgetary period (2014-2020) stress the priority of 'smart growth' through knowledge creation and upskilling and include substantial increases for investment in skills and knowledge creation. According to the Commission's proposal, a single funding programme for education, training and youth would receive €15.2 billion in 2014-2020, an increase of 73% on current investment (€8.8 billion for 2007-2013). The Commission has proposed a 46% rise in research funding, increasing this to €80 billion under the planned 'Horizon 2020' funding programme.

How does the EU strategy for the modernisation of higher education link to the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process)?

The European Higher Education Area ([Bologna Process](#)) is an intergovernmental co-operation process involving 47 countries, including all EU Member States. The European Commission is a full partner and provides policy input and financial support for many Bologna activities, such as providing funding for experts to advise institutions on implementing Bologna reforms. The current Bologna priorities are set out in the [Leuven-Louvain la Neuve Communiqué](#) of 2009.

The EU agenda for the modernisation of higher education responds to the Europe 2020 strategy and is a key priority of the Commission's Youth on the Move initiative (see [IP/10/1124](#)). The 27 EU Member States, plus candidate countries and associated countries, co-operate to share policy experience in order to learn from each other and work towards agreed targets. The Commission monitors progress and supports Member State reform efforts, including through country-specific recommendations and with EU funding programmes.

Many of the key issues are common to both processes, such as widening the participation of underrepresented groups, and increasing the employability of graduates.