

Norwegian comment to the Communication from the European Commission on achieving the European Education Area by 2025

Comments from the Norwegian Minister of Education and Integration and the Norwegian Minister of Research and Higher Education to the Communication, 30 October 2020

Introduction

Norway welcomes the *Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, adopted by the European Commission on 30 September 2020.

Norway is a committed partner in the European education cooperation through our active participation in the Erasmus+ programme for nearly three decades, and the European education cooperation is an integrated part of Norwegian education. Norway's participation in Erasmus+ is based on the relevant provisions in the Agreement on the European Economic Area (the EEA Agreement). The EEA Agreement brings together the EU Member States and the three EEA EFTA States — Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway — in a single market, referred to as the "Internal Market". We appreciate that Erasmus+ is highlighted as an important instrument to achieve the ambitions of the European Education Area.

With this comment, we want to state that Norway wants to take an active part in the further development of the European Education Area, and we look forward to being involved in the discussions and consultations. Norway welcomes the co-creation process that the Commission describes, a process which will involve Member States and other stakeholders. Social partners, students and student organisations, and regions are also important stakeholders for the development of the Education Area, both on the European and national levels, and should be involved in the coming processes.

Norway is also contributing in the new phase of the development of the European Research Area. It is important for us to engage in these processes, and to bring them forward. We support promoting synergies between research, innovation, and education policies, including between the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged our societies as a whole, and the education and training systems in particular, and it has had a negative impact on the learning situation and results of many pupils and students. However, the pandemic has also incited great leaps in the digitalization of our education systems and inspired innovative approaches by teachers, trainers, and students, that we need to build on.

Education, at all levels, is the basis for personal fulfilment, active and responsible citizenship, employability, as well as a prerequisite for developing the workforce needed to create inclusive societies, as well as being an important element to foster broader social cohesion and integration of refugees and third country nationals, and fulfill the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDG number 4 and the 1st principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights both aim to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all, and we are pleased that they also form an important basis for the European Education Area.

The longstanding European cooperation in education, combined with national efforts and multilateral processes such as the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes, has already shown great results. Norway emphasizes the need to build on the successes already achieved, so that new initiatives support, strengthen, and bring added value to already existing common principles, frameworks, platforms and methods.

Comments to the six dimensions of the European Education Area

Quality

Quality in education is at the core of European education cooperation and a main motivation for Norway's engagement. Norway appreciates how the quality development has been addressed under the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework. The discussions at Working Group and Director-General levels, as well as peer learning and peer counselling activities and the Commission's initiatives in the follow-up of the discussions, including calls in Erasmus+, have provided important inputs to the development of the Norwegian national policy developments.

High quality education through the whole education system, from Early Childhood Education and Care to higher education, is important for the individuals as well as for the society. The education and training systems have to meet the needs and the abilities of individual pupils and students. This requires development of suitable educational tools and pedagogical approaches. The indisputable basis for high quality education, however, is that curriculum and working methods at all levels build on solid knowledge, based on research. Quality education provides the basis for learning to distinguish between truth and "fake news", a necessary competence for pupils and students, both in their personal and working lives. It also helps install the curiosity to keep updated on the latest knowledge development in one's fields.

Schools need to give pupils the opportunity to learn about democracy and promote active citizenship. Pupils and students should learn to be inquisitive, ask questions, develop scientific and critical thinking and act with ethical awareness. We also welcome the emphasis on the importance of language learning and multilingualism.

One particular issue – not especially addressed in the Communication, but still important from an educational perspective – is the opportunity for digital training of health professionals. Digitalisation provides new opportunities that may contribute to increased quality in training within many professions. It is important that regulations do not prevent such a development. An example is the Requirements for clinical training in the Directive on recognition of professional qualifications (2005/36/EC) for some of the professions with harmonised minimum training requirements (e.g. nurses). Norway would like to contribute in a discussion on how the directive in the future can take advantage of the digital development and enable opportunities for increased use of simulation based learning in the education and training of health professionals.

We support the focus on mobility of pupils and students in upper secondary education, including vocational education and training (VET), as well as higher and other post-secondary and tertiary education. A long term goal of the Norwegian government is that 50 per cent of all students in higher education should spend a study period abroad during their studies. Our aim is that mobility

should be the norm in all study programmes, and that students will actively need to decline the offer if they don't want to be mobile, a so-called "opt-out" strategy.

Norway already participates in, and encourages, both the European Universities Initiative and the Centres of Vocational Excellence, as means to improve and develop higher education and VET.

Inclusion and gender equality

Norway welcomes the ambition to develop an inclusive education, in which educational achievement is decoupled from social, economic, and cultural background. To fulfil this, the education systems need to be inclusive and flexible, supportive of diversity, and address the needs of the individuals as well as the labour market. Education and training, together with the labour market, is an important arena for integration of refugees and other third-country nationals.

Early school leaving and low achievements in basic skills need to be addressed, and we welcome a European arena for discussion and cooperation in these fields, including the "Pathways to School Success".

Inclusion is a fundamental principle to improve our education systems. We believe that it is important to strengthen the competence and capacity of all professionals working with children in kindergartens and schools. The government has developed concrete measures to achieve this.

We support that there is a need to further develop the role of upper secondary education, vocational training and higher education institutions in lifelong learning policies, so that they can offer flexible and tailored courses. The skills acquired through such courses need to be recognized and validated. As an example, Norway is currently trying out modular curricula in upper secondary vocational education and training, so that adults can build up to a full qualification.

The development of a European Approach to micro-credentials should build on the common standards and frameworks already in place, and respect for the principle of subsidiarity. It is also a prerequisite that the authority and autonomy of the educational institutions is respected when it comes to the organisation, modes of delivery, and content of the study programmes provided, as well as the degrees awarded. Norway looks forward to contributing in the further discussions on the development of a European Approach to micro-credentials.

Norway supports the ambition to create 50 Centres of Vocational Excellence during the next years. These centres will contribute to highlight how important vocational education and training will be to develop Europe after the pandemic. The centres will also be crucial for enhance cooperation with different education institutions, stakeholders and the world of work.

Norway welcomes the Commission's ambition to address the broader spectrum of gender issues in education. In our experience, the work on gender equality needs to start from an early age, in order to tackle gender stereotypes and gender based-based discrimination in education and career choices. We welcome the Commission's proposal to work towards proper gender balance in leadership positions.

Green and digital transitions

We consider the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the European Green Deal, and the Digital Strategy as forceful agendas for the European Education Area. We welcome the similarity of goals set for the European Education Area and the European Research Area, thus constituting a firm basis for the development of synergies between the two areas and for reaching the goals.

The Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes need to support our efforts towards reaching the SDGs in general and the green and digital transitions in particular. It is important that achievements and methods of research and innovation are introduced in curricula, learning tools, pedagogical methods and communication in general. Pupils and teachers at all levels of education and training could play a role in the realization of citizens science, and as actors in citizens science campaigns.

Digital education will need to be a priority in the years to come, both for the use of digital technology by schools, higher education institutions, teachers, and students for better teaching and learning, and for the development of digital skills and competencies at all levels of education and training.

Teachers and trainers

The role and conditions of teachers and trainers are crucial to further develop the quality in education. It is important to involve the educational institutions and the teachers' professional organisations actively in the process. Norway supports the new Erasmus+ Teacher Academies initiative, to be launched in the next Erasmus+ programme period, as an arena for cooperation between the teacher training institutions, to share good practice, to increase international cooperation and for developing the initial and continuous teacher education. We would like to contribute in the further development of this initiative and emphasize that the development of the initiative should also include a broad spectrum stakeholders. We would also like to emphasise the value of the eTwinning platform, which supports cross-border cooperation between teachers around Europe.

Higher education

Higher education institutions are at the heart of the knowledge system, and we support the reference to their mission as "the knowledge square". The higher education institutions are particularly well placed to ensure that a stronger link is made between higher education and research. They are at the centre of the production of new knowledge through teaching, through research and development, and through interaction with society at large, including external stakeholders, on knowledge production and innovation. It is important that Higher Education Institutions work systematically to develop study programmes of high quality, which includes cooperation with the labour market, and enable the students to gain new knowledge throughout their personal and professional life.

In Norwegian higher education institutions, the majority of the academic staff are engaged in both teaching and research. The process of recruiting and developing attractive careers for academic staff is crucial. Thus, we support the European Research Area priority of making researchers' careers attractive. Further, career frameworks and reward systems should support all the tasks of higher education institutions, which should be reflected in further development of instruments and career frameworks, Charter&Code for researchers, and other EURAXESS tools.

We acknowledge the need for a transformation agenda for higher education that shows how the various concrete initiatives work together in a holistic way. We support the co-creation approach, whereby the transformation agenda will be developed in synergy with the European Research Area, together with Member States, EEA EFTA countries and other stakeholders.

The Communication proposes and outlines several initiatives for developing and implementing the European Education Area, such as a European Degree, a legal statute for the alliances of universities, the full rollout of European Universities, micro-credentials and a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System. Some of these initiatives, like the European Universities, have already been

established and proven successful, while others have yet to be developed. It is our profound belief that the new initiatives should build upon tools and systems already developed and implemented in higher education, also through the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These include the ECTS, the common degree structure, and the qualifications framework adopted for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), *The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*, as well as EU tools like the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), and existing co-operation in the area of recognition.

Norway believes that the European Universities Initiative may act as a game changer for higher education in Europe. The European University Alliances should be given autonomy in the pilot period in order to strive for different and ambitious goals. Five Norwegian universities participate in different alliances, and we would like to see more participating in the years to come. The Ministry of Education and Research is committed to cooperating with these universities in order to remove any formal, national obstacles that may appear, and facilitate further development of the alliances. We welcome the further development of Universities in Europe in cooperation with the European Research Area.

While the Norwegian legal and regulatory framework for higher education permits both establishing and awarding joint degrees, we are a bit hesitant towards developing a European degree for the Universities alliances. It is not clear to us how the proposed European Degree could be established within the existing quality assurance systems, and we would like to underline the need to take into account *The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*. We agree that this proposal requires further work and would like to signal interest in participating in exploratory work in this regard.

Similarly, the Commission's proposal of exploring the necessity and feasibility of a legal statute for alliances of universities, such as the European Universities, raises a number of sensitive issues and would require further study. We would like to stress that diversity and autonomous higher education institutions are highly important aspects of European higher education. Hence, we underline the need to keep this in mind when developing the European Education Area.

Offering smaller units of learning is important in order to enable learners to update their skills and competences at various stages in their lives. Many higher education institutions offer such smaller flexible units today, but there is a need to further develop the delivery of these units in a lifelong learning perspective. An EU-framework for micro-credentials is referred to in the document, encompassing both VET and higher education. However, how these micro credentials differ from other smaller units of learning already in existence and how they are to be defined is still unclear to us. We welcome the fact that a Council Recommendation is to be developed on micro credentials, and we would like to contribute to this work. In addition we would like to underline the need to build on existing tools and standards already developed and implemented in the work on micro credentials.

Geopolitical dimension

Cooperation with other countries and regions is important to make Europe's education, research and innovation competitive on the global scene, to promote European values, and also to achieve the SDGs. We consider the means and milestones defined to follow up the priorities as important, and to the point. For instance, we are very much in favour of opening up to the world actions such as

Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, as that will most likely be met with enthusiasm in our higher education sector.

New initiatives should support, strengthen and bring added value to already existing common principles, frameworks, platforms and methods. Acknowledging that our challenges are global, Europe should cooperate on a global scale, to promote a sustainable world development.

[An enabling framework to achieve the European Education Area](#)

Norway welcomes the Commission's proposal to enter into a co-creating process towards a new governance framework for the period 2025–2030.

Norway participates in all the Working Groups under the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework, as well as in the Directors-General formations for higher education, vocational education and training, and schools. Norway values the opportunity to take part in the discussions taking place in these arenas, and finds that the cooperation under the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework has supported and complemented national policy development and actions.

In today's governance framework, we miss the opportunity to participate in the discussions in the High Level Group. We would like to see that the development of a new governance framework would allow a closer involvement of Norway on all levels, on similar terms as in the European Research Area. We would also like to discuss how Norway could be more closely included in the stock of progress to meet our common goals by 2025.