



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Higher education package

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities
[COM(2022) 16 final]

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation
[COM(2022) 17 final]

SOC/715

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Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted at plenary	23/03/2022
Plenary session No	568
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	190/0/2

1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC underlines the importance of the European Commission's statement regarding the initiative: "Universities need to be places of freedom: for speech, thought, learning, research and academic freedom at large. Academic freedom cannot be isolated from institutional autonomy, nor from the participation of students and staff in higher education governance."¹ It asks the European Commission, the Member States and higher education institutions (HEI) to consider this a guiding principle for implementation.
- 1.2 The EESC is pleased that the initiative encourages the Member States and HEI to bolster transnational cooperation in order to improve students' skills and competences for the twin transitions of the labour market and economy, uphold the EU's values, identity and democracy, and make European society and economy more resilient.
- 1.3 The EESC would point to² the important role played by HEI in improving green skills acquisition, environmental responsibility and sustainable development which should be integrated transversally within the learning outcomes of education. It welcomes the European Commission's intended actions to help the Member States and HEI to develop national and whole-institutional approaches to sustainability and climate and environmental literacy. The EESC would point out that this is important for students in full study programmes and for learners taking HEI's lifelong learning programmes, not only for micro-credentials³.
- 1.4 The EESC calls on the Member States and HEI to improve the quality, fairness, equality and social inclusion of higher education and research when setting up digitalisation strategies, to enhance equal access to digital material for all students, to support the safe use of digital technologies while always prioritising the social interaction of in-person teaching, and to respect academics' intellectual property rights. The EESC calls on the European Commission to engage with students and academics when developing education and training programmes on digital skills within the Digital Europe Programme.
- 1.5 The EESC underscores the importance of balanced partnerships between HEI and companies, with a view to meeting the skills needs of students, society and the labour market, and to ensuring and broadening access for students to high quality and paid apprenticeships and traineeships in companies and institutions. It calls on the Member States and HEI to ensure academic freedom and institutional autonomy, especially in relation to collaboration with non-academic actors on curriculum development, skills and the requirements incumbent upon academic staff.
- 1.6 The EESC would point out that the European Commission and every Member State must protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy as fundamental values enshrined in the [Rome Communiqué](#). The EESC welcomes the European University Alliances (UA) initiative as

¹ Communication from the Commission on a European strategy for universities, 2022.

² [OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1.](#)

³ [OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1.](#)

Erasmus+ projects which comprise voluntary and bottom-up actions by HEI, and they are important for closer cooperation under democratic leadership. The EESC is concerned that fundamental values are at stake when the European Commission and Council institutionalise UA projects, asking the Member States to set up a legal statute for the Alliances' joint European degrees, as well as external quality assurance and accreditation for the Alliances' joint transnational educational activities and programmes.

- 1.7 The EESC flags up the essential value of diversity of HEI which can support different kinds of cultural, educational, societal and economic needs. The EESC calls for the equal value of HEI both outside and within the UA to be acknowledged and for the principle of freedom of knowledge to be upheld. The EESC welcomes the establishment of guiding principles protecting fundamental academic values, based on the Rome Communiqué, with the involvement of the relevant social partners and stakeholders.
- 1.8 The EESC regrets that HEI are underfunded⁴ despite their increased needs during the pandemic, and calls on the Member States to increase public funding for them. It is concerned about the increasing privatisation of HEI and private investment in higher education and research which could jeopardise academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It also points out that keeping up financial support for the UA will ensure sustainable national public funding for all HEI. The EESC calls on the Member States to use the European Semester and the EU funds, including the RRF, ESF+, Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, to help the HEI to achieve their goals.
- 1.9 The EESC asks the European Commission to monitor EU, national and institutional level investment in higher education, using the leading political tools of the European Semester and the RRF. It also asks the Commission to restrict use of the European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard and the findings of the Expert Group on Quality Investment in Education and Training to a supporting role.
- 1.10 The EESC is concerned about the objectives and governance of the European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard which conducts annual assessments of the progress made across the EU towards meeting the initiative's key priorities: inclusion, values, quality and relevance, mobility, green and digital skills, employability, transnational cooperation, technology transfer and knowledge valorisation. The EESC asks the European Commission to clarify the role of this tool in monitoring the Member States' progress and the governance of this monitoring tool in relation to the European Semester process, and to specify whether this tool will also be used to monitor national investment in higher education. The EESC asks for the role of the Member States, social partners in the field of education and relevant stakeholder in the process to be upheld.
- 1.11 The EESC welcomes the establishment of a European Higher Education Sector Observatory to bring the best current EU data tools and capacities together. The EESC asks the European Commission to uphold the role of the Member States, social partners in the field of education and relevant stakeholder in this process. The social partners play an important role in the education-to-work transition, in representing students' labour market interests and in reducing

⁴ [EUA Public Funding Observatory Report 2019/20.](#)

the number of NEETs. More efforts should be made at both EU and Member State level to track students as they move from education to work.

- 1.12 The EESC asks the European Commission and the Member States to actively involve social partners in the field of education and civil society organisations in the further development of the Commission's initiatives and actions under this strategy and in implementation at Member State level. This is important in order to ensure that students acquire the skills needed to be citizens of a democracy and to access quality jobs within the twin transitions. Democratic governance and effective social dialogue are essential to improve students' wellbeing, academic freedom, permanent status and working conditions for staff, and institutional autonomy. The EESC asks the European Commission to involve social partners in the field of education and civil society organisations in developing European criteria for awarding a European Degree label.
- 1.13 The EESC asks the Member States and HEI to involve learners, academics and researchers more effectively in the governance of higher education policy and institutional, transnational cooperation structures, with effective collaborative leadership, collegial governance and social dialogue. This should seek to ensure good quality and inclusive higher education and research, effective mobility of students, staff and researchers, and full diversity (including gender equality) of students, academics, researchers and professional staff.
- 1.14 The EESC asks the European Commission to ensure that there is social dialogue with academic trade unions when developing a European framework for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, to improve the working conditions, well-being and status of academics, and to support academic careers in and beyond academia. Increasing the participation of students in the decision-making process and improving the operational capacity of student organisations should be a constant concern. ESF+ funds could be allocated to this end.
- 1.15 The EESC welcomes the promotion of staff and students from diverse backgrounds, entailing setting up a European framework for diversity and inclusion (including gender gaps), providing support for at risk researchers with guiding principles for universities to facilitate their inclusion, and setting up national and institutional strategies for inclusion with a focus on refugees and asylum-seekers. The EESC calls for transparent and fair recognition of third-country qualifications, including those held by refugees, through the network of academic recognition centres. The EESC asks the European Commission, the Member States and HEI to develop such strategies together with students and staff, particularly those who can bring to bear their own experience in strategy development.
- 1.16 The EESC welcomes the further development of the European Student Card initiative, in order to reduce the administrative burden involved in managing student and staff mobility and exchanges, while also flagging up the importance of ensuring data security and protection. Reducing red tape and facilitating credit transfers between Member States is mandatory for assuring proper mobility at EU level.
- 1.17 The EESC welcomes the move to extend mobility of students and staff to third countries and points to the importance of in-person mobility and ensuring health and safety. It welcomes the

new Erasmus Charter for Higher Education and the new Erasmus Student Charter; they integrate academic freedom and integrity and foster academic debates and the exchange of good practices on values and democracy, as part of Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Higher Education activities, including in third countries.

2. Background to the opinion

- 2.1 After the Education Council of the EU had adopted the Council conclusions on the [European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education](#), the European Commission published two documents. The Communication from the Commission on a European Strategy for Universities includes the actions set to be taken by the European Commission between 2022 and 2024 on higher education and research, while the proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, to be adopted by the Education Council of Ministers at their meeting on 4-5 April 2022, includes specific recommendations for the Member States. These initiatives plan to meet the new EU target whereby by 2030, at least 45% of 25-34 year-olds obtain tertiary level attainment⁵.
- 2.2 Through this initiative, the Commission plans to expand the existing 41 European University Alliances to 60, with more than 500 universities being members by mid-2024. There will be an indicative Erasmus+ budget of EUR 1.1 billion for 2021-2027 and several supporting initiatives.
- 2.3 The recommendations to the Member States ask them to enable HEI to develop and implement innovative joint transnational education activities (within and beyond the EU), to set up a legal statute for the European University Alliances by 2024, to facilitate the delivery at national level of a joint European degree by 2024, including the link to the National Qualifications Frameworks, to support more mobility for students and staff (including online), to provide sustainable financial support for European Universities Alliances, and to promote and protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

3. General comments

- 3.1 The EESC points out⁶ that "It is important to seek more connections between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area to improve the quality and inclusiveness of higher education and research for all students regardless of their age or socio-economic background. Enhancing the quality and recognition of studies between universities needs to be an important focus of the European Universities initiative. While higher education is a national competence, the Commission's proposals for the European Degree, a European University Statute and a European Recognition and Quality Assurance System seems to be a move towards the synchronisation of higher education studies. Thus, the EESC requests that the ideas behind these initiatives and further policy actions be further discussed with governments, relevant social partners and civil society organisations." The EESC is pleased that the social

⁵ The Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030).

⁶ [OJ C 10, 11.1.2021, p. 40.](#)

partners and civil society organisations could express their views on this initiative via public consultations.

- 3.2 Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are increasingly under attack in some countries which are signatories to the Bologna Process⁷. The [Rome Communiqué](#), adopted by 49 ministries of the European Higher Education Area at the 2020 Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process, reaffirms the ministers' commitment to "promoting and protecting our shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation as the necessary basis for quality learning, teaching and research as well as for democratic societies". They also committed "to upholding institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education". [Annex I of the Rome Communiqué](#) defines academic freedom as "an indispensable aspect of quality learning, teaching and research in higher education as well as of democracy" based on institutional autonomy, and underlines that "Societies cannot be genuinely democratic without honouring academic freedom and institutional autonomy".
- 3.3 The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on teaching and research methods, university operation (in terms of campus closures and the shift to online learning) and university governance. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of universities' community engagement. Approximately half of all students felt that their academic performance worsened with online education, and they have had a larger workload since the transition to online teaching. Access to digital skills, online communication tools and the internet remained a challenge for many socio-economically disadvantaged students. There was also an impact on students' psychological and emotional well-being⁸.
- 3.4 For academic staff, the COVID-19 crisis has led to a deterioration in working conditions, including massively increased workloads due to online and blended learning, and job losses for fixed-term and casual staff. These developments have had a disproportionate effect on specific groups of staff, such as women and ethnic minorities. The pandemic has also had a detrimental impact on the mental health and well-being of staff.
- 3.5 Academic staff play a vital role in providing quality education and research in universities. Even before the pandemic, academics across Europe faced decreasing job security, due to budget constraints, reduced employment opportunities, an increasing proportion of staff in temporary, part-time or fixed-term positions, and an increasing proportion of staff in externally funded positions. Decent working conditions and salaries are pivotal if they are to be able to effectively prepare their students for the twin transitions of society and the economy. Academics on fixed-term contracts are in precarious employment situations which makes it harder for them to undertake high quality teaching and research⁹. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the career prospects of post-doctoral researchers and is having a detrimental effect on their well-

⁷ https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/academic-freedom-monitoring-project-index/?_gp=1.

⁸ European Commission: [The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence](#), 2021.

⁹ ETUCE [Report to Rome Ministerial Meeting](#) (2020).

being. Younger and female researchers are more likely to be affected by precarious conditions and by the negative effects of the pandemic in this regard¹⁰. Increasing allowances for doctoral researchers and ensuring free access to literature and participation in international conferences should be a priority.

- 3.6 In order to reduce skills shortages and ensure that students from HEI can access the labour market, effective partnerships between HEI and companies and access by students to high quality and paid apprenticeships and traineeships in companies is essential. The EESC would point out that "Business and higher education partnerships should be beneficial for both parties without external pressure and be balanced to ensure company research and innovation work in its own right and public higher education and research objectives in its own right¹¹."
- 3.7 Facilitating access to higher education should take into account the fact that university fees are under pressure due to energy prices and additional costs relating to the educational process (accommodation, access to literature, etc.). Additional costs could be subsidised by EU funds, reducing exposure to loans and other financial methods used to finance university studies. Synergies must be ensured between the dynamic of technological progress and the equipment, standards and procedures used in the educational process, in order to ensure an efficient transition from education to active life.

Brussels, 23 March 2022

Christa Schweng
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

¹⁰ OECD: [Reducing the precarity of academic research careers](#), 2021.

¹¹ [OJ C 10, 11.1.2021, p. 40](#).