

Covid-19 has significantly disrupted education and training worldwide and in the European Union. This article presents the process of policy reflection and formation at the European Commission in the field of education, looking at the challenges, objectives, and framework for cooperation at EU level. The key instruments include the European Semester, European Education Area, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility as the centrepiece of NextGenerationEU.

Covid-19 has put unprecedented pressure on education and training worldwide. The pandemic and the subsequent move to remote or blended learning have been a watershed event for Member States' education and training systems, strongly affecting students' and teachers' wellbeing. Countries faced similar challenges during the crisis, in providing all learners with access to online learning; helping children to cope with the lack of social interaction with friends, classmates, and teachers; and supporting them when confronted with challenges they faced in their families.

Despite efforts and some progress in recent years, too many young people in the European Union (EU) still leave education and training without upper-secondary qualification, and one in five 15-year-olds do not reach sufficient competences in reading, mathematics, or science. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented among those leaving education and training early or not having sufficient competences (European Commission, 2020, pp. 12–13). Additionally, pupils' wellbeing and sense of belonging to school are declining, with many suffering from bullying or violence at school (OECD, 2019).

The health crisis is likely to have worsened the situation, with especially detrimental effects on disadvantaged learners in all European countries (European Commission, 2020, p. 11). Supporting teachers and schools, including the wellbeing of school staff and students, in the aftermath of the pandemic will be key to prevent disengagement and school failure of many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Support to tackle the pandemic's impact on education and training

Member States are solely responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems. EU policies in the fields of education and training are designed to facilitate

European Cooperation in Education

Policy reflection and development in the field of education at the European Commission



Sylwia Sitka

Policy Officer,
Directorate-General
for Education, Youth,
Sport and Culture,
European Commission



Susanne Conze

Head of Country
Analysis Unit,
Directorate-General
for Education, Youth,
Sport and Culture,
European Commission

the exchange among Member States and to help address common challenges such as skills deficits, an ageing teaching force, the requirements of technological developments, and the green and digital transitions.

In light of Covid-19, the ambition of the European Commission is to support Member States to prevent the crisis from creating long-term structural barriers to the young generations' future (European Commission, 2020, p. 3). Helping young people to reach their full potential, regardless of their socio-economic background, is the guiding principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (Council of the European Union, 2017). There are two ways the Commission can support Member States: by facilitating exchange among Member States, and by providing financial support for their initiatives and projects.

“ **The main instrument to recover and emerge stronger from the pandemic is NextGenerationEU, providing substantial financial support to Member States.** ”

Looking at the money first, relevant financial support for education in the last decades came from the Structural Funds (European Social Funds and European Regional and Development Funds), but also the Erasmus+ programme supported a huge number of initiatives in schools, higher education institutions, vocational education and training (VET), and adult learning. Both will play an important role also in future.

In addition, existing European funds were reallocated in recent months to help Member States to address their most urgent needs resulting from the pandemic. The main instrument to recover and emerge stronger from the pandemic is NextGenerationEU, providing substantial financial support to Member States.

Its centrepiece is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), providing up to €675 billion in grants (€312.5b) and loans (€360b). The RRF supports sustainable and growth-enhancing reforms and investments to help recovery and build institutional capacity, essential to reduce inequalities and divergences in the Union. Among its six pillars are policies for the next generation, for children and young people.

Member States have prepared national plans under RRF, and, according to provisional calculations, all education levels and sectors will benefit from major investments. At least 37% of the total expenditure will be devoted to climate-related investments, and at least 20% to promoting digital transitions (European Parliament and the Council, 2021).

European cooperation and exchange about education policies takes place at different levels. The European Semester, a framework for the coordination of economic policies across the EU since 2010, has allowed EU countries to discuss their economic and budget plans and monitor progress. In its context, the Commission carries out country analyses across a range of policy areas, including education and training.

These analyses support EU Member States to address social challenges identified at EU, national, and regional level. They also assess progress made on implementing necessary reforms and investments. Based on its analyses, the Commission proposes country-specific recommendations to each Member State, which are then discussed and adopted in the Council. In the

area of education and training, recommendations often address the need to improve basic and digital skills, as well as the quality and inclusiveness of education and training. The European Semester will be closely linked to NextGenerationEU and the recovery from the crisis.

More specifically, in the area of education and training, Member States have worked for the two last decades in the so-called open method of coordination: they agree on common targets and exchange on the different approaches in Member States to achieve these targets. The current cycle of cooperation, launched in 2021, is shaped by the ambition to create a European Education Area (EEA), a genuine European space of learning, which benefits all learners, teachers, and institutions.

This ambition has gained even more relevance in light of Covid-19. The pandemic increased the risk of learning losses, disengagement, and lack of access to high-quality remote or blended learning for young people, as well as affecting some students' mental health. Debates at European level show that Member States are interested in exchanging on good practices to stop the crisis from hampering learning and skills development – and consequently employment prospects and participation in society. The EEA therefore ties in with NextGenerationEU and the European Semester. It aims to develop a holistic approach to EU action in education and training.

European Education Area and the way forward

To allow the EEA to become a reality by 2025, and to keep track of the progress achieved, the Council agreed on seven EU-level targets to be reached (Council of the European Union, 2021):

1. The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science should be less than 15% by 2030.
2. The share of low-achieving eighth-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15% by 2030.
3. At least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care by 2030.
4. The share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9% by 2030.
5. The share of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45% by 2030.
6. The share of recent graduates from VET benefiting from exposure to work-based learning during their VET should be at least 60% by 2025.
7. At least 47% of adults aged 25–64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months by 2025.

An online European Education Area platform will serve as a public gateway and ensure transparency and access to information on the EEA and the outputs of policy cooperation. This cooperation will be based on working groups addressing the key challenges in early childhood education and care, schools, higher education, vocational education and training, and adult learning. Working groups will also be created to discuss digital education, equality, and values in education and training.

Representatives from all Member States can engage in peer learning activities and peer counselling, aiming to profit as much as possible from the experiences made in different parts of Europe. The annual Education and Training Monitor, published by the European Commission, reports on Member States' progress towards achieving the EEA 2030 targets. It gathers a wide range of evidence to indicate the evolution of national education and training systems across the EU.

The Monitor comprises a cross-country comparison and 27 in-depth country reports. Its lead theme in 2020 was digital education and digital competence, and in 2021 it was wellbeing in education, including the impact of Covid-19. This analysis also feeds into the evaluation of broader socio-economic progress by Member States in the framework of the European Semester.

A new initiative launched by the European Commission in 2021 is Pathways to School Success. It looks for policies to improve basic skills and reduce further early school leaving, addressing exactly the educational problems that the pandemic might have increased: school failure and unequal access to high-quality education. Creating positive and welcoming learning environments, improving mental health and wellbeing, and fighting bullying will be at its centre.

Education and training will play an important role in recovering from the crisis, in building a greener and more resilient Europe, and in mastering the digital transition. Education and training also play an enormous role for each person in the EU: for children and young people to develop the right skills and competences to have a good start in life, and for adults to adapt to new requirements in the labour market and in society.

Member States can profit a lot from European cooperation. With all the challenges ahead of us, the next years will be a tremendously interesting and challenging time in this cooperation.

REFERENCES

- Council of the European Union (2017) European Pillar of Social Rights. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/proclamation-pillar_en.pdf.
- Council of the European Union (2021) Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021–2030). www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48584/st06289-re01-en21.pdf.
- European Commission (2020) Education and Training Monitor 2020: Teaching and learning in a digital age. Luxembourg Publications Office of the EU. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/92c621ce-2494-11eb-9d7e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.
- European Commission (2021, forthcoming) Education and Training Monitor 2021: Well-being in the context of COVID-19. Luxembourg Publications Office of the EU.
- European Parliament and the Council (2021) Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0241&from=EN>.
- OECD (2019) PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives. Paris: PISA, OECD Publishing. DOI: 10.1787/acd78851-en.