



Young European research universities welcome the EEA Communication

The Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN) warmly welcomes the publication of the Communication "Achieving the European Education Area by 2025". Such an ambitious Communication certainly comes at a unique moment, as the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital and green transitions are accelerating changes in the European education and training landscapes. Consequently, it seems important to develop new initiatives, foster investment in education and training, and achieve a stronger cooperation between the EU Member States so that all European citizens can benefit from high quality education and training.

YERUN believes that the Communication perfectly acknowledges these needs and supports the will to further develop the European Education Area (EEA) along its 6 key dimensions. While generally welcoming the EEA's policy objectives (I), YERUN also calls on EU policy-makers to further reinforce the EEA (II) by:

- further enhancing quality in education, by bringing research and education closer together and by ensuring that the human and social dimensions are duly protected under the new digital setting;
- accurately preparing teachers, staff and leaders for the future of education, by providing them with the training and tools they need;
- working towards an increased recognition of professional qualifications across the EU, by ensuring synergies between EU education, research and employment policies;
- embedding a true culture of societal engagement throughout the European higher education community, by encouraging universities to become more linked to their local ecosystems and to embark on a stronger cooperation with non-academic actors.

I. How young European universities welcome the EEA Communication.

YERUN particularly welcomes the fact that **reinforcing higher education institutions** is stated as one of the 6 dimensions of the Communication and that this dimension envisages to:

- support the full roll out of the European Universities Initiative,
- review the Council Recommendation on Quality Assurance,
- work on a European Degree and towards its recognition in all EU Member States without exceptions and additional requirements, and,
- further develop the European Student Card Initiative and the Graduate Tracking Initiative.

YERUN believes these are important steps towards creating a unique higher education landscape where universities can collaborate in areas of mutual interest and in which opportunities are maximised in a way that no one is left behind.

Regarding the other dimensions of the Communication, the following objectives are welcomed by YERUN universities and, in some cases, are already implemented by them:

- **promoting diversity and inclusiveness in education.** YERUN especially supports the will to foster research in making education and training more gender sensitive[1].
- **encouraging the Researchers at School Initiative** by building bridges between schools and research with the aim of engaging students, for example, in climate change[2] and STEM subjects[3]. Moreover, YERUN also believes that researchers will increasingly need to have access to practical teaching phases during their PhD studies[4], as this can be a way for researchers to gain teaching skills that will certainly be key for their future careers.
- **fostering transversal skills** by developing knowledge ecosystems that adopt transdisciplinary, learner-centred and challenge-based approaches.
- **updating the learning mobility framework of the Erasmus programme as well as ensuring the next programme to be greener and more digital.**
- **greening education infrastructures**, as it is important to support higher education institutions in the process of developing ambitious and future-thinking greening strategies[5].

YERUN considers the aforementioned points as a very good basis for achieving a European Education Area by 2025. However, some aspects deserve further attention. Hereby, YERUN invites EU policy-makers to consider the following recommendations when putting in place the EEA enabling framework.

[1] Early Career researchers from the University of Eastern Finland are [promoting gender equality](#) in schools.

[2] The University of Antwerp is supporting secondary schools with the [Klimaatlink project](#).

[3] Dublin City University has launched the 2021 [STInt Programme](#) to inspire innovative learning in STEM education and Brunel University is encouraging the next generation of students to study STEM subjects through its [Sector Skills Strategy in Additive Manufacturing \(SAM\) Project](#).

[4] The University of Bremen is supporting this initiative through a unique [dual PhD programme](#).

[5] The University of Essex has created a [Climate Emergency Group](#) and the University of Southern Denmark has committed itself to become a [sustainable university](#).

II. How young European Universities envision the EEA Communication to be reinforced.

Enhancing quality in education by taking into account new methodologies and ways of learning.

Further to the actions mentioned in the Communication, YERUN believes that reframing educational courses by taking into account new methodologies and ways of learning is also key for lifting quality in education. In order for this transition to be successful, it will be crucial to:

- **bring research and education closer together**, as it is important to foster the fields of study that focus specifically on education and that take into account, in a holistic way, all the changes the digital and green transitions bring about.
- ensure that the **human and social dimensions are duly protected under the new digital setting**. This is particularly necessary in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the increase of online and blended learning. To avoid incurring into new risks such as digital poverty^[6], unequal access to learning content^[7] and isolation, strengthening support mechanisms is key. This will ensure individual follow-up of students by reinforcing the communication channels between them and the academic staff and will incentivise student engagement at university level.

Accurately preparing teachers and leaders for the future of education.

YERUN highly welcomes the EEA's objectives of developing 25 Erasmus Teacher Academies and creating an European Innovative Teaching Award to help enhance competence and motivation in the education profession. YERUN believes that further actions are needed in this respect. The new digital setting will require a **generation of teachers, staff members and leaders with digital, creative and methodological skills** and for this to become a reality it will be important to ensure:

- **suitable mentoring from teachers and administrative staff**, which will require methodologies and time to be implemented.
- the provision of **adequate investments in tools, accessibility, content development and training** for teaching and administrative staff.
- **openness to new higher education professional roles** that might emerge, e.g. coaches for online studies for students, educational technologists, blended teaching experts, etc.
- the **acknowledgement of the investments that higher education institutions and staff will require**. This will be a crucial point for university leaders as they will need to be forward-looking in the support of appropriate structures for online teaching, learning, research and collaboration with other sectors.

[6] Digital poverty should be avoided by ensuring that all students have their own computers and adequate internet connection allowing them to follow the classes and complete their assignments properly.

[7] Unequal access should be avoided by ensuring that students with disabilities (e.g. hearing or visual impairments) have the same level of access to content, something that still today is not yet mainstreamed.

Working towards an increased recognition of professional qualification across the EU.

Although the Communication acknowledges the need to make automatic mutual recognition a reality by 2025, in the text there is no reference to the already existing legal instruments related to the recognition of professional qualifications, such as the Directive 2013/55/EU^[8]. Professional recognition differs greatly across Member States, across educational institutions and across professions. To ensure that EU citizens can fully enjoy their right to work and establish themselves in a Member State other than the one they have acquired their education it will be key for the European Education Area to:

- develop **a common approach at EU level on how to interpret** key concepts of the EU, national and regional **legal instruments on recognition**.
- provide **information at EU level on how national recognition systems are shaped**. This would help EU citizens to avoid unforeseen challenges and would therefore facilitate mobility across the EU. Moreover, such information should be well communicated and easy to access, something that can be done through education institutions and employment services.
- to work towards achieving such a complex objective, **synergies between the different education, research and employment policies are much encouraged**.

Embedding a true culture of societal engagement throughout the European university community.

YERUN strongly believes that embedding a true culture of societal engagement throughout the whole university community will contribute to building a better society overall. This will entail:

- **that universities become more interconnected and linked to their local ecosystems**. YERUN misses in the EEA a European action to encourage universities to focus on work that directly benefits local communities. An example could be making students' learning experiences go hand in hand with their engagement in voluntary schemes and other kinds of participatory activities, which would also contribute to the development of transversal and professionalising skills.
- **a stronger cooperation with non-academic actors**. YERUN believes that there is a need to further develop mentoring programmes with the aim of promoting mobility and exchange between higher education institutions and non-academic actors. This could be done by incentivising partnerships not only to include private actors but also public authorities, NGOs, cultural institutions, etc.

III. Joining forces to achieve the EEA by 2025: in summary

In achieving the European Education Area by 2025, YERUN calls for (1) further enhancing quality in education by taking into account new methodologies and ways of learning; (2) accurately preparing teachers, staff and leaders for the future of education; (3) working towards an increased recognition of professional qualifications across the EU; and (4) embedding a true culture of societal engagement throughout the European higher education community.

[8] [Directive 2013/55/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 amending Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications.

YERUN wishes for an EEA that facilitates cross-border and transnational collaboration so that higher education institutions can easily share objectives and develop common education and research agendas. These will be the keys for addressing the complex challenges of the future and for ultimately building a strong European Knowledge Area.

A co-creation approach, involving the EU Commission, Member States and the education and training community, is much welcomed and, as representatives of young universities, we recall our commitment in taking part in this process.



- About YERUN -

The Young European Research University Network (YERUN) is a cluster of highly-ranked young universities in Europe that strengthens and facilitates cooperation in the areas of scientific research, academic education and services which benefit society. In this context, YERUN members consider that adequate support to human capital is essential to foster the next generations of (European) researchers and innovators. Strong support for excellent early-career researchers is therefore a priority for all YERUN members.

- YERUN Members -

University of Antwerp, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Autonomous University of Madrid, Bremen University, Brunel University London, University Carlos III Madrid, Dublin City University, University of Essex, University of Eastern Finland, University of Konstanz, Maastricht University, University Nova de Lisboa, University Paris Dauphine, University Pompeu Fabra, University Rome Tor Vergata, Syddansk University, and Ulm University.



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