EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

Directorate A Policy Strategy and Evaluation
Unit A.1 Strategy and Investments

INFORMAL COMMISSION EXPERT GROUP 'WORKING GROUP ON HIGER EDUCATION'

TERMS OF REFERENCE

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1. BACKGROUND

The Commission's Communication of 30 September 2020 on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025[1] (hereafter 'EEA Communication') and the Council Resolution of on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)[2] (hereafter 'Council Resolution') call for maintaining the format of working groups as part of the "tried and tested working arrangements" in the context of the new cycle of European cooperation in education and training. In particular, the Council Resolution stresses that the mutual learning initiatives should have "clear mandates, time schedules and planned outputs to be proposed by the Commission in cooperation with Member States".

The overall **objective** of the new working groups shall be to **promote mutual learning on policy reform of national education systems** with a view to **effectively contributing to the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025**, and as relevant, the **Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) through tangible outputs**.

By continuing the work done under the previous strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), the new working groups shall be established as informal Commission expert groups, in compliance with the horizontal rules[3]. Through their respective roles and specific tasks, the expert groups will provide the Commission with advice and expertise in the policy areas that they cover, and they will be part of a governance structure that will coordinate the work and steer the development of the strategic framework, within the overarching objective of achieving and further developing the European Education Area (EEA).

As part of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), their overall work shall reflect the vision, milestones and specific initiatives set forth in the EEA Communication and the priority areas, issues and actions of the Council Resolution, with each working group addressing concrete policy issues and actions, in line with their specific objectives detailed in annexes to their Terms of Reference.

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1601687240311&uri=CELEX:52020DC0625
[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01)
[3] C(2016) 3301 final

One of these groups will be covering issues in relation to higher education.

The group shall focus on the support for the Member States' and other participating countries' reforms to maximise the potential of higher education systems to **promote transformation of the higher education sector and provide high quality higher education,** preparing graduates for changing societies and labour markets and contributing to building a stronger Europe through enhancing Europe's innovation capacity on the way towards a European Education Area by 2025.

The objective is to promote mutual learning on policy reform of national education systems with a view to effectively contributing to the achievement of the EEA by 2025, and the Digital Education Action Plan through tangible outputs, and to discuss at the technical level policy developments at European level in the field of higher education. The group shall facilitate synergies between the education and the research and innovation missions of higher education institutions, in the context of the European Education Area and the European Research Area, while ensuring consistency with the European Higher Education Area.

The group shall start its activities in September 2021 and end the first working cycle by the end of 2025.

2. SUBJECT MATTER

The group of experts on Higher Education ('the group') is set up.

3. TASKS

The group's tasks shall be:

1.   to assist Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) in the preparation of policy initiatives in the field of higher education.

2.   to establish cooperation/coordination between the Commission and Member States or stakeholders on questions relating to the policies in the field of higher education.

3.   to bring about an exchange of experience and good practice in the field of higher education.

Priority areas from the Council Resolution to be addressed: 1. Quality, equity, inclusion and success in education and training, 2. Lifelong learning and mobility, 3. Teachers and Trainers, 4. Higher education, 5. Green and digital transitions.

The specific objectives are further detailed in the annex.

4. MEMBERSHIP

1. Members shall be organisations, Member States' authorities, other public entities including public entities from acceding and candidate countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, Union bodies, offices or agencies and international organisations (Type C, D and E Members).
2. Member States' authorities, organisations and other public entities shall nominate their representatives and shall be responsible for ensuring that their representatives provide a high level of expertise. DG EAC may refuse the nomination by an organisation of a

representative if it considers this nomination inappropriate in the light of the requirements specified in the call for applications. In such case, the organisation concerned shall be asked to appoint another representative.

3. Organisations who are members who are no longer capable of contributing effectively to the expert group's deliberations, who, in the opinion of DG EAC do not comply with the conditions set out in Article 339 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union or who resign, shall no longer be invited to participate in any meetings of the group and may be replaced for the remainder of their term of office.

5. SELECTION PROCESS

1. The selection of organisations as group's members (Type C) shall be carried out via a public call for applications, to be published on the Register of Commission expert groups and other similar entities ('the Register of expert groups'). In addition, the call for applications may be published through other means, including on dedicated websites. The call for applications shall clearly outline the selection criteria, including the required expertise and the interests to be represented in relation to the work to be performed. The minimum deadline for applications shall be four weeks.

2. Registration in the Transparency Register is required in order for organisations to be appointed.

3. The members of the group shall be appointed by the the Director-General of DG EAC from applicants with competence in the areas referred to in point 3 and who have responded to the call for applications.

4. Members shall be appointed for until 31 December 2025. They shall remain in office until replaced/until the end of their term of office. Their term of office may be renewed.

5. DG EAC shall establish a reserve list of suitable candidates that may be used to appoint members' replacements. DG EAC shall ask applicants for their consent before including their names on the reserve list.

6. CHAIR

The group shall be chaired by a representative of DG EAC.

7. OPERATION

1. The group shall act at the request of DG EAC, in compliance with the horizontal rules[4].

2. Meetings of the group shall, in principle, be held on Commission premises or virtually, depending on the circumstances.

3. DG EAC shall provide secretarial services. Commission officials from other departments with an interest in the proceedings may attend meetings of the group and its sub-groups.

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[4]   C(2016) 3301, Article 13.1.

4. In agreement with DG EAC, the group may, by simple majority of its members, decide that deliberations shall be public.

5. Minutes on the discussion on each point on the agenda and on the opinions delivered by the group shall be meaningful and complete. Minutes shall be drafted by the secretariat under the responsibility of the Chair.

6. The group shall adopt its opinions, recommendations or reports by consensus.

8. SUB-GROUPS

1. DG EAC may set up sub-groups for the purpose of examining specific questions on the basis of terms of reference defined by DG EAC. Sub-groups shall operate in compliance with the horizontal rules and shall report to the group. They shall be dissolved as soon as their mandate is fulfilled.

2. The members of sub-groups that are not members of the group shall be selected via a public call for applications, in compliance with point 5 and the horizontal rules[5].

9. INVITED EXPERTS

DG EAC may invite experts with specific expertise with respect to a subject matter on the agenda to take part in the work of the group or sub-groups on an *ad hoc* basis.

10. OBSERVERS

1. Organisations and public entities other than Member States' authorities may be granted an observer status, in compliance with the horizontal rules, by direct invitation.

2. Organisations and public entities appointed as observers shall nominate their representatives.

3. Observers' representatives may be permitted by the Chair to take part in the discussions of the group and sub-groups and provide expertise. However, they shall not participate in the formulation of recommendations or advice of the group and sub-groups.

11. RULES OF PROCEDURE

On a proposal by and in agreement with DG EAC the group shall adopt its rules of procedure by simple majority of its members, on the basis of the standard rules of procedure for expert groups, in compliance with the horizontal rules[6]. Sub-groups shall operate in compliance with the group's rules of procedure.

12. PROFESSIONAL SECRECY AND HANDLING OF CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

The members of the group and their representatives, as well as invited experts and observers, are subject to the obligation of professional secrecy, which by virtue of the Treaties and the

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[5]   C(2016), Articles 10 and 14.2.
[6]   See Article 17 of the horizontal rules.

rules implementing them applies to all members of the institutions and their staff, as well as to the Commission's rules on security regarding the protection of Union classified information, laid down in Commission Decisions (EU, Euratom) 2015/443[7] and 2015/444[8]. Should they fail to respect these obligations, the Commission may take all appropriate measures.

13. TRANSPARENCY

1.   The group and its sub-groups shall be registered in the Register of Commission expert groups and other similar entities ('the Register of expert groups').

2.   As regards the group and sub-groups composition, the following data shall be published on the Register of expert groups:

> (a) the name of Member States' authorities;
>
> (b) the name of other public entities, including the name of third countries' authorities;
>
> (c) the name of member organisations; the interest represented shall be disclosed;
>
> (d) the name of observers.

3.   All relevant documents, including the agendas, the minutes and the participants' submissions, shall be made available on the Register of expert groups. In particular, DG EAC shall publish the agenda and other relevant background documents in due time ahead of the meeting, followed by timely publication of minutes. Exceptions to publication shall only be possible where it is deemed that disclosure of a document would undermine the protection of a public or private interest as defined in Article 4 of Regulation (EC) N° 1049/2001[9].

14. MEETING EXPENSES

1.   Participants in the activities of the group and sub-groups shall not be remunerated for the services they offer.

2.   Travel and subsistence expenses incurred by participants in the activities of the group and sub-groups shall be reimbursed by the Commission. Reimbursement shall be made in accordance with the provisions in force within the Commission and within the limits of the available appropriations allocated to the Commission departments under the annual procedure for the allocation of resources.

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[7]   Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2015/443 of 13 March 2015 on Security in the Commission (OJ L 72, 17.3.2015, p. 41).

[8]   Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2015/444 of 13 March 2015 on the security rules for protecting EU classified information (OJ L 72, 17.3.2015, p. 53).

[9]   These exceptions are intended to protect public security, military affairs, international relations, financial, monetary or economic policy, privacy and integrity of the individual, commercial interests, court proceedings and legal advice, inspections/investigations/audits and the institution's decision-making process.
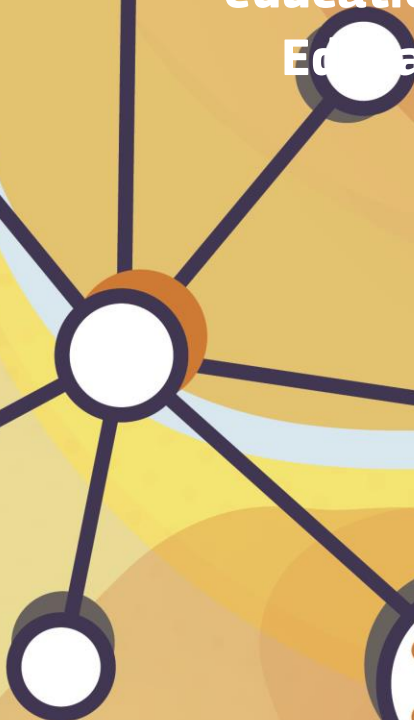
ANNEX:

-        Description of specific objectives.

Done in Brussels, on 23 July 2021.

Achieving the European Education Area by 2025

Annex: Working Group on Higher Education 2021-2025

Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)

European Education Area

Working Group on Higher Education

Title	**Working Group on Higher Education**
Duration of mandate	2021-2025[10]
Coordinating Unit(s)	EAC B1 – Higher Education
Chair (Head of Unit level)[11]	Vanessa Debiais-Sainton
Coordinating official(s)	Tine Delva, Kinga Szuly, Julie Anderson

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE

The Working Group will support Member States' and other participating countries' reforms to maximise the potential of higher education systems to **promote transformation of the higher education sector and provide high quality higher education,** preparing graduates for changing societies and labour markets and contributing to building a stronger Europe through enhancing Europe's innovation capacity on the way towards a European Education Area by 2025.

The **objective** of the Working Group is to **promote mutual learning on policy reform of national education systems** with a view to **effectively contributing to the achievement of the EEA by 2025** and the **DEAP through tangible outputs, and to discuss at the technical level policy developments at European level in the field of higher education.** The Working Group will facilitate synergies between the education and the research and innovation missions of higher education institutions, in the context of the European Education Area and the European Research Area, while ensuring consistency with the European Higher Education Area.

Priority areas to be addressed:

☒ 1. Quality, equity, inclusion and success in education and training
☒ 2. Lifelong learning and mobility
☒ 3. Teachers and Trainers
☒ 4. Higher education
☒ 5. Green and digital transitions

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[10] The Working Groups will run until 2025, throughout the first cycle of the strategic framework; their specific objectives can be reviewed and updated, if needed to reflect emerging policy needs, including during the stocktaking exercise foreseen in 2022 as part of the European Education Area Progress Report. Concrete outputs to support Member States in their national reforms and contribute to the achievement of the European Education Area will be further defined in the work plan of respective Working Groups.

[11] For some of the specific outputs and peer learning events identified below, Member State representatives may be invited to take the lead, if appropriate.

MAIN "CONCRETE ISSUE(S) and ACTION(S)" TO BE ADDRESSED (*as established in Annex III of the Resolution*):

Priority area 1 - Quality, equity, inclusion and success in education and training

viii) Addressing the increasing diversity of learners and enhancing access to quality and inclusive education and training for all learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as learners with specific learning needs, minorities, people with a migrant background and Roma, and with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their social-economically disadvantaged situation.

x) Addressing the issue of gender gaps in education and training, and unequal opportunities for girls and boys, women and men, by promoting more gender-balanced educational choices, challenging and dissolving gender stereotypes in education and educational careers, especially in STEAM fields of study, addressing issues such as boys' underachievement, bullying and sexual harassment, and developing a better gender sensitivity in education and training processes and institutions.

Priority area 2 - Lifelong learning and mobility

v) Strengthening the key role of higher education and VET systems in supporting lifelong learning and reaching out to a more diverse student body. Exploring the concept and use of micro-credentials can help widen learning opportunities and could strengthen the role of higher education and VET in lifelong learning by providing more flexible and modular learning opportunities, and offering more inclusive learning paths.

vii) Promoting the freedom for learners, teachers and trainers, and other education and training staff, to be mobile and for institutions to freely associate with one another in Europe and beyond, through learning mobility and cooperation across borders. Further efforts must be made to remove existing obstacles and barriers to all types of learning and teaching mobility, including issues related to access, guidance, student services and recognition.

ix) Continue working towards the full implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods aboard (26 November 2018).

Priority area 3 – Teachers and trainers

vii) Supporting the promotion of excellence in teaching at all levels of education and training, through effective organisation of learning and structural incentives, by promoting appropriate support mechanisms, infrastructure and teaching materials and research-based teacher education, as well as exploring new ways to assess the quality of teacher training.

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Priority area 4 – Higher education

i) Encouraging closer and deeper cooperation between higher education institutions, namely by promoting and fostering seamless transnational cooperation, which will enable alliances of higher education institutions, such as those within the European Universities initiative, to leverage their strengths and jointly deliver transformative higher education.

ii) Engage in the roll-out of the European Universities initiative under the Erasmus+ programme, in synergy with Horizon Europe and other funding instruments.

iii) Establishing an agenda for higher education transformation, with a focus on inclusion,

innovation, connectivity, digital and green readiness and international competitiveness, as well as fundamental academic values and high ethical principles, as well as employment and employability.

iv) Encourage balanced mobility flows and optimal brain circulation.

v) Fostering he role of higher education institutions as central actors of the "knowledge square" (education, research, innovation and service to society), enhancing synergies and facilitating further work between higher education and research.

vi) Strengthening automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad for the purpose of mobility and further learning, while ensuring that quality assurance mechanisms provide a strong basis for public trust for further learning and safeguard the autonomy of higher education institutions. Automatic recognition of joint transnational activities and the recognition and portability of short courses, where appropriate, should be developed.

vii) Encourage further use of the European Student Card initiative with the aim of benefitting all mobile students in Europe.

viii) Fostering the relevance of higher education to the labour market and society, e.g. encouraging the development of curricula that encourage more work-based learning and enhanced cooperation between institutions and employers, fully respecting the holistic approach of higher education and the autonomy of higher education institutions and by exploring the possibility of establishing a European graduate tracking mechanism.

Priority area 5 - Green and digital transitions

v) Promoting environmental sustainability perspectives across education and training curricula, at all levels of education and within an inter-disciplinary approach, and promoting educational concepts, such as Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education, in order to empower citizens to contribute to sustainable development.

Contribution to other "concrete issues and actions": 1.4., 1.11., 1.12., 1.14., 1.15., 2.1., 2.2., 2.3., 2.8., 3.1., 3.8., 3.9., 3.10., 3.11., 3.12., 5.1., 5.2., 5.4., 5.6. (see Annex)

Contribution to implementation and follow-up of other major EU policy initiatives and intergovernmental processes in the field of higher education
- European Skills Agenda
- European Research Area
- Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027
- European Green Deal
- Bologna process

Contribution to implementation of major EU funding initiatives
The Working Group will contribute to the implementation of EU funding initiatives within the framework of adopted programmes/plans: Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, InvestEU, Structural and Cohesion funds, Recovery and Resilience Facility

Affiliations and joint activities with other bodies of governance (EEA and related areas):

Name of entity	Subject of cooperation/ Planned joint activities/ reporting
Governance structure, including, inter alia, the Council, the Education Committee and other relevant governance bodies, to be agreed by the end of 2021	Regular and timely reporting on the overall progress of the Working Groups and valorisation of results. Additionally, punctual reporting and dissemination is ensured for relevant outputs
Expert Group on Quality investment in education	Exchange of information on empirical evidence relevant for the policy area
Informal meetings of the Directors-General for Higher Education meetings	Periodic reporting, in accordance with future governance mechanism
Ad-hoc expert group on higher education transformation and the European Universities initiative	Ensuring synergies (tbd)
Working Group on Schools	Cooperation on topics of recognition, mobility, learning periods abroad, upper secondary education
Working Group on digital education: learning, teaching and assessment (DELTA)	Cooperation on topics linked to digital education
Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks	Identification of evidence and data gaps, development and maintenance of indicators and targets for measuring performance and progress
Bologna Process	Ensuring synergies (tbd)
ENIC/NARIC network	Ensuring synergies (tbd)
European Graduate tracking network	Ensuring synergies (tbd)
ERA forum for transition	Ensuring synergies and joint activities

EXPECTED TANGIBLE OUTPUTS:

Common tools and approaches (e.g. toolkits, guidelines, frameworks):
To be decided where appropriate in consultation with the Working Group

Peer learning and exchange of good practice (e.g. reports, collections of good practice, fiches, etc.):
– Conclusions from the Working Group meetings and peer learning activities, as well as system-level policy examples, with where relevant reports and collection of good practices The number and topics of the peer learning activities will be discussed with the Working Group in view of the work plan for 2021-2022.

Contribution to implementation and follow-up of actions announced in the EEA Communication:
– The full roll-out of European Universities Initiative
– Technical work exploring a European approach to Micro-credentials
– Support to Higher Education Transformation
– Technical work exploring a European Degree
– Technical work on a European Graduate Tracking initiative
– European Student Card initiative
– European Recognition and Quality Assurance System
– Automatic mutual recognition
– Technical work exploring a legal statute for alliances of universities

RECURRENT ACTIVITIES:

Support to Member States facing issues identified in CSRs
If relevant, provide support to clusters of Member States in response to issues identified in European Semester country-specific recommendations (CSRs), by having such Member States benefit from the practical experience and good practices of other Member States.

Support to Member States implementing EU (RRF/Structural Funds) funded reforms in education and training
If relevant, provide support to clusters of Member States in implementing EU funded reforms, by having such Member States benefit from the practical experience and good practices of other Member States.

Support to Member States for Covid-19 recovery
If relevant, provide support to clusters of Member States in response to the recovery from the COVID -19 crisis, by having such Member States benefit from the practical experience and good practices of other Member States.

Support to the incubation and follow-up of Erasmus+ KA3 policy experimentation
Follow-up of policy experimentation programmes relevant for higher education.

INDICATIVE ROADMAP (2021-2022):

On the basis of this indicative roadmap, the Working Group will draw up a work plan for 2021-2022. This work plan will include where appropriate a more detailed timetable, taking into account developments at the political level.

PHASE	MAIN THEMES/ACTIVITIES	DELIVERABLES
Phase 1: September – December 2021	• European Approach to Micro-credentials • A European Strategy for Universites (linked to higher education transformation) • Education for environment sustainability • Full roll-out of the European Universities • European graduate tracking • Automatic recognition • European Student Card Initiative roll out	Policy debate and policy input to the initiatives
Phase 2: January - June 2022	• European Approach for Micro-credentials • A European Strategy for Universites (linked to higher education transformation) • Full roll-out of the European Universities • Exploring the possibility of a European Degree and European statute • European Recognition and Quality Assurance System • Automatic recognition • European Student Card Initiative roll out	Policy debate and policy input to the initiatives
Phase 3: July - December 2022	• European Approach for Micro-credentials • A European Strategy for Universites (linked to higher education transformation) • Full roll-out of the European Universities • Exploring the possibility of a European Degree and European statute • European Recognition and Quality Assurance System • Automatic recognition • European Student Card	Policy debate and policy input to the initiatives

	Initiative roll out	

EVIDENCE BASE

Relevant EU-level target(s):

- Tertiary level attainment (the share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45%, by 2030)
- Participation of adults in learning (at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months, by 2025)

Coherence with other EU indicator frameworks, dashboards and targets:

- Social Scoreboard of the European Pillar of Social Rights

Relevant indicator frameworks, data collections or reports:

- Education and Training Monitor
- Eurydice reports
- Eurostudent
- European Graduate Survey
- Relevant Commission studies
- U-mulitrank
- ETER

Important data gaps:

Data gaps inter alia link to inclusion and equity, as well as to sustainability, including greening of education and training systems. These are being tackled inter alia through Eurostudent, ETER, and U-multi-rank and the European Graduate Survey.

DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

Dissemination through the future EEA platform, and through events (PLAs, conferences, webinars).