



## **The Netherlands' response to the Call for Evidence of the interim evaluation of the European Education Area (2020-2023)**

This paper presents the Netherlands' position on progress made towards the realisation of the European Education Area (EEA) since the adoption of the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* in February, 2021 and the complementing *Council Resolution on the governance structure of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* in November 2021. It additionally presents eight specific recommendations for the strengthening of the current framework and forming of the EEA post-2030.

### **Introduction**

The Netherlands welcomes the efforts of all EU Member States and the European Commission to develop an European Education Area (EEA) that is inclusive, competitive and adaptive to the digital and green transitions as well responsive to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We underline the value of collaborative efforts to enhance the quality of education across the EU across all sectors and for all learners.

We confirm our support for the undertaking of an interim evaluation of the EEA by the European Commission (the Commission) as it allows Member States to reflect on the lessons learned, identify areas for improvement and ensure that the EEA continues to develop as an initiative that is fit-for-purpose and reactive to the prevailing societal challenges.

In this paper, we share the Dutch reflections on the activities that have helped shape the EEA thus far. We present our views on the current strategic prioritisation and respective flagship activities, as well as the governance structure of the EEA. We have additionally identified several recommendations for the further development of the EEA.

### **The EEA strategic prioritisation and flagship activities**

With its five overarching strategic priorities and 40 (strategic) actions, the EEA is an ambitious initiative that is well on its way to achieving its targets for 2025. The progress report package has shown that despite the need to

quickly adapt to emerging challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EEA has been highly adaptive and while it remains on course to achieve its 2025, as well as its 2030, goals. The progress report package was a valuable presentation of progress made under the different strategic priorities of the EEA. It moreover provided a useful update on Member States' progress to achieving the quantitative targets. We encourage the Commission to continue its monitoring activities in good coordination with Member States including via the Standing Group for Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB).

We highly value the emphasis of the EEA to address emerging needs of the digital and green transitions. In the field of digitalization, we are impressed by Member States' responsiveness to emerging digital needs resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. We are pleased that these efforts have continued beyond the pandemic and warmly welcome the activities under the EU's Digital Education Plan 2021-2027. Given the speed of developments in the field, for instance in relation to the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the increasing influence of BigTech companies on education, digitalization should receive a central role in the next phase of the EEA realization, including based on the Action's plan mid-term evaluation. We moreover value the steps taken under the EEA in relation to developing learning for the green transition and sustainable development, as well as greening education infrastructure. We firmly believe that both the digital and green transversal priorities should remain prominent on the EU policy agenda for the next phase of the EEA.

Despite the progress made across the various education sectors, we have identified several issues that could be addressed to ensure the EEA remains as effective and adaptive to the EU's needs as possible. The recommendations are summarised in the box below:

- 1. Introduce new measures to address the asymmetry in student mobility streams**
- 2. More efforts should be undertaken to promote equity and equality across all education sectors**
- 3. Vocational education, adult learning and lifelong learning should be more prominently represented in the EEA actions**
- 4. Provide more transparency regarding the financial instruments supporting the realization of the EEA**

## **Recommendation 1: Introduce new measures to address the asymmetry in student mobility streams**

As outlined in our recently published position paper<sup>1</sup>, we strongly believe in the value of international learning experiences for pupils, students, teachers and staff for both personal and professional development. It is solely through transnational cooperation that we can improve cross-border learning opportunities, decrease disparities and positively contribute to upwards convergence across the EU. We therefore welcome both short term exchanges, as well as degree mobility.

In the Netherlands, however, we face a disproportionately high number of degree-seeking students compared to other Member States. While this has a positive impact on learning and intercultural exchange, we are also faced with negative consequences such as increased (financial) pressure on the (quality of) national education systems, accessibility issues for domestic students and a shortage of adequate student housing. Other Member States face similar challenges due to a high influx of degree-seeking students, while others are faced with the consequences of a high outflow rate.

We would greatly welcome more initiatives (and resources) to tackle the important issue of asymmetric degree mobility streams in higher education. While we welcome the imminent Council Recommendation on a new Learning Mobility Framework, we urge the Commission to aim for balance and to be mindful of the negative side-effects of asymmetric degree mobility in particular. We encourage all Member States to identify ways in which they can remove barriers and provide incentives for all types of mobility, including short-stay mobility, virtual or blended mobility and degree mobility, depending on their national contexts. Concrete actions can include peer-learning activities, communication actions or specific agreements at local, regional, national and transnational level.

## **Recommendation 2: More efforts should be undertaken to promote equity and equality across all education sectors**

We fully welcome the inclusion of an EU-level indicator for equity in education to monitor the progress of the realisation of the EEA, and were dismayed to find the socio-economic background remains one of the foremost predictors of educational success. As noted in the Education and Training Monitor (ETM) 2022, students of low socio-economic status are almost six times more likely to underachieve than students of high socio-economic status<sup>2</sup>. This statistic is unacceptable and Member States' actions to tackle the issues of inequity and inequality across all education sectors should be stepped up in the next phase of the EEA. It is particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2023). The Netherlands' position paper on the European Learning Mobility Framework. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/brieven/2023/06/19/the-netherlands-position-paper-on-the-european-learning-mobility-framework>

<sup>2</sup> p. 10, European Commission (2022) Education and Training Monitor (ETM) Comparative Report. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/education-and-training-monitor>

important that young people have equal opportunities during their early years, as it is during this time that they build the foundations for their future learning pathways.

**Recommendation : Vocational education, adult learning and lifelong learning should be more prominently represented in the EEA actions**

We applaud the progress made across education sectors through the various EEA actions, but would welcome more dedicated resources to the strengthening of the VET and adult learning sectors. EU Member States should furthermore address the heterogeneity in definitions of (informal and non-formal) lifelong learning.

The persisting labour and skills shortages, alongside evolving labour markets, across the EU need to be collaboratively tackled by investing in the VET sector, boosting the attractiveness and recognition of VET and encouraging lifelong learning pathways. By giving too much emphasis on increasing the number of tertiary graduates, Europe will not be able to realise the big transitions it is facing. We need to boost the attractiveness of the VET sector.

We are concerned that there is limited centralised overview of the Commission initiatives to stimulate lifelong learning and address skills shortages and that there is consequently no coherence between objectives, target-setting and activities addressing skills development (e.g., through the Skills Agenda). The emerging sectoral skills academies, for example, should be discussed in the context of the developing EEA. Strategic discussions related to skills should also be addressed in the EYCS-Council and HLG. Moreover, synergies should actively be sought through better collaboration between DG EAC and other Directorates-General, as well as the various Council committees.

**Recommendation 4: Provide more transparency regarding the financial instruments supporting the realization of the EEA**

As noted in the progress report package, the main EU funding sources supporting the EEA actions are the Erasmus+ programme, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and Cohesion Policy funds. We welcome the significant increase in investment in education and skills between 2021-27, compared to 2014-2020. However, we would welcome more discussion on investment pathways within the main EEA governance bodies. EU funding investments have received little attention in the HLG or DG-meetings to date, resulting in a lack of strategic oversight on the longer-term investments in particular areas or actions.

We would welcome a clearer multi-annual overview of how the different EU funds will be used to support EEA actions. To ensure sustainability and a long-term impact of EEA actions, institutions need to have a clear indication

of the available financial support available to support their activities. Particularly for flagship initiatives such as the European University Initiative, the Centres for Vocational Excellence and Teacher Academies, which require significant time and resource investment from institutions, it is essential that there is clarity around the long-term funding opportunities. To exemplify, in the case of the European University Alliances, the possibilities for renewing the Horizon 2020 'Science with and for Society' (SWAFS) top-up remained unclear for a considerable amount of time and were ultimately discontinued. While it was ultimately replaced with the opportunity to apply for funds under the 'Improved access to Excellence' pillar of Horizon Widening participation (WIDERA), the precarity of the financial support was a source of concern for education providers. To ensure longer-term impacts of EEA actions, it is essential that there is a clearly identified and communicated investment pathway for each action.

## **Consolidating the multi-level governance approach of the EEA**

The co-creative nature of the EEA is one of the key strengths of the initiative. Improving the quality of EU education systems in an inclusive and sustainable way can only be successful when there is a holistic approach that includes buy-in from relevant actors within public authorities as well as from leaders, experts and practitioners from the education field. We value the current approach to governance, which includes a mix of formal and informal bodies, groups and networks.

The decision-making and political steering of the EEA formally takes place in the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council of the European Union (EYCS Council). The meetings of the EYCS Council are prepared via the Education Committee (EDUC) and COREPER thereafter.

In the aforementioned Council Resolution of November 2021, the High-Level Group on Education and Training (HLG) was identified as the informal body of high-level officials from Member States and the Commission that should link the political goals and operational activities of the EEA. Their objective is to bring together the insights gathered through the relevant EEA groups and bodies, as well as identify and escalate the important matters for political debate to the EYCS-Council. The goal of the HLG is to have a horizontal view and strategically reflect on the emerging findings and conclusions from the three Director-General formations (DG Schools, DG VET and DG Higher Education), who in turn are fed by EEA Strategic Working Groups and ad hoc experts groups.

Identifying new trends, potential issues and points of contention at operational level, and subsequently escalating these issues at the various levels of the governance ladder ensures that the most urgent strategic decisions can be made at ministerial level in the EYCS-Council.

We still firmly underline the adoption of such a multilevel approach to governing the EEA, but we similarly believe that the operationalisation of this approach can be further strengthened.

It is our observation that there is currently insufficient distinction between the different governance layers of the EEA, resulting in limited opportunity for strategic debate, reflection and prioritisation. We are therefore strongly in favour of an increase in capital-led initiatives and discussions pertaining to the EEA, and a more limited role steering of the agenda-setting and discussions from a top-down, EU-perspective, resulting in more balanced dialogue between national interests and views from a European perspective.

We furthermore believe that the communication campaign around the EEA could be improved. Particularly for education and training providers, it is unclear what the European Education Area is, when it should be realised by (2025 or 2030), and which activities fall under the EEA. While we welcome the development of an online EEA platform on the Europa website, we note that the sections are aligned to the Commission's priorities as identified in the progress report, rather than the priorities agreed in the EEA Council Resolution.

We have identified several recommendations for the strengthening of EEA governance, which are summarised in the box below:

- 5. More strategic debates within the EYCS-Council and the HLG**
- 6. Solidify the role of the HLG and avoid fragmentation through the creation of new high-level governing bodies**
- 7. Enhance the effectiveness of the DG-meetings and the EEA Strategic Working Groups by clearly defining their role and working method**
- 8. Actively identify and foster synergies between the EEA and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA)**

#### **Recommendation 5: More strategic debates within the EYCS-Council and the HLG**

The EYCS-Council and HLG are the two fora where strategic discussions on the EEA can be held. In our experience, particularly the HLG meetings have functioned predominantly as knowledge-sharing opportunities for the

Commission, with limited space for Member States to undertake critical reflection and debate on the progress made, remaining challenges and future developments specifically related to the EEA.

The publication of the EEA progress report package in November 2023<sup>3</sup>, and the completion of the mid-term evaluation early 2024, provide ample evidence for critical reflection on the future approach to the realisation of the EEA. In the recent *Council Resolution on The European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond*<sup>4</sup> it was agreed that the Coordination Board of the HLG prepare an 18-month policy agenda in education and training. We recommend that future HLG meetings include more interactive sessions that allow Member State lead interventions, strategize and identify priorities for incorporation into the 18-month policy agenda, with a clear ownership for those priorities. Once adopted, the HLG meetings could be used to subsequently monitor and reflect on the progress made in the implementation of the policy agenda.

We recall the opportunity for the HLG to make use of a rapporteur “to inform the HLG, and if needed the Education Committee in view of timely information sharing, of the progress made by the working groups of the Strategic framework and other expert groups and relevant bodies” as agreed in the 2021 EEA Governance Resolution and Terms of Reference of the HLG set thereafter. We are in favour of appointing such a rapporteur to ensure clear, consistent communications between the different governance layers.

### **Recommendation 6: Solidify the role of the HLG and avoid fragmentation through the creation of new high-level governing bodies**

There are many transversal issues and themes that touch upon the education sector, such as digitalisation, climate change, inclusion, geopolitical developments, sectoral skills shortages, etc. In our view, the HLG should remain the central body of high-level representatives that discusses the impact of such transversal issues on the EEA, including the Commission’s broader policy on those issues, and identifies the key matters that require discussion or decision-making in the EYCS-Council. It is essential that the HLG remains a body of senior Member State representatives, that have the necessary strategic discretion to debate and take position in a European setting, but also implement agreements at national level. To ensure consistency in Member State representation the agendas of the HLG meetings should be responsive to Member States’ needs and include ample interactive sessions for reflection and debate.

The HLG, supported by its Coordination Board, should maintain the strategic overview of all pertinent topics and can ensure that the EEA evolves in a manner that is responsive to contemporary needs and trends.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/building-the-european-education-area-progress-report-published>

<sup>4</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023G0526\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023G0526(01))

We would therefore strongly advise against the introduction of new high-level bodies for specific aspects of education policy – such as currently is debate regarding digital education and digital skills - to ensure that there remains clear cohesion across all priorities of the EEA.

**Recommendation 7: Enhance the effectiveness of the DG-meetings and the EEA Strategic Working Groups by clearly defining their role and working method**

The purpose of the DG-meetings is to zoom in on specific developments and challenges in the primary and secondary education, VET and higher education sectors which could also lead to identifying potential topics that require further attention in the HLG. The EEA Strategic Working Groups (EEA WGs) and the ad hoc expert groups follow the day-to-day implementation of the main EEA actions and activities. Operational matters are discussed in these meetings, and the main outcomes should be presented for critical and strategic reflection in the respective DG-meeting.

We suggest that the working methods of the two meetings are clearly communicated to ensure that the distinction is clear for all participants. Overlaps between the agendas and Commission presentations of DG and EEA WG meetings, alongside limited strategic discussions at DG-level, make it challenging to consistently ensure senior-level involvement in the DG-meetings. At the DG-meetings it would be beneficial to include a clearer harvesting of the results of the EEA WGs, focusing on the main identified challenges and successes rather than providing a full description of the progress made across each action. This would also allow for more to-the-point discussions and reflections on emerging trends, challenges and opportunities.

Overall, the EEA Strategic Working Groups are very useful groups for following the developments regarding the EEA actions and activities. They are well-organised, engaging and reactive to the needs of the group, and give also opportunity to key stakeholder organisations including other international organisations to contribute. Additionally, the peer-learning activities (PLA's) are valuable moments to exchange knowledge and best practices, and should ideally be demand-driven and based on policy needs of Member States. The effectiveness of these groups could be enhanced, however, by sharing the meeting agenda further in advance and allowing more than one national representative to participate in the meetings. The heterogeneity of the topics discussed within the Working Groups frequently requires the inputs from multiple policy experts across various departments. Allowing multiple participants per Member State ensures the availability of the expertise on each topic during the two-day meetings. This flexibility also ensures that participation is less strenuous for policy experts in terms of resources and time.

**Recommendation 8: Actively identify and foster synergies between the EEA and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA)**

While the EEA is being formed, Member States are also working towards building a European Research Area (ERA) and within the Bologna process a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In our view it is essential that Member States and the Commission foster synergies and coherence between these areas. To do so, a more strategic vision is necessary to develop these areas in conjunction. The policy agendas of the three areas should be complimentary and take into account key milestones and outputs, where relevant. We appreciate the inclusion of this point in the 2023 Council Resolution *on the European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond* and encourage the Commission and the upcoming EU Presidencies to actively seek out these synergies to maximise the impact of EEA activities.

The developments in the EEA and the EHEA are, and should remain, closely interconnected. The objectives and activities of the EHEA closely align to the fourth EEA priority 'Strengthening high education in Europe' and will contribute to the achievement of the quantitative goal of at least 45% of 25-24 year-olds holding a tertiary education diploma by 2030. Thus far, the EU has been effective in encouraging Member States to implement the Bologna agreements of the EHEA and we encourage all Member States to continue their active roles in achieving said agreements, particularly in the fields of quality assurance and mutual recognition of diplomas. However, we note that there is limited ownership of the synergies, and that the governance structures of the EEA and EHEA do not strategically discuss, capitalise on and strengthen the complementarities between them sufficiently. Considering new initiatives relating to quality assurance and recognition, we urge that the EU builds on the structure and agreements made in the EHEA, instead of developing overlapping or competing structures.

Research and education are closely connected, particularly in higher education institutions, resulting in a natural complementarity of the actions under the EEA and the ERA. In our view, taking into account the respective frameworks and competencies, there is scope for deeper cooperation between the two areas. The strengthening of this cooperation requires more structured dialogue between the governance structures of the EEA and ERA at all levels. It would also benefit from closer collaboration and joint planning between the Directorate-General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (DG EAC) and the Directorate-General for Research and Development (DG RTD). In the same vein, there is an increasing need for collaboration between DG EAC and the DG Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG Connect) regarding the development of digital education and digital skills. In this respect, we refer to the Dutch position in the ongoing negotiations on the Council Recommendations on those areas.

## **Concluding remarks**

*"Removing barriers to learning and improving access to quality education for all"* remains a goal that the Netherlands proudly works together with our fellow Member States to achieve.

Significant progress to strengthen European cooperation across different education sectors has already been made. The EEA has shown that it can be reactive to the emerging needs of learners by effectively reacting to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Looking towards 2030, we must continue to develop the EEA as a structure that is flexible, resilient and responsive to urgent, emerging trends. This can solely be done through regular, critical discussions in the EYCS-Council and HLG, as well as effective DG and EEA Working Group meetings.

In this rapidly evolving world, we must urgently and efficiently work together to ensure that our education systems are readily able to adapt to the emerging needs of the digital and green transitions while addressing skills gaps and changes in labour markets. It is imperative the EEA meets these needs, while ensuring that education systems become more equitable and inclusive to all types of learners.

If we wish to successfully reach (or exceed) our 2025 and 2030 targets, we need to support our education and training providers in making positive, sustainable impacts. We should aim to provide clear investment pathways for each EEA action. We should also strengthen the reach and engagement of EEA communications, for instance, through clear, consistent information on the EEA Portal.

It is solely through joint efforts that EU Member States can ensure that the EEA can become a reality for all.