



NETH-ER POSITION PAPER

Learning Europe: the European Education Area

October 2020

- Automatic and mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications
- Student flow and mobility
- Networks and partnerships



Introduction

The Dutch knowledge community, as represented by Neth-ER, the Netherlands house for Education and Research, recognises the importance of the European Education Area and welcomes the Communication of the European Commission on this highly important topic.

Whilst many sectors across Europe and globally, including the education sector, have been heavily impacted by the Covid-19 crisis, we think the further development and implementation of the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 can and should play a pivotal role in the European recovery process and in contributing to a **strong, resilient, green and digital Europe**.

Through the European Education Area we can make 'a Europe, in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent, where spending time in another Member State – to study, to learn or to work – has become the standard [...]'¹ become a reality. An area in which obtained study results and qualifications are automatically and mutually recognised and in which every citizen, independent of age, background, gender or study level will have the opportunity to spend a (study or internship) period abroad, acquiring knowledge, skills, competences and experience. This opportunity should also be given during challenging times in which international mobility might not seem self-evident, for instance during the current corona crisis. An area that **prepares our students and our citizens for the future**, and that makes European education more **resilient** as well as more **competitive** on a global scale.

The EEA was first introduced during the Social Summit in Gothenburg, November 2017. Since then, the Commission has launched several Communications and Recommendations, followed by Council Conclusions in 2018 and 2019², aiming to develop further the Area.

Hence, the political will for closer collaboration and better coordination amongst Member States on education and training exists. It is now time for actions that will turn the ambitions into reality. This requires good and clear agreements. Besides **synergies with existing (policy) instruments** - for example within the **Bologna and Copenhagen** Processes -, **the European Research Area (ERA)** and the updated **Skills Agenda**, we see three main focus areas:

- I. **Automatic and mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications**
- II. **Student flow and mobility**
- III. **Networks and partnerships**

In this paper, we further outline these important issues and provide policy recommendations for the future EEA framework.

¹ See also [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad](#), European Commission, May 2018

² See also [Towards a European Education Area](#), website of the European Commission



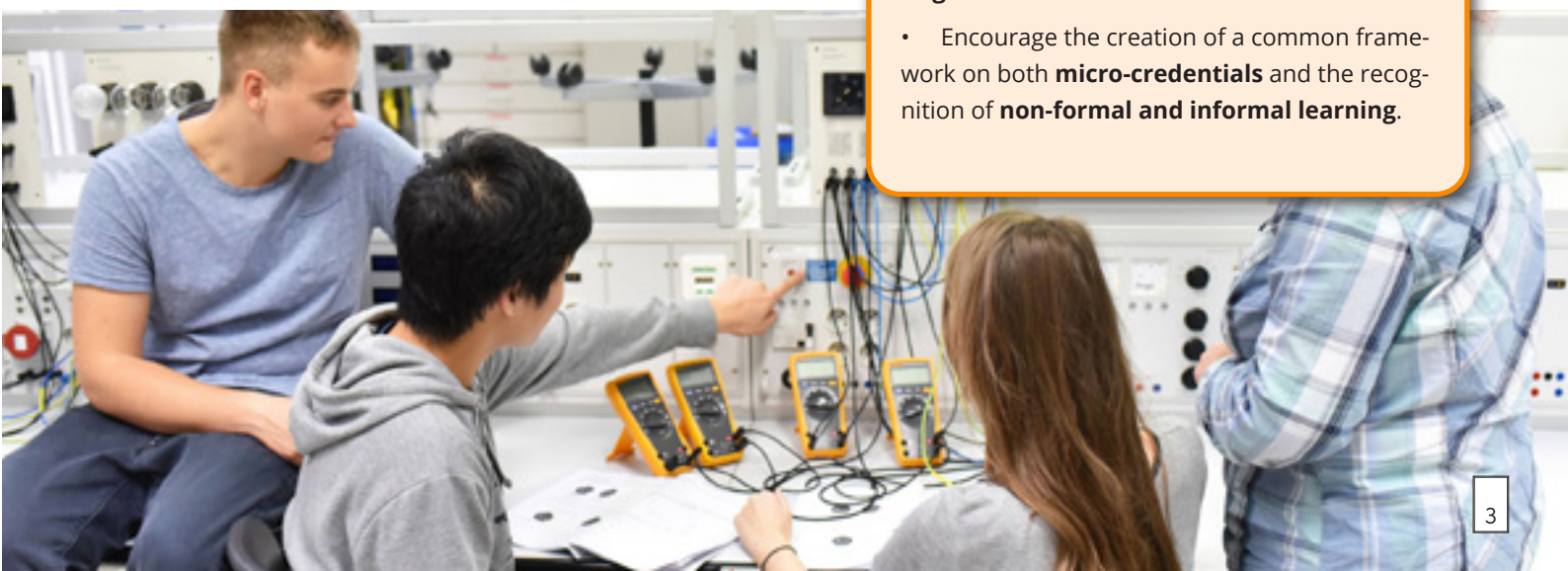


I. Automatic and mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications

Improving the procedures for **automatic and mutual recognition** of diplomas and qualifications in EU Member States is one of the most important criteria for realising the European Education Area by 2025. If we want to make mobility feasible for everyone, we need to provide **clear definitions and agreements**, which ensure that our students can validate their knowledge and experiences acquired abroad back at home or in any EU Member State in which they decide to settle. This should be done automatically, without cumbersome, time-consuming and costly administrative procedures. Unfortunately, the process of recognition is often still burdensome and therefore often forms an obstacle to study- and internship mobility and career opportunities abroad. Automatic recognition means that the qualification is recognised at the level of the **European Qualification Framework (EQF)** (e.g. 'a bachelor degree is a bachelor degree'). It must then be determined whether the profile and the specific learning outcomes meet the admission requirements of a specific study programme; just as is the case for national qualifications.

Our recommendations:

- Provide clear definitions and agreements on **recognition and quality assurance**. These will also help create mutual trust. Ensure that the implementation and use of existing instruments and initiatives, such as these within the framework of the European Higher Education Area / Bologna process and the Copenhagen process, are improved and complied with. National and/or regional legislation also has an important role to play.
- All diplomas and qualifications obtained in a Member State of the European Education Area should be **automatically recognised** within the Area. In addition, strive for the realisation of a **'European Degree'**, which should comprise any diploma obtained within at least two European education institutions, including **Joint and Dual Degrees**.
- Encourage the creation of a common framework on both **micro-credentials** and the recognition of **non-formal and informal learning**.



A) Recognition and Quality Assurance

Regarding the recognition of diplomas and qualifications we want to stress that **clear definitions** are key. **Existing policy initiatives and instruments**, especially those that were agreed upon in the framework of the **Bologna Process** or **European Higher Education Area** when it comes to Higher Education, and those in the framework of the **Copenhagen Process** regarding Vocational Education and Training (VET), have to be **properly implemented and complied with in all countries** of the European Education Area.

For Higher Education we would like to refer to both its framework of three cycles of higher education qualifications, namely bachelor, master and doctorate, as well as to level six, seven and eight of the **European Qualification Framework (EQF)** and short cycle programmes or associate degrees, that correspond with EQF level five. Within this framework the so called **European Credit Transfer System** or ECTS is being used, which enables a uniform description of competency-based courses across Europe, making it easier to compare programmes in different member states with each other as well as increasing transparency within the system. Another important Bologna tool are the **Networks of Recognition Information Centres (ENIC-NARIC)**, whose task is it to further the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The centres are also assigned an important role in European policy documents relating to the EEA, in particular to support Higher Education Institutions with the introduction of automatic recognition. In various policy documents relating to the EEA, the centres are assigned an important role when it comes to supporting Higher Education Institutions in introducing automatic recognition.

Unfortunately, the framework mentioned above has not yet been implemented to a satisfactory level in all Member States.³ We therefore call for a correct introduction and implementation of the commitments made **within the entire EEA**. To do so, we also ask for an **elaborate mapping at the European level of all tools and initiatives** available and how these are currently being applied. Furthermore, we expect that the competent legislative powers on **national or regional level** will provide ample space for **mutual recognition**, hence introducing **national strategies** and **linking national frameworks to the EQF**.

EXISTING AGREEMENTS

In 1997, the Council of Europe and UNESCO developed [the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region](#), usually referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention. It is the only legally binding text of the [European Higher Education Area](#) (EHEA) or Bologna Process. Within the EHEA Framework, the ministers of education adopted the [Bucharest Communiqué](#) in 2012, with which they committed to the long term goal of achieving the automatic academic recognition of comparable degrees.

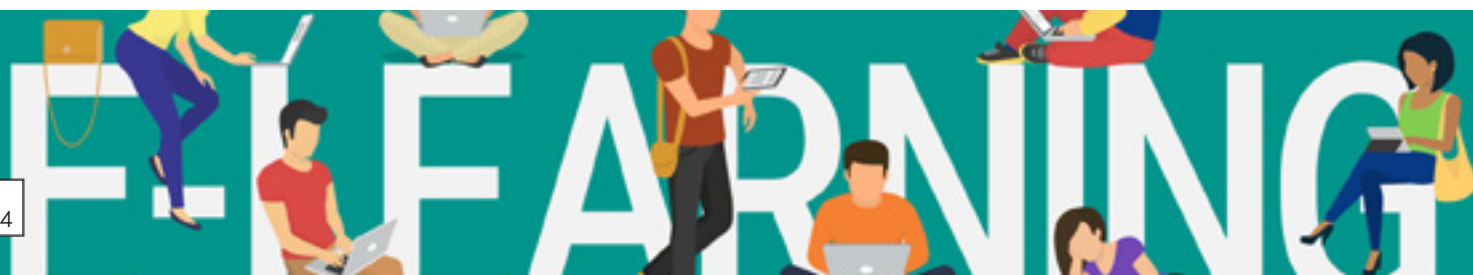
In 2002, the competent ministers for the VET sector, fired the starting signal for the [Copenhagen Process](#), setting out to enhance intensive cooperation on the recognition of competences and skills.

In 2018, the EU Member States adopted the [Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad](#).

Whereas a degree in Higher Education no longer necessarily leads to a specific profession, this actually still often applies for **Vocational Education and Training**. To allow for more flexible and compatible curricula, we also, within the EEA, need to stimulate the **recognition of professional qualifications** between Member States. At the moment, this is often being hampered by the many different national professional regulation systems, revealing a lack of mutual trust between the Member States. Bringing together networks and creating a single platform could give new impetus to the recognition of professions and skills. Close collaboration between the various sectors and policy areas is of utmost importance.

Clear agreements create mutual trust. **Quality Assurance (QA)** has an important role to play in this. For Higher Education, we already have the European Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) within the EHEA, whereas we have the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) in the framework of the Copenhagen Process. Every EEA Member State should link its national Quality Assurance system to these existing initiatives.

³ See also [The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report](#), Eurydice (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency), European Commission, November 2018





Best Practices from the Member States, which also showcase mutual trust between national and/or regional legislators in each other's educational systems, can serve as a source of inspiration for a more general European agreement framework. Examples from the Netherlands include, inter alia, the Agreement on the automatic mutual recognition of higher education degrees within the Benelux Union⁴, the recent agreement between the Benelux Union and the Baltic States⁵ and cross-border mobility agreements made between specific border regions.

Furthermore, we also expect clear agreements between **educational institutions** themselves. After all, they are the ones, together with the national legislative bodies, or in the case of VET often also industry, responsible for the design of the curriculum. Based on its learning outcomes, the curriculum itself leads to the awarding of a diploma. In this regard, European partnerships, such as the Centres of Vocational Excellence and the European Universities Initiative, can act as ideal test beds, both with regard to mutual agreements and the creation of best practices, but also for identifying obstacles and barriers in national legislation (see also chapter 3).

B) The realisation of a European Degree

As one of the focal points of the European Education Area, we want **every diploma** obtained at an educational institution of a EEA Member State to be **automatically recognised** in the other Member States and thus also giving access to further training or recognition on the labour market.

An extension of this is the design of a **European Degree**. Within the Dutch knowledge community we see the European degree as **a diploma obtained and hence also awarded, by at least two European educational institutions**. This therefore also includes **Joint and Dual Degrees**. This type of degrees is currently the exception rather than the rule; precisely because obstacles and barriers caused by national legislation.

Since **national legislation** remains the principal authority regarding the recognition of diplomas, we must ensure that **differences** between these national legislations will be **reduced** within the EEA. Therefore, agreements on mutual recognition and quality assurance must be put in place, as described in point A above. It is only then that a European Degree can be successfully realised.



⁴See also [Benelux countries agree on mutual recognition of higher education diplomas](#) or [Akkoord Benelux-Ministers voor hoger onderwijs over de automatische erkenning van diploma's hoger onderwijs tussen de drie landen](#) (in Dutch), Benelux Union, May 2015.

⁵ [Declaration of Intent by the Baltic States and the Benelux Member States on the Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Degrees](#), Benelux Union, November 2019

C) A Quality Framework for micro-credentials

In addition to traditional educational and training programmes, there is an increased interest in today's society for short and digital training, often in the form of **micro-credentials**. We expect that micro-credentials will play an increasingly important role in the **further flexibilisation** of education, especially in the context of **Lifelong Learning** and **re- and upskilling**. Neth-ER therefore welcomes the ad hoc expert group on micro-credentials established by the European Commission last spring. The principles for the recognition of micro-credentials, as developed by project teams within the ENIC-NARIC network were also included in this.

Neth-ER believes that a micro-credential, as a kind of mini diploma or certificate, cannot replace a full qualification within the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). However, it can complement the curriculum or can be **of value in its own right**, but in both cases a correct classification in the EQF is crucial. This means the EQF should be extended or improved. Besides that, it should also be possible to accumulate micro-credentials into a larger credential or degree.

To be able to recognise micro-credentials internationally, between different EEA countries, it is crucial that the **educational component** is firmly anchored in the entire validation and recognition process. For example, the educational institution must determine what the module entails exactly (learning content / curriculum), and how many ECVET or ECTS a single module counts. This way, the institution can also determine which accumulation of credentials one needs in order to achieve a qualification. In addition to content, the modules must also be clearly demarcated in terms of **level**, and thus also be included in the EQF, which serves as a European quality guarantee. This way, they serve both purposes of educational recognition as well as employment micro-credentials can also offer the possibility to **progress** from one EQF level to the next, or enable better access to the evolving labour market, hence also stimulating **re- and upskilling** among students and professionals.



D) Recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Neth-ER also sees added value for the EEA when it comes to the recognition of **non-formal and informal learning**. Even if we seem very much used to the long-established custom of entering education, taking exams and, if we manage to do so successfully, be awarded with a diploma or qualification, we see that our society is changing and with it, there is also an increasing need to recognise previously acquired knowledge, skills and competences that were not necessarily collected through the traditional education system, but outside the formal educational environment. How does one determine at what level a student can enter the educational system, or progress from one level to the next, or how can one assess previous qualifications with regards to entering the labour market?

At higher education institutions in the Netherlands an assessment can be taken via the colloquium doctum⁶. When it comes to vocational education and training this is often done via independent centres.

Neth-ER believes that national systems within the Member States should let go of the thought that the traditional pathway of education – assessment – diploma should all take place within one and the same (educational) institution. For example, one could involve non-profit organisations, such as youth organisations, in the development of new mechanisms for validating previously acquired competences. Best cases from within the Member States can serve as an example in this respect and contribute to bilateral and multilateral agreements. At European level the use of peer-learning as an instrument should be intensified. Furthermore, it is also important not to lose sight of important synergies with the recently updated **Skills Agenda**.

⁶ A special oral or written entrance exam, that serves as an assessment of suitability when a student does not have a formal degree or diploma that would grant direct access to the study programme of choice.



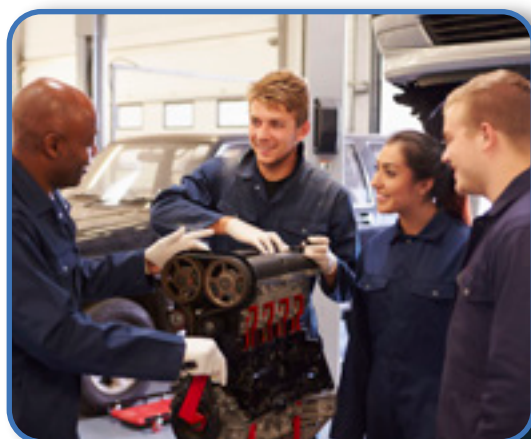


E) The EEA as facilitator of student flows – or progression through the educational system.

The EEA should also contribute to the awareness among European learners⁷ on the importance of mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications. This applies not only to higher and vocational education and training, but certainly also to **secondary education**. Although there is a broad consensus within the EU that pupils who graduate in one EU Member State, having obtained a qualification that would give access to higher education in their home country, should automatically gain access to higher education in the other EU Member States, the mutual recognition of secondary education diplomas is still a point that requires attention, with the lack of comparability between curricula being the main obstacle⁸.

Here too, **clear national legislation and guidelines** must be pursued within the Member States. As it is the case for Higher and Vocational Education and Training, there should be a clear link to the existing EQF also for secondary education, as well as the establishment of agreements and framework on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Within the EEA, the European Union should take steps to improve compliance with already existing agreements, including the implementation of existing instruments as well as peer learning. Furthermore, this should also be addressed in the successor to the **Strategic Framework for European cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020)**.

A European Education Area, in which degrees and qualifications obtained are automatically mutually recognised, will also contribute to a greater success when it comes to student flow and mobility, as addressed in the next chapter of this paper.



⁷ See also '[Study on Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications](#)', European Commission, 2016

⁸ See also '[Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad](#)', European Commission, May 2018

II. Student flow and mobility

Clear agreements on recognition and quality assurance improve the attractiveness of both individual national education systems, as well as European education as a whole. At the same time, these elements also foster a more balanced flow of students in the European Education Area. They also resolve one of the main obstacles for study or internship mobility abroad. Thus, for mobility to be more successful and inclusive, a solid system of **automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications and quality assurance** is required.

Our recommendations:

- In order to make learning experiences abroad an integral part of studies, **clear agreements and close collaboration** are needed at the institutional, national and European level. The **Erasmus Charter** must become the universal standard for all types of learning mobility.
- Increase **inclusiveness** by ensuring students continue to be eligible for benefits they are entitled to in their home countries (e.g. grants, insurance), during their stay abroad.
- The process of **digitalisation** must be safe and simple. Virtual mobility enhances physical mobility; but **cannot replace it!**

A) Learning mobility across borders should become self-evident

Learning mobility abroad enables students to become more flexible and resilient, and teaches them how to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. Furthermore, it has a positive effect on acquiring skills and competences – both content-related as well as social, personal and cultural skills –, improves employability and entrepreneurship and a swifter transition from education to the labour market⁹.

Within the framework of the European Education Area, Neth-ER calls for a more **inclusive and sustainable Erasmus** programme, which provides all students, regardless of age or level of education, with the opportunity to spend time abroad as part of their studies or for an internship. Everyone should get the possibility to develop international and intercultural skills. This will require clear agreements, with the view of making mobility an integral part of studies. By offering a suitable framework, support to the Member States, enabling the rollout of new initiatives and providing a matching budget, the EU has an important role to play in this regard. The success of the current Erasmus+ programme and an ambitious new successor from 2021 on offer the right momentum and the right preconditions. Now is the time for action. The **Erasmus Charter**¹⁰ should become the gold standard and should apply not only to exchanges that are part of Erasmus+, but also to all other learning mobility that takes place in the EEA.

In this regard, **national and regional authorities** as well as **educational institutions** themselves also have an important role to play. There are still too many hurdles that hamper mobility, e.g. difficulties to integrate **curricula**, which may require extending the duration of studies, or curricula that even inhibit an exchange or internship abroad. Educational institutions should make a conscious decision whether or not to offer the possibility for mobility in their curricula. Where learning outcomes do make mobility the norm, good mutual agreements are essential. This also goes for practical aspects, such as accommodation and access to libraries. Obviously, students that are entitled to certain benefits in their home country (e.g. grants, insurance) should be able to continue to make use of these during their stay abroad. Networks such as the **Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE)** and **European University Networks** are ideal forerunners for all these aspects.

When the right preconditions and provisions are taken by the authorities and educational institutions, we expect that **students too will take an active role**. Mobility will become more and more a standard component of their curriculum. Certain activities will need to become more important within the EEA: initiatives such as student ambassadors, buddies and other types of support as is often already offered by student associations such as ESN and ESU, but also the role of **student representation** within the European Universities Initiative and other projects.

⁹ See also 'Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)', European Commission, 2018

¹⁰ See also 'Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-2027', European Commission, 2020

ERASMUS



B) Digitalisation as enhancement, not a replacement

In order to increase the accessibility of Erasmus+, more and better facilities are needed. **Digitalisation** in the form of virtual mobility can provide as valuable support. In case physical mobility is not possible, for example during a pandemic, virtual or blended mobility can ensure that students do get an international learning experience. It is important to take note of the whole spectrum of mobility and internationalisation activities, such as virtual cooperation projects and 'internationalisation@home'. These forms provide valuable possibilities which – if applied consciously and purposefully – can add to inclusiveness and strengthening an international orientation. However, Neth-ER would like to emphasize that, especially under normal circumstances and in the long term, **virtual mobility cannot replace physical mobility**.

C) Safe and easy

A **safe and GDPR-proof digital system** is needed for the exchange of data, whether it is between educational institutions in the framework of an exchange within the EEA, or when a graduate wants to enter the job market in another EEA Member State. At the same time, this system should **not impose an additional administrative burden**.

Neth-ER also believes that sufficient attention should be paid to the way data are collected and used. Thorough coordination and clear agreements are crucial in this regard. In the near future, the Neth-ER members will thoroughly discuss the various attention points. During these discussions the objectives of the new Europass platform, launched in September 2020, will also be considered. Moreover, the link with other European initiatives, such as the **European Student Card Initiative**, should be closely guarded.

A swift information exchange will depend on how the relevant data will be stored in the national context. Respectively, the **national and/or regional authorities** have a crucial role to play in this. Neth-ER therefore calls on national authorities to work on such **data storage, management and sharing**. The (right) use of **new technologies**, such as **blockchain**, can play a big role here. The EEA will also have to take into account the different speeds in which Member States will adopt and implement these technologies and data systems, and in the short term this may well lead to a **multi-speed Europe**.



III. Networks and partnerships

Neth-ER foresees a big role for new European partnerships such as the **Centres of Vocational Excellence** and the **European Universities Initiative**. The networks that are currently being set up are part of a pilot phase within Erasmus+, but will be fully rolled out under the future Erasmus programme. They can initiate and promote the implementation of new agreements on quality assurance and recognition and in pursuance of international exchange as part of their DNA, they can contribute to a more inclusive experience abroad for everyone. Moreover, the close, geographically balanced collaboration between multiple institutions contributes to a **positive development and higher quality of individual education systems** in all Member States of the European Education Area. Finally, they are uniquely placed to **identify obstacles and barriers**, including those regarding national and/or regional legislation.

Our recommendations:

- Make networks such as **Centres of Vocational Excellence** and **European University Networks** **inclusive**; both for students as well as for educational institutions; every institution should have the possibility to join.
- The additional efforts that close partnerships require should be made at both European and national levels, both through **policy and financial support**.
- Centres of Vocational Excellence and the European Universities Initiative are important fore-runners for education in Europe as a whole. They can develop themselves to become the **dominant model** for cooperation, but should **not become the sole medium** for mobility and the European degree.

A) Network evaluation – role of national legislation

The networks will be thoroughly evaluated at the end of the pilot phase. With regard to this evaluation, Neth-ER believes that it is important that, in addition to the provided evaluation criteria, sufficient attention will be given to the way in which **relevant legislation on education** in the different Member States has played a role in the roll-out of these networks; have they supported or hindered the success of the initiatives?

B) Ample support

Neth-ER considers it vital that thorough consideration is given to the support for these new initiatives; are the extra efforts that are required from educational institutions to build successful alliances met by additional policy and financial support, both at European and national level? This is the only way for the initiatives to become a sustainable, fully-fledged and mature model.

C) Inclusive networks; no stratification

One cannot forget that the networks themselves should be **set up to be inclusive and sustainable**. The networks cannot become exclusive clubs of educational networks. Every institution should get the opportunity to join an existing or new alliance, if they so desire. The creation of these networks can thus **under no circumstances lead to a stratification of the European educational landscape**. Naturally, this also implies that the EEA should provide the

right conditions for the creation of these networks; the new Erasmus programme provides these conditions and possibilities and should therefore be fully exploited.

Neth-ER considers these networks to be **important fore-runners** for a real European Education Area. This form of collaboration can set out to become the dominant model within the EEA, but **in no way should it become the only and exclusive model** concerning mobility and the design of a European degree. The latter should be accessible **to every student in the EEA**, as discussed previously.

D) Synergies

Moreover, these networks are uniquely placed to develop a **true European Knowledge Strategy**, bringing together the European Education Area and the European Research Area. For instance, the European Universities already provide the possibility to combine education and research within one network, thanks to synergies between the Erasmus and Horizon programmes. Furthermore, the partnerships with industry, NGOs and other players play an important role in facilitating better collaboration. The same goes for the Centres of Vocational Excellence, that are focussed on creating innovation by virtue of public-private partnerships in the region. They are also cross-sectoral and connect diverse levels of study, varying from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education. By means of their accessibility at different levels, they can also play an important role in the European process for **re- and upskilling** and **lifelong learning**.

Colophon

Neth-ER is the Brussels-based association of eleven Dutch organisations working in the field of education, research and innovation. Neth-ER looks forward to help shaping the future of EU education, research and innovation together with European institutions, national governments and stakeholder organisations.

Neth-ER members:

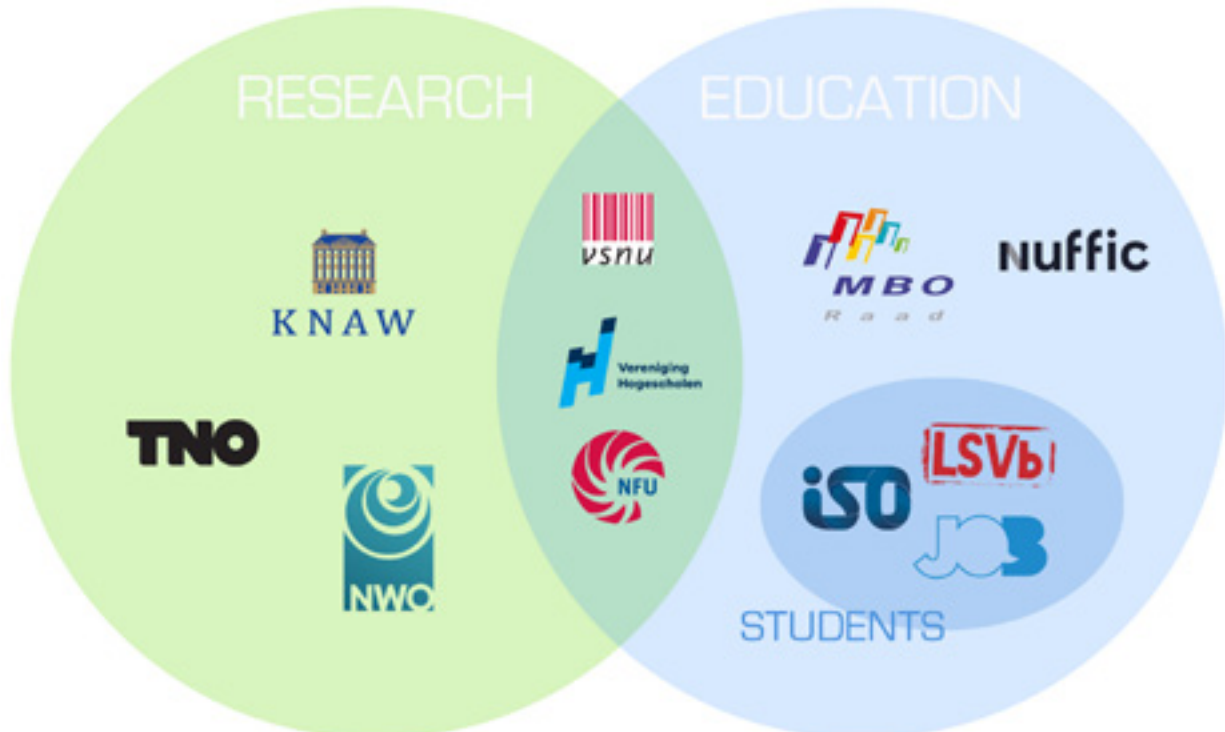
KNAW - Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
MBO Raad - Netherlands Association of Vocational Education Colleges
NFU - Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres
Nuffic - Netherlands Organisation for the internationalisation of education
NWO - Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research
TNO - Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research
VH - Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences
VSNU - Association of Universities in the Netherlands

www.knaw.nl
www.mбораad.nl
www.nfu.nl
www.nuffic.nl
www.nwo.nl
www.tno.nl
www.vereniginghogescholen.nl
www.vsnu.nl

Neth-ER associated members:

ISO - Dutch National Student Association
JOB - Union of Vocational Students
LSVb - Dutch National Students' Union

www.iso.nl
www.jobmbo.nl
www.lsvb.nl





Aarlenstraat 22
1050 • Brussels
Belgium

+32 2 511 50 40
neth-er@neth-er.eu