

ESN's Response to the Council Resolution

*Strategic Framework for the European Education Area
(2026-2030)*



Enhancing European cooperation in education and training. ESN's reaction to the Council Resolution on the second cycle of the strategic framework towards the European Education Area (2026-2030)

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Table of contents

1. Introduction
2. Delivering on the Ambitions of the European Education Area
 - a. 2.1. Digital Skills and Citizenship Education
 - i. Citizenship Education and Civic Engagement
 - ii. Digital Skills
 - b. 2.2. Making Lifelong Learning and Mobility a Reality for All
 - i. Learning Mobility for All
 - c. 2.3. Recognition, Flexible Learning Pathways and Lifelong Learning
 - d. 2.4. Inclusive Education and Student Wellbeing
 - e. 2.5. Fostering Excellent and Attractive European Vocational Education and Training (VET)
 - i. Vocational Education and Training
 - f. 2.6. Promoting Competitive European Higher Education
 - i. Higher Education Cooperation
3. Conclusions
4. References

1. Introduction

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) welcomes **the Council's resolution on the second phase of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training as it relates to the European Education Area (2026–2030)**. Building the first phase, the updated framework reviews the priorities for European cooperation in education and training. It establishes the course to be followed to achieve the European Education Area (EEA) by 2030; during the second phase of the EEA, greater emphasis should be placed on moving from setting common aims to ensuring their effective implementation.

The second cycle comes at an important moment for European education. While progress has been made since 2021, persistent barriers and uneven implementation of European commitments continue to limit students' experience. At the same time, geopolitical, societal and economic developments are placing new expectations on education and training systems. ESN welcomes the framework's response to this evolving context and **stresses that the growing emphasis on skills and competitiveness should go hand in hand with education's broader role in fostering inclusion, active citizenship, European values, intercultural understanding, and social cohesion.**

As a student-led organisation supporting mobile and international students, ESN contributes to the development of the European Education Area by bringing its experiences and perspectives into European policy discussions. ESN's grassroots presence, complemented by its research and policy work, provides evidence on the opportunities and challenges students experience in learning mobility and international higher education. Building on its contributions to the interim evaluation of the EEA and the European Commission's Implementation Dialogue, **ESN has consistently advocated for accessible, high-quality learning mobility; effective recognition; inclusive internationalisation; meaningful student participation; and stronger European cooperation in higher education.**

This reaction focuses on the areas of the renewed strategic framework most closely connected to ESN's mission and expertise and their impact on students. In particular, it considers **learning mobility, recognition and flexible learning pathways, inclusion and student well-being, citizenship and student participation**, and European higher education cooperation.

For ESN, the second cycle should be, above all, a period of implementation. **By 2030, the success of the European Education Area should be reflected not only in European-level initiatives and commitments but also in tangible and consistent improvements in students' experiences across Europe.** Closing the gap between European ambitions and their implementation will require sustained cooperation between the European Commission, Member States, higher education institutions and other education stakeholders, with students and their representative organisations meaningfully involved in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the framework.

2. Delivering on the ambitions of the European Education Area

2.1. Strategic priority 2: Developing digital skills and citizenship education

Citizenship education and civic engagement

ESN particularly welcomes the **strengthened emphasis on citizenship education and civic engagement** within the second cycle of the European Education Area. At a time when European societies face growing democratic challenges and increasing levels of disinformation, education plays a crucial role in equipping learners with the competences, values and critical thinking needed to participate actively in democratic life. Citizenship education should therefore extend beyond formal curricula and be embedded throughout the learner experience.

Learning mobility is a powerful instrument for fostering **active citizenship**. Intercultural exchange, volunteering, participation in student organisations and engagement with local communities all contribute to developing democratic values, intercultural understanding, solidarity and a stronger sense of European belonging. In this context, ESN highlights the potential of service-learning as an approach that combines academic learning with meaningful community engagement. By connecting learners with local communities, **service-learning**

strengthens the societal impact of internationalisation while fostering civic and transversal competences.

Finally, **citizenship education should empower learners not only to participate in society but also to shape education itself.** Meaningful student participation in institutional governance and education policymaking at local, national and European levels is essential for building more responsive and democratic education systems. Recognising students and their representative organisations as equal partners, while supporting service-learning and other forms of civic engagement through institutional strategies and appropriate recognition mechanisms, will be key to delivering the ambitions of the European Education Area.

What the evidence tells us

- **Learning mobility strengthens European identity and sense of belonging.** Following their mobility experience, students' sense of belonging to the European Union increases from 3.81 to 4.10 (on a five-point scale), while their feeling of connection to Europe rises from 3.99 to 4.27. Their sense of belonging to the world also increases from 3.91 to 4.16, demonstrating the contribution of mobility to both European and global citizenship.
- **Mobile learners demonstrate a strong commitment to democratic participation.** 76% of mobile students express a high intention to vote in the European Parliament elections. In addition, 57% of Erasmus+ participants report acquiring greater knowledge of democratic values through their mobility experience, while 39% indicate a stronger willingness to participate in democratic processes and community activities afterwards.
- **Learning mobility encourages continued civic engagement beyond the mobility period.** 43.59% of students indicate that they are likely to become a buddy or mentor for incoming international students, 43.90% intend to act as mobility ambassadors and 38.66% express interest in joining an international organisation such as the Erasmus Student Network after returning from their mobility.
- **Service-learning is widely recognised as enhancing the international learning experience, but access remains limited.** 86% of higher education institution staff participating in the ECEM project agree that service-learning enhances learning mobility, yet 52% of incoming international students do not have access to structured service-learning opportunities. This highlights significant untapped potential to strengthen the civic dimension of internationalisation.

- **Greater efforts are needed to connect learners with their host communities.** Although engagement with local communities is one of students' key motivations for participating in mobility, 53.47% of exchange students do not participate in activities organised by the local community or host institution during their exchange, and only 34% report engaging frequently with members of the local community.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen citizenship education across all education sectors** by embedding democratic participation, European values, media literacy, critical thinking and intercultural learning into curricula, while recognising learning mobility as a key instrument for developing these competences.
- **Promote service-learning as an integral component of internationalisation strategies** by supporting the integration of community-based learning into learning mobility, fostering partnerships between education institutions, civil society organisations and local communities, and ensuring that learners have access to civic engagement opportunities during their mobility.
- **Recognise civic engagement and community participation as valuable learning outcomes** by promoting the recognition of volunteering, service-learning and other forms of non-formal and informal learning through appropriate recognition mechanisms, including ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and micro-credentials where appropriate.
- **Create more opportunities** for learners to engage with local communities before, during and after mobility, supporting volunteering, peer mentoring, student organisations and community-based initiatives that strengthen intercultural dialogue and European identity.
- **Ensure meaningful student participation in education policymaking and institutional governance** by involving students and their representative organisations in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of education policies at institutional, national and European levels.

Digital skills

ESN welcomes the stronger emphasis placed on **digital skills** within the second cycle of the European Education Area. As digital technologies continue to transform education, **learners**

need a broad set of future-oriented competences to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. Developing digital competences is essential not only for employability, but also for ensuring that learners can participate confidently in the digital transformation of society. Alongside technical proficiency, education should foster critical thinking, media and information literacy, responsible use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence, creativity, adaptability and problem-solving, enabling learners to navigate digital environments with confidence and responsibility.

Developing these competences requires **a holistic approach across all education sectors.** Learning mobility exposes learners to digital learning environments, collaborative technologies, innovative pedagogical approaches and intercultural collaboration, while strengthening transversal competences that are increasingly valued in rapidly evolving societies and labour markets. Education should therefore equip learners not only to adapt to technological change, but also **to use digital technologies creatively and responsibly to address societal and environmental challenges.** Digital competences should be developed in an integrated way alongside communication, teamwork, resilience and entrepreneurial mindsets, preparing learners not only for employment, but also for lifelong learning and civic engagement.

As digital competences are increasingly acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences, they should be appropriately recognised and made visible. **ESN therefore supports the development of flexible recognition mechanisms, including micro-credentials, that enable learners to demonstrate these competences in a portable way.** Such approaches should complement existing qualifications, support flexible learning pathways and facilitate progression across educational sectors and borders.

What the evidence tells us

- **Developing digital competences requires greater alignment between educational outcomes and professional expectations.** While 54.3% of exchange students agree that Erasmus+ supports the acquisition of digital skills and digital literacy, the [ETILabs project](#) identifies a discrepancy between student competence levels and employer expectations. Its analysis finds the largest shortfall in information and data literacy, with students assessed at 3.02 out of 5 against an expected level of 4 (proficient), corresponding to a reported gap of 24.58%. This highlights the need to strengthen professional digital competences and ensure that learners can apply them in practical

contexts.

- **Learning mobility exposes students to innovative pedagogical approaches that foster future-oriented competences.** 69% of students report that teaching methods at their host institution enhanced their critical thinking, while 52% experienced innovative digital approaches to teaching. In addition, non-mobile students identify adopting innovative learning methodologies as one of the highest priorities for higher education institutions, scoring 4.29 out of 5.
- **International learning is a powerful driver of transversal competences needed for the future.** Students report significant improvements in language skills (86.22%), communication (75.86%), open-mindedness (74.76%), adaptability to change (67.46%), cultural awareness (65.1%) and critical thinking (50.01%). At the same time, satisfaction with language support provided by host institutions averages only 3.82 out of 5, with lower satisfaction among students with learning disabilities (3.52) and students with both physical and learning disabilities (3.00). This suggests that the language-learning dimension of mobility remains an area where further institutional support is needed.
- **Students recognise the value of digital solutions in supporting learning mobility.** 63.8% of exchange students agree that Erasmus+ offers digital solutions that facilitate the mobility experience, demonstrating the growing importance of digital tools in enabling accessible and learner-centred international education.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the development of digital competences across all education sectors by **embedding digital literacy and critical thinking** into study programmes and lifelong learning opportunities.
- Promote **learner-centred and innovative pedagogical approaches** that strengthen professional digital competences by combining digital technologies with challenge-based learning and cooperation between education institutions and employers, enabling learners to apply gained skills in professional contexts, while supporting the green and digital transitions.
- Strengthen **multilingualism as a core component of skills development** and learning mobility by investing in accessible, high-quality language learning before and during mobility, strengthening and expanding Online Language Support (OLS), and ensuring that language support is relevant to students' academic, professional and everyday

needs in the host environment.

- Recognise and make visible digital competences acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning, including learning mobility, through quality-assured and portable mechanisms such as micro-credentials and European Digital Credentials for Learning.
- Ensure that all learners have equitable opportunities to develop advanced digital competences, regardless of their educational pathway or background, so that their digital skills contribute not only to employment opportunities, but also to participation in **Europe's digital transition**.

2.2. Strategic priority 3: Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all

Learning mobility for all

Learning mobility remains one of the defining pillars of the European Education Area and ESN supports its strong presence throughout the second cycle of the strategic framework. Beyond reaffirming mobility as a key objective of European cooperation in education and training, the Resolution recognises its contribution to educational quality, inclusion, skills development and cooperation across education sectors.

ESN particularly welcomes the renewed commitment to the EU-level learning mobility targets, including the objective of ensuring that at least 23% of higher education graduates benefit from a mobility experience. These targets provide an important benchmark for measuring progress towards a truly accessible European Education Area. Achieving them, however, will require sustained commitment from both the European Commission and Member States to address the persistent barriers that continue to limit participation.

The Resolution also rightly recognises Erasmus+ as the European Union's flagship programme for mobility. As the primary instrument for delivering the ambitions of the EEA, Erasmus+ must be equipped with the resources necessary to meet growing demand and expand opportunities for learners from all backgrounds. **The implementation of the second cycle should therefore go hand in hand with the development of a more ambitious Erasmus+ programme for the 2028-2034 programming period.**

Expanding participation, however, **must not come at the expense of quality**. Increased mobility should be accompanied by continued efforts to strengthen the quality of the learning experience, improve the recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications and ensure that opportunities remain accessible for every learner. ESN remarks on the Resolution's emphasis on quality assurance, recognition and the removal of barriers, recognising these as essential conditions for translating the ambitions of the European Education Area into opportunities for students across Europe.

What the evidence tells us

- **Mobility equips learners with key transversal competences.** Students identified improvements in language skills (86.22%), communication skills (75.86%), open-mindedness (74.76%) and adaptability to change (67.46%), demonstrating that mobility contributes to both personal development and future employability.
- **Financial barriers remain the greatest obstacle to learning mobility.** The average monthly cost of living during mobility amounts to €847, while the average Erasmus+ grant covers only 55.3%, leaving students to finance the remaining 44.7% from other sources. Prefinancing mobility is also a significant concern, with 82% of students indicating it as a fear, while more than 75% of students with fewer opportunities report that they would need 75–100% of their costs covered in order to participate. Moreover, 62.7% of students receive their grant only after the start of their mobility, creating an additional financial barrier for those without sufficient personal resources.
- **The quality of the mobility experience requires continued attention.** Satisfaction with host institutions has decreased to 72.48%, while satisfaction with sending institutions stands at 63.88%. Furthermore, 53.47% of students report not participating in activities within the local community or host institution, highlighting the need to strengthen integration and student engagement during mobility.
- **Recognition remains essential to ensuring quality mobility.** On average, students lose 2 ECTS credits during the recognition process, while 2.6% of respondents receive no academic recognition for their mobility period. This demonstrates that, despite progress, consistent recognition practices remain a prerequisite for achieving learning mobility for all.

Recommendations

- Ensure the achievement of the EU learning mobility targets by **removing administrative**

barriers to mobility, integrating them into national education and training policies and regularly monitoring progress towards their implementation.

- Provide an **ambitious and adequately funded Erasmus+ programme for 2028-2034**, ensuring that financial support reflects the real costs of mobility, grants are disbursed before the start of the mobility period and participation is accessible to learners from all backgrounds.
- Strengthen **the quality of learning mobility by promoting comprehensive support before, during and after the mobility period, fostering the integration of mobile learners into local communities and ensuring that mobility experiences contribute to learners' personal, academic and professional development.**
- Remove the remaining barriers to learning mobility through simplified administrative procedures and implementation of automatic recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications.

2.3. Recognition, flexible learning pathways and lifelong learning

ESN welcomes the strong emphasis placed on recognition, flexible learning pathways and lifelong learning throughout the second cycle of the European Education Area. Together, these elements form the foundation of a learner-centred education system that enables individuals to move seamlessly between institutions, education sectors and countries while ensuring that their learning is recognised and valued.

The increased focus on **lifelong learning** reflects the growing need for education systems to support learners throughout their lives in an increasingly dynamic social and labour market context. **ESN considers the recognition of flexible learning pathways and micro-credentials a positive development**, as they can widen participation in education, facilitate upskilling and reskilling and make learning opportunities more responsive to diverse learner needs. Their implementation should, however, complement rather than replace comprehensive higher education programmes, while maintaining high quality standards and transparency.

The success of these approaches ultimately depends on reliable and transparent recognition systems. Continued efforts to improve the recognition of qualifications, learning outcomes and periods of study, alongside the renewed emphasis on automatic mutual recognition, are therefore essential. Consistent and learner-centred recognition practices not only facilitate learning mobility but also enable flexible educational pathways and strengthen trust between education systems across Europe.

What the evidence tells us

- **Course selection remains a significant challenge during mobility.** Upon arrival at their host university, students typically need to adjust an average of 14 ECTS, representing over 42% of the credits originally planned. This points to persistent challenges with the availability and accessibility of accurate course information, course schedules and enrolment procedures before mobility.
- **Recognition remains inconsistent despite continued policy efforts.** On average, students include 33 ECTS in their Learning Agreements and successfully complete 30 ECTS during their mobility. However, only 28 ECTS are recognised by their home institution upon return, resulting in an average loss of 2 ECTS credits.
- **Full automatic recognition has not yet become a reality for all learners.** While students rate the implementation of full automatic recognition at 3.84 out of 5, 2.6% of respondents report that none of the credits obtained during their mobility were recognised. Satisfaction with information on credit transfer and grade conversion procedures is even lower, at 3.57 out of 5.
- **Students increasingly benefit from more flexible mobility opportunities, but their uptake remains limited.** While 68.17% of respondents participate in traditional semester-long mobility, 9.07% undertake mobility periods shorter than three months. At the same time, awareness of Blended Intensive Programmes remains low, with only 8.84% of students reporting familiarity with this mobility format.
- **Digitalisation has yet to simplify recognition and administrative processes.** Only 22.25% of students report that their credit recognition process was managed digitally, while just 22.45% completed all mobility procedures online, indicating considerable scope for further digitalisation and administrative simplification.

Recommendations

- Improve the accessibility of course information before mobility by ensuring that higher education institutions provide up-to-date information on course availability, schedules, prerequisites and enrolment procedures sufficiently in advance, enabling students to **develop realistic Learning Agreements and reducing the need for substantial changes after arrival.**

- Ensure the **full implementation of automatic recognition of qualifications**, learning outcomes and periods of study **across all Member States**, supported by transparent, student-centred and consistently applied recognition procedures.
- **Promote flexible learning pathways throughout the European Education Area** by facilitating the wider use of micro-credentials, recognising prior, non-formal and informal learning and ensuring that these instruments complement degree programmes while maintaining high quality standards.
- Make transversal competences acquired through learning mobility visible and portable by developing complementary recognition mechanisms, **including micro-credentials and European Digital Credentials for Learning**. Support learners in documenting and presenting these competences through Europass and interoperable digital credential tools, including the **EU Digital Identity Wallet** where appropriate. Involve students and their representative organisations in developing and piloting these mechanisms, including through jointly designed courses and micro-credentials with clearly defined learning outcomes.
- Accelerate the **digitalisation of recognition and mobility procedures by expanding the use of interoperable digital tools** and ensuring that recognition processes are transparent and accessible.
- Strengthen **lifelong learning opportunities** by fostering greater cooperation between education sectors and enabling learners to move more easily between different learning pathways throughout their lives.
- Support higher education institutions in implementing student-centred approaches by **improving guidance on Learning Agreements**, course selection and recognition procedures.

2.4 Inclusive education and student wellbeing

ESN welcomes the continued commitment to fostering inclusive and learner-centred education systems throughout the second cycle of the European Education Area. Rather than treating inclusion as a standalone objective, **the renewed strategic framework embeds it across its priorities, recognising that equal access to quality education and learning mobility should underpin all education policies and initiatives.**

Creating a truly inclusive European Education Area requires addressing **the barriers that continue to affect learners' participation in education and international mobility**.

Socio-economic background, disability, health conditions and other personal circumstances should not determine whether individuals are able to benefit from the opportunities offered by the EEA. The continued emphasis on widening participation is therefore an important step towards ensuring that learners from underrepresented groups are supported throughout their educational journeys.

The renewed framework also places greater emphasis on **student wellbeing**, recognising its close relationship with academic success, inclusion and the overall quality of the learning experience. ESN considers this a positive development and emphasises that wellbeing should be recognised as a prerequisite for meaningful participation in education rather than solely as a support measure. Achieving this requires accessible support services, inclusive learning environments and institutions equipped to respond to the diverse needs of their student communities.

What the evidence tells us

- **The Erasmus+ programme is becoming more inclusive, but there is still room for improvement.** 81.6% of exchange students agree that the programme is inclusive for learners from different backgrounds.
- **Financial barriers continue to undermine equal access to learning mobility.** 35.63% of students identify insufficient financial support as their biggest challenge during mobility, 17.2% of respondents report that their grant covers less than a quarter of their total mobility costs.
- **The housing crisis has become a significant challenge for student inclusion and wellbeing.** 35.5% of students report difficulties finding affordable accommodation, while housing-related costs account for 48.03% of their total monthly expenditure. At the same time, support in finding accommodation remains the lowest-rated service provided by host institutions, receiving a satisfaction score of only 2.67 out of 5.
- **Wellbeing is a prerequisite for students' learning and participation.** 42.3% of students report experiencing anxiety and stress as a result of challenges encountered during their mobility, 37.6% indicate reduced motivation to study and 22.9% experience feelings of isolation or social exclusion during their stay abroad. These findings highlight that wellbeing is not separate from the learning experience. When students' basic

needs and sense of safety and belonging are not adequately supported, their ability to engage with learning and benefit from their mobility can be significantly affected.

- **Support services remain essential for ensuring inclusive mobility.** While students report high satisfaction regarding equal access to academic facilities (4.39 out of 5), satisfaction with support for students with fewer opportunities or special needs is considerably lower, scoring 3.52 out of 5 at sending institutions and 2.96 out of 5 at host institutions. This highlights the need to further strengthen targeted support throughout the mobility cycle.

Recommendations

- Improve the **affordability of learning mobility by ensuring that grants better reflect the real cost of living**, are disbursed before the start of the mobility period and are complemented by national and institutional support where necessary to remove financial barriers to participation.
- Place student wellbeing at the centre of the European Education Area by promoting accessible mental health and wellbeing services, fostering inclusive learning environments and ensuring that higher education institutions provide adequate support before, during and after learning mobility.
- Address structural barriers to inclusion, including **access to affordable student accommodation, accessible campuses and tailored support services** for students with fewer opportunities.

2.5. Strategic priority 5: Fostering excellent and attractive European vocational education and training (VET)

Vocational education and training

ESN welcomes the establishment of **vocational education and training (VET)** as a dedicated strategic priority within the second cycle of the European Education Area. **The stronger emphasis on transnational cooperation reflects the growing recognition that internationalisation should extend across all education sectors.** Opportunities to develop

intercultural and civic competences through European cooperation and learning mobility should be accessible to learners regardless of the educational pathway they choose.

The ambition to expand VET learning mobility is therefore a particularly positive development. As in higher education, mobility opportunities should be underpinned by quality, inclusion, adequate financial support, preparation, support throughout the mobility cycle and effective recognition of learning outcomes. **ESN also welcomes the commitment to strengthen permeability between VET and higher education by facilitating the recognition of qualifications, competences and prior learning acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning.** Enabling learners to move between educational pathways without unnecessary barriers is essential for building flexible lifelong learning pathways across the European Education Area.

Finally, ESN supports **the exploration of new European instruments that facilitate cross-border mobility and recognition, including a potential European VET diploma or label, provided they deliver clear added value for learners, support progression across borders and educational pathways and remain transparent and learner-centred.** More broadly, ESN welcomes that the Resolution recognises VET not only as a response to labour market needs, but also as a means of fostering personal development, transversal competences, active citizenship and European identity. Strengthening VET should therefore complement, rather than substitute for, the role of higher education and research in driving innovation in Europe. A balanced approach across education sectors can strengthen Europe's attractiveness as a place to learn and develop skills, while ensuring that all learners can fully benefit from the opportunities offered by the European Education Area.

What the evidence tells us

- **International experiences before higher education encourage lifelong participation in mobility.** 51.11% of respondents had an international experience prior to their higher education mobility, most commonly through educational short trips (23.90%), language programmes (15.60%), high school exchanges (12.73%) or youth exchanges and volunteering (10.96%). These findings demonstrate the importance of providing international learning opportunities across different education sectors and stages of education.
- **Flexible mobility formats can broaden participation.** While 68.17% of students participate in traditional semester-long mobility, 9.07% undertake mobility periods of

less than three months. Blended Intensive Programmes, which can serve as important stepping stones towards longer mobility experiences, remain known to only 8.84% of non-mobile students, highlighting significant potential for further development.

- **Work-based mobility offers valuable learning opportunities, but quality assurance and student support remain important challenges.** In ESNsurvey XV, 7.05% of respondents reported undertaking a traineeship or internship. Moreover, the [DETAS project](#) identifies challenges in ensuring the quality of these experiences - 31% of higher education institutions reported no engagement with host employers, while fewer than one-third (30%) quantitatively evaluated students' academic performance after placements.

- **Learning mobility develops transversal competences valued across all education sectors.** Students report significant improvements in language skills (86.22%), communication skills (75.86%), open-mindedness (74.76%), adaptability to change (67.46%) and cultural awareness (65.1%), demonstrating that international learning contributes to personal, civic and professional development alongside employability.

- **Recognition and flexible learning pathways remain essential for lifelong learning.** ESNsurvey XV recommends the wider use of micro-credentials and improved recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning to support more flexible educational pathways. At the same time, only 22.45% of students report that their mobility procedures were fully digital and 22.25% that credit recognition was managed digitally, indicating that administrative systems still need to better support learner mobility and progression.

Recommendations

- Ensure that learners in vocational education and training have **equitable access to high-quality international learning opportunities, supported by adequate funding, inclusive participation, comprehensive preparation, appropriate support throughout the mobility cycle** and transparent recognition of learning outcomes. Work-based mobility should be underpinned by clear learning agreements, defined learning outcomes, appropriate workplace supervision and regular monitoring involving the learner, sending institution and host organisation, ensuring that traineeships provide meaningful learning experiences.
- Strengthen permeability between vocational education and training and higher education by **promoting the recognition of qualifications, competences and prior**

learning acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning, enabling learners to progress between educational pathways without unnecessary barriers or duplication.

- Promote the **internationalisation of vocational education and training as an integral part of the European Education Area**, ensuring that learners in all education sectors can develop competences through transnational cooperation and learning mobility.
- Ensure that any future European VET diploma or label delivers clear added value for learners by facilitating cross-border recognition and progression between educational pathways, remaining transparent and learner-centred, and being developed in close cooperation with learners and their representative organisations.
- Promote vocational education and training as a pathway that contributes not only to employability, but also **to personal development, active citizenship and European identity**, recognising the broader educational value of international learning experiences and transversal competences across all education sectors.

2.6. Strategic priority 6: Promoting competitive European higher education

Higher education cooperation

ESN welcomes **the establishment of higher education as a dedicated strategic priority within the second cycle of the European Education Area**. This reflects the growing recognition of higher education's role in strengthening educational quality, advancing European cooperation and contributing to the social, democratic and economic objectives of the European Union. At the same time, efforts to strengthen the competitiveness of European higher education should not reduce its purpose to economic performance or market needs. Higher education is a public good with a broader role in knowledge creation, personal development, democratic participation and social cohesion, and these dimensions should remain central to its development.

The continued support for the European Universities initiative is a particularly positive development. **As a driver of transnational cooperation and institutional transformation, it should benefit the wider higher education community, foster meaningful student**

participation and be supported through sustainable and ambitious funding beyond the current programme cycle. Strengthening Europe's higher education sector should therefore go hand in hand with safeguarding accessible and learner-centred education, rather than contributing to the commercialisation of higher education.

ESN also supports **the stronger synergies between the European Education Area and the European Higher Education Area**. The effective implementation of the **Bologna Process** commitments remains fundamental to creating a coherent European higher education landscape. **Continued alignment between the EEA and the EHEA** will be essential to avoid fragmentation and ensure consistent progress across Europe.

Similarly, the continued development of initiatives such as **the European Degree Label** has the potential to further strengthen the European dimension of higher education. Their implementation should remain learner-centred, delivering tangible benefits for students through enhanced quality, recognition and transnational cooperation.

What the evidence tells us

- **The European Universities initiative has yet to achieve broad visibility among students.**
Awareness of European University Alliances currently stands at 17.57% among non-mobile students, highlighting significant opportunities to increase their visibility and impact.
- **Students support deeper transnational cooperation between higher education institutions.** Non-mobile students identify the establishment of joint degrees with universities across Europe as a high priority, awarding it a score of 4.24 out of 5. At the same time, awareness of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's programmes remains relatively low at 27.02%, suggesting that opportunities created through European cooperation require greater visibility.
- **Cooperation should translate into more diverse and accessible learning opportunities.**
Blended Intensive Programmes have the potential to widen participation in mobility, yet awareness remains limited, with only 8.84% of students reporting familiarity with this mobility format.

Recommendations

- Provide sustainable and ambitious support for transnational higher education cooperation, ensuring that initiatives such as **the European Universities Alliances**

continue to develop beyond pilot funding and deliver tangible benefits to the wider higher education community.

- **Strengthen the implementation of the Bologna Process commitments by accelerating progress on automatic recognition and quality assurance**, while reinforcing synergies between the European Education Area and the European Higher Education Area.
- Continue the development of the **European Degree Label and the future European Degree** in close cooperation with students and higher education institutions, ensuring that these initiatives remain learner-centred, transparent and complementary to national education systems.
- Increase **students' awareness of European higher education initiatives by improving communication about opportunities offered through European Universities Alliances, joint programmes and other transnational cooperation initiatives**, enabling a broader range of learners to benefit from them.
- Ensure meaningful student participation in the governance and implementation of transnational higher education initiatives, recognising students as equal partners in shaping the future of European higher education cooperation.

3. Conclusions

The Erasmus Student Network positively acknowledges the adoption of the second cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (2026-2030). **Building on the achievements of the first cycle, the renewed framework provides a solid foundation for advancing high-quality, inclusive and future-oriented education across Europe while responding to evolving challenges.**

The priorities and actions set out in the Resolution reflect many of the objectives that ESN has consistently advocated for, including strengthening learning mobility, improving the recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes, promoting inclusive education, supporting higher education cooperation and ensuring meaningful student participation. The success of the second cycle will now depend not on defining new ambitions, but on the effective and consistent implementation of the commitments already agreed. This requires sustained political commitment, adequate investment, close cooperation between European and national stakeholders and continued progress towards the common objectives of the European Education Area.

As Europe's largest student-led organisation in the field of international higher education and student mobility, **ESN remains committed to contributing to the implementation of the European Education Area.** Through its policy expertise, research and the experiences of its volunteers and student community, ESN stands ready to work alongside the European Commission, Member States, education institutions and other stakeholders to ensure that the ambitions of the second cycle translate into tangible benefits for learners across Europe.

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