



**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a blueprint for a European degree**

(COM(2024)144)

**Proposal for a Council Recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education**

(COM(2024) 145 final — 2024/0078 (NLE))

**Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education**

(COM(2024) 147 final — 2024/0079 (NLE))

(C/2024/6883)

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**

Legislative procedure	N/A
Referral	European Commission, 29.5.2024
Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
European Commission documents	COM(2024) 144 COM(2024) 145 COM(2024) 147
Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	SDG 4 – Quality education
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	4.9.2024
Adopted at plenary session	18.9.2024
Plenary session No	590
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	158/0/3

**1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC):

1.1. **emphasises** that education is a fundamental right and a public good, aimed at preparing students for life, work and active participation in democratic societies; encourages Member States and higher education institutions (HEIs) to take concrete actions to enhance quality, fairness, equality, and social inclusion in higher education, ensuring that policies are tailored to meet the specific needs and contexts of their communities;

1.2. **urges** the EU to safeguard academic freedom and institutional autonomy by establishing transparent mechanisms for monitoring and effectively implementing agreements from the Bologna Process, particularly the Tirana Ministerial Communiqué and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) statement on fundamental values;

1.3. **calls** for improved monitoring of equal access for underrepresented and socio-economically disadvantaged groups in higher education, particularly in permanent teaching positions, research positions, and leadership roles, with the aim of setting measurable targets and timelines, using EHEA principles and guidelines <sup>(1)</sup>;

1.4. **supports** fostering joint programmes among HEIs within and beyond European University Alliance projects, ensuring quality assurance by aligning with EHEA standards and including all relevant stakeholders in their implementation, while promoting interdisciplinary and intercultural learning opportunities;

1.5. **advocates** for a European career framework that ensures job security, decent working conditions and equal access to academic positions, developed in collaboration with civil society organisations, higher education institutions, respecting social and civil dialogue, academic trade unions and the social partners. This framework should include clear guidelines on career progression and support for diversity and inclusion;

1.6. **asks** for synergies between the European career framework for higher education and researchers to be enhanced to improve teaching and research quality, and urges a reassessment of appraisal systems and professional development, in order to provide a balance favouring the quality of teaching and excellence of research;

1.7. **stresses** the need for adequate resources, including sustainable public investment and streamlined EU funds, for an effective implementation of these initiatives, with a focus on transparency, accountability, and efficient use of funds;

1.8. **recommends** support for automatic recognition evaluation through quality assurance processes involving the education sector, social partners and relevant civil society organisations, to ensure alignment with labour market needs, and encourage cooperation between Member States to create a more integrated recognition system;

1.9. **highlights** the importance of digitalising higher education and student services, while respecting copyright and using artificial intelligence responsibly, with adequate digital infrastructure, support and training for staff and students;

1.10. **stresses** the significance of multilingualism in joint higher education programmes to support European integration and mobility, offering language training for practical learning experiences and internships, and promoting linguistic diversity as a key component of a well-rounded education.

## 2. EXPLANATORY NOTES

2.1. The EESC highlights its opinion on the *Higher education package* <sup>(2)</sup>, which supports the initiative's call for Member States and HEIs (higher education institutions) to enhance transnational cooperation. This cooperation would improve students' skills and competences for the dual transitions in the labour market and economy, and uphold EU values, identity and democracy.

2.2. The EESC appreciates that the package acknowledges both national competence over higher education and the institutional autonomy of HEIs, and emphasises the importance of defending and promoting academic freedom and institutional autonomy as fundamental principles for well-functioning and high-quality higher education systems.

<sup>(1)</sup> Rome Communiqué (2020).

<sup>(2)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities (COM(2022) 16 final) and the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (COM(2022) 17 final) (OJ C 290, 29.7.2022, p. 109).

*Arguments in support of recommendation 1.1*

2.3. The communication emphasises that the initiative is voluntary, and respects EU Member States' national competences in education and the autonomy and academic freedom of institutions. However, it aims to encourage governments to adapt their national legislation on qualifications and quality assurance processes. The initiative will also be connected to other EU instruments and to the next multiannual financial framework (2027), and will support the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework and the implementation of the SDGs, adopting a flexible approach that respects the different situations in the various Member States and HEIs.

2.4. The initiative primarily views higher education as a way to alleviate labour and skill shortages in the EU, including by attracting talent from other countries. However, it does not address the quality of employment, strategies to prevent brain drain globally and within the EU, or the promotion of innovation in teaching and learning for learners' comprehensive development.

*Arguments in support of recommendation 1.2*

2.5. The EESC appreciates that the initiative emphasises the protection of academic freedom – a core value of higher education. However, the European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor 2023 shows a decline in academic freedom across all EU countries. It is therefore crucial for EU institutions and the Bologna Follow-up Group to better monitor academic freedom, as it is linked to the quality and inclusiveness of higher education and to the mobility of students and staff within the Erasmus programme.

*Arguments in support of recommendation 1.3*

2.6. The EESC welcomes the initiative's aim to make higher education more inclusive, but insists that strong measures are needed to accelerate progress in this area.

*Arguments in support of recommendation 1.4*

2.7. The EESC welcomes the fact that the initiative respects national competence in higher education and institutional autonomy. Additionally, it welcomes that European degrees are not intended to replace national degrees, will be awarded by national bodies and that their issuance will be voluntary for HEIs. The EESC emphasises the need for broad collaboration among stakeholders to effectively implement the initiatives, particularly highlighting the fundamental values of student and staff participation following the Bologna Process. It is crucial to adhere to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, which address internal and external quality assurance as well as quality assurance agencies.

*Arguments in support of recommendation 1.5*

2.8. The EESC supports the *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education*, which seeks to ensure high-quality teaching and transnational cooperation through a free, safe and stable working environment. In line with national industrial relations systems and the principle of autonomy of the social partners, this includes ensuring the right to engage in collective bargaining, effective social dialogue with education trade unions, academic freedom, inclusiveness, gender equality, job security and decent working conditions. Depending on the national system concerned, this could include paid educational leave and sabbaticals to support quality teaching and research. The EESC stresses the importance of supporting European and national social dialogue and collective agreements, and of enhancing support for European sectoral social dialogue committees, particularly those focused on education and academic careers. It recommends an amendment to avoid duplicating existing social dialogue committee efforts.

2.9. Due to national competence in organising higher education and research, and the reduction or instability of public investment in many EU countries, the staff concerned are faced with increased job insecurity through short-term employment contracts related to task or project-based contracts.

2.10. The EESC suggests reviewing the criteria for the European degree label by involving more Member States and stakeholders. For instance, staff participation in higher education governance, as emphasised in the Rome Communiqué, is a fundamental value of the Bologna Process. Social dialogue and collegial governance are crucial in shaping higher education policies and programmes that ensure decent working conditions. However, the proposed revised list of criteria for a European degree currently involves only student representatives in the decision-making process, excluding staff. In any case, the relevant measures for maintaining, adapting or improving quality should be put in place, under the responsibility of the employer and in line with the statutes of the higher education institution concerned.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.6

2.11. The EESC welcomes the fact that the proposal is aimed at staff ‘working at higher education institutions who do both teaching and research, and staff who do teaching only or mostly, regardless of their status’. Given the diversity of higher education systems and institutions in the EU, it is often difficult to separate teaching and research roles. Therefore, the two career frameworks should work together, while ensuring that student assistants and doctoral candidates are adequately protected.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.7

2.12. The EESC highlights the need for sustainable public investment in HEIs, as reliance on project-based funding increases precarious working conditions for staff and diminishes stakeholder engagement in projects. Connecting European degrees and Council recommendations to the Erasmus+ programme will require commitments from Member States to increase budgets in the next multiannual financial framework, as well as a commitment from the European Commission to better assist Member States in integrating various funding lines (such as the ESF+, the European Globalisation Fund, Erasmus+, the TSI, the ERDF, etc.) to ensure comprehensive financial support for HEIs.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.8

2.13. The EESC stresses the importance of ensuring fair mobility for workers and for students and staff in higher education within the EU, and of recognising degrees in the labour market by clearly defining learning outcomes and adhering to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The EESC calls for the involvement of relevant labour market stakeholders in defining study programmes that have particular relevance to the labour market. To set up automatic recognition throughout the entire European Higher Education Area, Member States need to follow through on their commitments and prioritise quality assurance as the cornerstone of this effort. This requires investing resources in adapting legislation and supporting recognition bodies.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.9

2.14. The EESC highlights the need to address the challenges and opportunities of digitalising higher education.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.10

2.15. The EESC reiterates the importance of multicultural and multilingual study experiences for higher education students.

3. PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Amendment 1

linked to recommendation 1.2

COM(2024) 145 final

Paragraph 2, point (a) (i)

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(i) ensure that human resources policies in the higher education sector <b>recognise</b> and <b>reward</b> similarly diverse roles of academic staff, such as teaching, research, entrepreneurship and innovation, knowledge valorisation, transnational cooperation, business and community engagement, regional and local development, mentoring, administration and management, participation in institutional governance;	(i) ensure that human resources policies in the higher education sector <b>respect academic freedom and institutional autonomy, while recognising</b> and <b>rewarding</b> similarly diverse roles of academic staff, such as teaching, research, entrepreneurship and innovation, knowledge

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
	valorisation, transnational cooperation, business and community engagement, regional and local development, mentoring, administration and management, participation in institutional governance;

Reason

Higher education institutions vary significantly, and their personnel have diverse roles. Treating and rewarding vastly different tasks in the same manner is impractical and would undermine the quality of research and education, which are essential to these institutions.

Amendment 2

linked to recommendation 1.5

COM(2024) 145 final

Recital 15

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(15) The Commission also intends to support the organisation of a dedicated social dialogue at Union level on the careers of academic and professional services staff, facilitate peer learning between Member States on effective mechanisms ensuring recognition of academic and professional services staff engagement in transnational cooperation, and innovative teaching activities; and to support evidence-based policy and monitoring progress by mapping, through the European Higher Education Sector Observatory 55 existing data on higher education career and staffing policy at European, national, and institutional level, and identifying data gaps and needs.	(15) The Commission also intends <b>to continue</b> to support the organisation of a dedicated social dialogue at Union level on the careers of academic and professional services staff <b>(in particular within the European sectoral social dialogue in education)</b> , facilitate peer learning between Member States on effective mechanisms ensuring recognition of academic and professional services staff engagement in transnational cooperation, and innovative teaching activities; and to support evidence-based policy and monitoring progress by mapping, through the European Higher Education Sector Observatory 55 existing data on higher education career and staffing policy at European, national, and institutional level, and identifying data gaps and needs.

Reason

The European sectoral social dialogue in education (ESSDE), which includes the higher education sector, has been collaborating with the European Commission on academic careers. The EESC questions the need to establish a separate social dialogue committee, especially given the reduction in the Commission's social dialogue budget.

Amendment 3

linked to recommendation 1.5

COM(2024) 145 final

Paragraph 1, point (e)

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(e) encourage the possibility for academic and professional services staff to practice lifelong learning, including by going on sabbatical leave for the purposes of improving skills necessary for transnational educational activities.	(e) encourage the possibility for academic and professional services staff to practice lifelong learning, including, <b>where the national system provides for it</b> , by going on <b>paid educational and</b> sabbatical leave for the purposes of improving skills necessary for transnational educational activities.

Reason

Cross-border educational endeavours contribute to the betterment of society overall. However, such efforts are often undervalued, with individuals expected to undertake these activities alongside their primary responsibilities. Enhancing skills necessary for academics as needed should be integrated into an individual's primary duties, taking into account the associated costs and burdens to academic and professional services staff.

Amendment 4

linked to recommendation 1.6

COM(2024) 145 final

Recital 16

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(16) The Commission fosters synergies with the Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, to ensure improved and consistent careers for academic staff working at higher education institutions and engaged in both teaching and research.	(16) <b><i>This Recommendation aims to encourage the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area to become more competitive and to encourage universities in their high-quality research activities.</i></b> The Commission fosters synergies with the Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, to ensure improved and consistent careers for academic staff working at higher education institutions and engaged in both teaching and research.

Reason

The quality of teaching and research needs to be improved. The recommendation should be without prejudice to Article 179 of the TFEU and should promote the same research-related goals of competitiveness and high quality described therein.

Amendment 5

linked to recommendation 1.6

COM(2024) 145 final

Paragraph 2

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
2. It is recommended that Member States promote, acknowledge and value diverse academic roles, including innovative and effective teaching, and in particular:	2. It is recommended that Member States promote, acknowledge and value diverse academic roles, including <b>high-quality, inclusive</b> , innovative and effective teaching <b>and research</b> , and in particular:

Reason

The quality and inclusiveness of teaching and research need to be enhanced.

Amendment 6

linked to recommendation 1.9

COM(2024) 145 final

Recital 11

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(11) This Recommendation aims at promoting measures to enhance continuous professional development, and to further acknowledge the variety of activities that academic staff perform. This will allow for full staff mobilisation to develop innovative teaching and learning, stimulate the upskilling and reskilling mindset, and promote the acquisition of skills for the green and digital transitions, including the use of artificial intelligence in teaching.	(11) This Recommendation aims at promoting measures to enhance continuous professional development, and to further acknowledge the variety of activities that academic staff perform. This will allow for full staff mobilisation to develop innovative teaching and learning, stimulate the upskilling and reskilling mindset, and promote the acquisition of skills for the green and digital transitions, including the <b>responsible</b> use of artificial intelligence in teaching.

Reason

The EESC emphasises the significance of addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the digitalisation of higher education. The recital highlights the importance of skill acquisition, particularly regarding AI, which students must learn to use. AI needs to be incorporated into educational practices so that responsible use can be taught on a wide scale.

Amendment 7

linked to recommendation 1.5

COM(2024) 147 final

Annex II

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
Joint arrangements for the joint programme	Joint arrangements for the joint programme
The joint programme has joint policies, procedures and/or arrangements defining curriculum planning and delivery, as well as all organisational and administrative matters.	The joint programme has joint policies, procedures and/or arrangements defining curriculum planning and delivery, as well as all organisational and administrative matters.
Students' representatives are part of the decision-making process to define the joint policies and procedures and/or arrangements.	Students' <b>and staff</b> representatives are part of the decision-making process to define the joint policies and procedures and/or arrangements.

Reason

The EESC emphasises the importance of democratic decision-making at institutional level on joint arrangements for the joint programme, as such arrangements have an impact on staff workload and working conditions.

Amendment 8

linked to recommendation 1.8

COM(2024) 147 final

Annex II

Modify

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
Labour market relevance	Labour market relevance
The joint programme aligns with labour market requirements by incorporating intersectoral components or activities and the development of transversal skills.	The joint programme aligns with labour market requirements - <b>following consultations with relevant labour market actors, especially with social partners</b> - by incorporating intersectoral components or activities and the development of transversal skills.

Reason

The EESC emphasises the importance of involving labour marker actors when defining the learning outcomes of joint programmes.

Brussels, 18 September 2024.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Oliver RÖPKE