

EU mobilises international support for The Gambia

The reinforced political and financial support by the international community will assist The Gambia in continuing its democratic transition, building on strong democratic institutions, the respect of human rights and the rule of law, and sustainable and shared economic growth.

High Representative/Vice-President Federica **Mogherini**, who co-chaired the conference together with the President of The Gambia, Adama **Barrow**, in Brussels today, said: *“The Gambia is showing to the world that freedom and democracy are about real people and real lives. After the presidential election in 2016, neighbours and the international community stood with the Gambian people. We stood on the side of freedom and democracy. Two years on, we continue to stand by your side. Today the EU is proud to announce €140 million to invest in opportunities for the Gambian people and further strengthen democracy”.*

Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven **Mimica**, added: *“When people of a country decide to overturn a two-decades long dictatorship, this is a choice to commend. This is what happened in The Gambia one year and a half ago. When new authorities commit to profoundly reform the country and put it on the path of democracy and development, the international community has to answer their call. This is what happened today in Brussels. Out of the €1.45 billion that were pledged today, the EU has committed additional funding of €140 million until 2020, which adds to the €225 million mobilised since the beginning of the transition in 2017. Because nothing is more important today than showing to the people of The Gambia that democracy brings quick and tangible dividends.”*

Key outcomes of the conference are:

The International Conference for The Gambia will be followed by a **Business Forum** tomorrow, which will bring together interested European, regional and Gambian business representatives for exchanges on sector-specific strategies and projects during panel discussions on Energy & Infrastructure, Agricultural Value Chains, and Tourism.

Background

Following the end of 22 years of authoritarian rule by former President Yahya Jammeh with the change of government in January 2017, the EU and The Gambia have opened a new chapter in their relations. An intense political dialogue is ongoing at all levels, and the EU is actively supporting the democratic transition in co-ordination with other international partners of The Gambia. Areas of co-operation include e.g. security, development for sustainable growth, transitional justice, economic partnership, trade, fisheries and migration.

For more information

[International Conference for The Gambia – Joint Communiqué by the co-chairs](#)

[Opening remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the International Conference for The Gambia](#)

[Factsheet ‘The EU’s partnership with The Gambia’](#)

[EU Delegation to The Gambia](#)

Building a stronger Europe: new initiatives to further boost role of youth, education and culture policies

EDUCATION

1. Automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad

What currently complicates the mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary school education diplomas and learning periods abroad?

Students often have no guarantee that their diplomas acquired in one Member State will be recognised in another, and also have to face long waiting periods or costs in the recognition process. These obstacles not only give students uncertainty, but also hinder the creation of an integrated European learning space, and impede the emergence of a truly open European labour market. This was confirmed in recent consultations with stakeholders where respondents highlighted the lack of automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and expressed support for an EU action in this area.

What are the key steps that Member States need to take?

Member States will be invited first to make a voluntary commitment to automatic recognition. They will then be invited to implement a technical step-by-step approach to build trust in each other’s education and training systems. It will take account of the situation in different education and training sectors. The proposal sets out the conditions, such as quality assurance and transparency, that must be fulfilled for automatic recognition to become a reality, as well as the existing EU tools, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and European Qualifications Framework, which can support Member States, and their education and training institutions, in the realisation of this goal.

What is the difference between the approaches to mutual recognition in upper

secondary and higher education?

With regard to the recognition of **qualifications**, there will be no difference in approaches between higher education and upper secondary education. However, as procedures and tools are more developed in the recognition of mobility periods at higher education level, there will be a distinction concerning the recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad. For example, the [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System](#) is already in place to recognise the outcomes of **learning periods** abroad at higher education level, but no such process exists at secondary level in general education. Therefore, at this level, competences acquired abroad will be checked against the competences defined in the national curriculum of the country in which the learner is studying.

2. High quality early childhood education and care systems

Why is high quality early childhood education and care so important for the EU?

The first six years in life are essential. This is when the foundations for later educational achievement and a sense of belonging are laid, with big implications for people's prospects on the job market and their ability to seize opportunities and become independent, engaged citizens. The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) states that children have the right to quality and affordable early childhood education and care.

What can the EU do to improve early childhood care and education?

The EU strives to help in two ways: by providing funding under the [Structural and Investment Funds](#) and the [Erasmus+](#) programme as well as by encouraging Member States to cooperate in improving early childhood education and care systems.

The proposal for a Council Recommendation adopted today focuses specifically on improving access to and the quality of early childhood education and care systems. The Quality Framework annexed to the proposed Recommendation is a result of cooperative work between Member States. It is an attempt to define quality with regard to access, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding, and describes the main features of high quality services. For example, it underlines that staff need initial and continuous professional development and supportive working conditions to ensure that children benefit as much as possible from early childhood education and care. It also outlines key elements of curricula in the early years, taking into account the specific cognitive, social, emotional, physical and language development needs of young children.

3. Teaching and learning of languages

Why is there a need for these measures?

Being able to speak foreign languages is not only a competence needed on increasingly international job markets. It also opens new perspectives and enables people to discover other cultures. In 2002, that Barcelona European

Council set the goal of every European citizen having the possibility to learn two foreign languages from an early age. However, all available data sources, including a Eurydice Report on [Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe 2017](#), show that Member States are not advancing towards this objective fast enough – at a time when increasing mobility within the EU, as well as high numbers of children of school age arriving from third countries, pose challenges that need to be addressed.

What is the EU doing to support language learning?

Support for language learning and linguistic diversity is an over-arching objective of the Erasmus+ programme and its mobility actions for learners and teachers. eTwinning, the world's largest online platform for teachers with over half a million registered users, allows language teachers to communicate, collaborate and develop projects together across different languages.

Additionally, the Commission is planning to increase the impact of its funding programmes by including new target groups, for example smaller schools with fewer resources and learners from a less-favoured socio-economic background, fostering language awareness in schools, supporting cross-border collaboration between schools and enabling language teachers to spend time abroad to improve their own competences.

How will reporting on language learning be monitored and made compatible between countries?

There is no monitoring and compatibility tool for reporting in place at the moment. However, we need to re-launch the discussion on indicators, benchmarks and targets for language competences, taking certain past developments into account in order to make any kind of monitoring meaningful. Technical details about how the monitoring can be arranged will be discussed with experts from the Member States before the Commission can present a new proposal.

Past developments we can build on: the last survey on language competences in 18 education systems in 2012; and the Eurydice Report on [Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe](#), published in 2017, which shows positive trends in the teaching and learning of foreign languages compared to the previous edition of 2012. Also, many Member States have introduced reforms in the field of language teaching. Furthermore, the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report emphasises the need to support pupils in learning the language of schooling as their first or second foreign language.

Following the proposals presented today, what still needs to be done to complete the European Education Area?

The Commission will intensify its work towards a European Education Area in partnership with Member States. The Commission is planning to achieve this by:

- working with the Council towards adoption of the proposals for Council Recommendations presented today. The Commission will then regularly report to the Council on Member States' progress in implementing them;
- proposing, still in May 2018, a successor to the Erasmus+ programme that reflects the growing consensus on the need to further increase mobility, notably of school pupils, vocational education and training learners and apprentices, as well as to make the programme more inclusive and accessible;
- making full use of the existing European cooperation framework in education and training, focusing on exchanging empirical evidence, benchmarking, and mutual learning. As this framework will expire in 2020, the Commission is currently consulting policymakers and stakeholders with a view to making proposals for a new framework for EU cooperation in education and training. This framework will be the vehicle for setting education and training priorities and will help to better target EU funding towards EU and Member State priorities.

YOUTH

How does the new Youth Strategy link to the previous one?

The new Youth Strategy will seek to improve the EU's outreach to and dialogue with young people, building on EU youth policy cooperation between 2010 and 2018.

The interim evaluation of the existing [EU Youth Strategy](#) and a stakeholder consultation confirmed that EU youth cooperation has been successful. It has triggered both policy and legislative changes at national level. But there are areas for improvement, in particular the need to reach more young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, including at local level; to improve the impact of the dialogue with young people and to ensure their voice is heard across policy areas.

How will the EU use the strategy to encourage youth participation and engagement?

At the EU level, the Commission proposes to broaden the dialogue with young people beyond youth organisations active in the EU matters, embracing a more diverse audience and in particular targeting disadvantaged groups. The future EU Youth Dialogue should also enable alternative forms of participation, such as online campaigns or consultations via digital platforms connected to the European Youth Portal. This will increase the reach beyond the 200,000 young people involved in the EU youth dialogue since 2010.

Moreover, the Commission will work to remove obstacles to facilitate volunteering and young people's engagement in solidarity activities, for instance by updating and expanding the 2008 Council Recommendation on the cross-border mobility of volunteers.

How will the EU improve the promotion of youth issues across other EU policies?

The Commission is proposing for example to create the position of an EU Youth Coordinator who would be a visible contact point for young people in the Commission, helping to ensure coordination and sharing outcomes of the EU Youth Dialogue as well as well as give feedback to young people. Another novelty is the tracking of EU spending on young people.

CULTURE

Why is the Commission proposing a new European Agenda for Culture now?

European leaders have stated their vision of a Union which harnesses the role of culture in strengthening a European identity that preserves cultural heritage and promotes cultural diversity. And according to a 2017 Eurobarometer survey, citizens regard culture as the most powerful factor for bringing Europeans together. The New European Agenda for Culture seeks to support Member States in making the most of the potential of culture in fostering innovation, economic growth and job creation, as well as in building stronger links between communities and with the EU's partners across the world. Actions include fostering the mobility of artists, better supporting the cultural and creative sectors through stronger links with industrial policy and to strengthen cooperation with third countries, for instance the Western Balkans.

How will the New Agenda build on the European Year of Cultural Heritage?

The new European Agenda for Culture aims to continue and scale up efforts launched during the European Year to (re)connect Europeans with their cultural heritage and reap the full benefits heritage brings for social and economic development. One initiative announced in the Agenda is an Action Plan for Cultural Heritage which will be presented at the end of the European Year. Member States will be invited to develop similar plans at national level and follow up through the Council Work Plans for Culture.

For more information

[Questions and Answers](#)

[Education \(including factsheet\)](#)

[Culture \(including factsheet\)](#)

[Youth \(including factsheet\)](#)

New rules for organic production: Statement by Commissioner Phil Hogan

Today's decision by the Council to adopt the text of the Regulation providing new rules for organic farming clears the final hurdle for the modernisation of the sector and the harmonisation of rules covering organic production both within the European Union and in non-EU countries.

Speaking after the Council had approved the text of the Regulation today, Phil **Hogan**, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, said:

"Today is a day for which a lot of people worked very hard and showed tremendous patience. The approval by the Council of the text of the Regulation allows existing and potential organic producers to plan with confidence and certainty on the basis of new rules which will enter into force on 1 January 2021.

The organic sector has been steadily increasing in importance – by 125% over the past ten years alone – but that growth was compromised by rules that were no longer fit-for-purpose. One of the great successes of the Common Agricultural Policy and associated agricultural legislation has been its ability to adapt to meet new challenges and opportunities.

The European organic sector is on an upward trajectory and this Regulation will support the sector's growth by providing an appropriate legislation framework.

Producers, operators and trade partners now have two and half years to adapt to the new legislative framework which is also designed to protect the interests of the European consumer. The new legislative environment is a growth-friendly one which will contribute to this increasingly important and mainstream sector achieving its undoubted potential, based on the principle of a level-playing field."

For More Information

[Questions and answers about the new rules on organic farming](#)

[Factsheet on the organic sector and the new rules](#)

[Organic Farming website](#)

[EU organic logo](#)

Building a stronger Europe: new initiatives to further boost role of youth, education and culture policies

The new initiatives aim to enhance learning mobility and educational opportunities in the EU, empower young people, in particular by encouraging them to participate in civic and democratic life, and harness the potential of culture for social progress and economic growth in Europe.

Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness, Jyrki **Katainen**, said: *“Today we are taking further steps to reinforce youth policies, culture and education in the EU. Following last year’s Leaders’ meeting on education and culture at the [Gothenburg Social Summit](#) and the [December European Council](#), we swiftly presented a first set of initiatives addressing key competences for lifelong learning, digital skills as well as fostering common values and inclusive education. The second set of initiatives we are presenting today go a step further, focusing on learning mobility, youth, early childhood education, and learning of foreign languages and culture – all important building blocks for the future of Europe.”*

Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor **Navracsics**, said: *“Education, culture and youth policy have a central role in building a resilient, competitive and cohesive Europe for the future. Along with the first package adopted in January, the proposals we are putting forward today show that the Commission is working hard to achieve a set of ambitious goals together with Member States. These actions will help to pave the way towards the European Education Area while strengthening a European identity and empowering people, especially young people.”*

More attention needs to be devoted to education, training, youth and culture at the EU level to enable young people to reach their full potential. Investing in skills, competences and knowledge drives innovation, competitiveness and resilience. The initiatives presented today will help give young people of all backgrounds more promising prospects and help them take a more active role in society.

The Commission is today presenting a package including:

- an overarching **Communication** on ‘Building a Stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies’ which outlines how the Commission is taking forward the [Gothenburg agenda](#) and the European Council’s mandate;
- a **Youth Strategy** for the period 2019–2027 to empower Europe’s youth and give them a stronger voice in EU policymaking, reflecting the importance the Commission attaches to investing in young people and their future;
- proposals for Council Recommendations on **High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems** to lay the foundations for later success in life; on the **Automatic Mutual Recognition of Diplomas and Learning**

Periods Abroad to facilitate learning mobility in Europe; and on improving the **Teaching and Learning of Languages** to ensure that more young people become proficient in foreign languages;

- a **New Agenda for Culture** to raise awareness of Europe's shared, diverse heritage. It aims to use the full potential of culture in building a more inclusive and fairer Union, supporting innovation, creativity, sustainable jobs and growth and in reinforcing the external relations of the EU.

As part of the initiatives announced today, work continues on other aspects of developing the European Education Area by 2025. The overarching Communication on 'Building a Stronger Europe' outlines plans for a **European Student Card** which is designed to boost learning mobility by reducing administrative burdens and costs for students and education and training institutions. The Commission plans to implement it by 2021 as a visible symbol of European student identity.

The Communication also highlights the work being carried out with Member States and the education sector to develop **European Universities**. These European Universities consisting of bottom-up networks of existing universities will boost cross-border cooperation through long-term institutional strategies. They will promote innovation and excellence, increase mobility for students and teachers and facilitate language learning. This should also help to make European higher education more competitive. The Commission aims to launch pilots in 2019 and 2020 under the Erasmus+ programme before the full roll-out of the initiative in 2021.

Other actions to support a lifelong learning and innovation-driven approach to education and training will also be developed. The Commission will for instance propose to support the establishment of **Vocational Education and Training Centres of Excellence** which would promote an active role for vocational education and training in local and regional economic development.

Initial results of a [Eurobarometer survey](#) revealing Europeans' views on key initiatives designed to build a European Education Area are also published today. It shows that more than nine in ten respondents in all countries think it would be useful to give students the chance to work with people from other countries on innovative projects, within networks of European Universities. It also shows that 84% of the young people surveyed would like to improve their command of a language they have already learned, and that 77% would like to learn a new language.

Background

In 2016 the EU leaders endorsed the [need for action](#) in support of youth. In the Bratislava [roadmap](#), they committed to creating better opportunities for young people, such as the [Youth initiative](#) including the European Solidarity Corps. The Commission is now proposing to renew the Youth Strategy to ensure young people can play their part in building the future of Europe.

Heads of State and Government discussed education, training and culture at the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017 guided by the Commission's

Communication '[Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture](#),' setting out the vision of a European Education Area and announcing a New Agenda for Culture. This resulted in the [European Council conclusions](#) of 14 December 2017 calling on Member States, the Council and the Commission to take forward the agenda discussed in Gothenburg. The European Council also highlighted the [2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage](#) as an opportunity to increase awareness of the social and economic importance of culture and heritage.

For More Information

[Questions and Answers](#)

[Education \(including factsheet\)](#)

[Culture \(including factsheet\)](#)

[Youth \(including factsheet\)](#)

[Eurobarometer on the European Education Area](#)

[Commission welcomes green light to start trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand](#)

President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude **Juncker** said: *“These agreements will build on the recent successful agreements with Canada, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, as well as Mexico among others, expanding the alliance of partners committed to open and rules-based global trade. Open trade must go hand in hand with open and inclusive policy making. That’s why the Commission published the draft negotiating mandates with Australia and New Zealand when it proposed to the Council to open these negotiations. These agreements will be negotiated in the greatest transparency and we expect Member States to uphold this high level of transparency.”*

Commissioner for Trade Cecilia **Malmström** said: *“This is great news. We look forward to adding Australia and New Zealand to the EU’s ever-growing circle of close trading partners. We are already close in terms of shared values and our open, global outlook. Together, we will now negotiate win-win trade deals that create new opportunities for our businesses, as well as safeguard high standards in key areas such as sustainable development. I am looking forward to visiting Canberra and Wellington in the coming weeks to officially launch our negotiations. Starting these talks between likeminded partners sends a strong signal at a time where many are taking the easy road of protectionism.”*

Australia and New Zealand are important allies and these agreements will offer significant economic gains by getting rid of obstacles and boosting trade further. Despite the distance, trade between the EU and these two countries is already roughly the same as with Mexico or Canada.

Having trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand would provide EU businesses with a valuable entry point into the wider Asia-Pacific region. They will also put European companies on an equal footing with those from the other countries in the area that have signed up to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or that already enjoy better access to Australia and New Zealand through other preferential trade agreements.

Commissioner **Malmström** will travel to Australia and New Zealand in June to open negotiations at the political level. The first negotiation rounds between the teams of negotiators are then envisaged to take place in Brussels in July.

For More Information

[Draft mandate for negotiations with Australia](#) and [draft mandate for negotiations with New Zealand](#) as proposed by the Commission in September 2017

[Factsheet on future negotiations with Australia and New Zealand](#)

[Impact Assessment Report](#) and its [executive summary](#) for the agreement with Australia

[Impact Assessment Report](#) and its [executive summary](#) for the agreement with New Zealand

More information on [EU-Australia](#) and [EU-New-Zealand](#) trade relations