

AGENCY POSITION ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Background Information Paper for the Second Edition

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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PREAMBLE

In 2015, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) published its [Position on Inclusive Education Systems](#) (European Agency, 2015). This expressed an ultimate vision for inclusive education systems: **to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.**

This ultimate vision was agreed as a focal point for Agency work and an aspiration towards which all Agency member countries could align their policy development work.

The position paper also set out the essential features of inclusive education systems that would guide the development and direction of Agency activities in the medium to long term. Since 2015, the position has been central to Agency work and has informed thinking about ways to support member countries in their efforts to develop more inclusive education systems.

Seven years on, as the Agency reflects on 25 years of activity, the vision for inclusive education systems remains constant, but the context for international and European-level work in this area has changed significantly.

The recent Agency publications [Key Principles – Supporting policy development and implementation for inclusive education](#) (2021a) and the [Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027](#) (2021b) draw on the Agency’s growth and development in the field of inclusive education. The Agency has grown its knowledge, understanding and experience in supporting countries in their policy development and implementation through its projects and activities. This includes work for the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support ([DG REFORM](#)), which has involved in-depth analysis of national legislation and policy and examination of issues around implementation and impact evaluation.

A 2022 update of the Agency position paper has taken account of these changes and their potential impact on education systems’ key components. This update will be central in informing the future direction and focus for Agency work with its member countries.

This paper presents the background information – evidence and literature – used to inform the [2022 update of the Agency position paper](#). It provides the rationale for the update and information on the legislative and policy context for the position. It also considers the next steps for the Agency in supporting countries to use this information in their on-going development work.



THE NEED FOR AN UPDATED POSITION PAPER

The rapid changes taking place in the world today include the development of digital technologies, consideration of sustainability and a greater emphasis on climate change in all spheres of society. A variety of factors have led local schools to experience greater diversity in terms of learners' abilities and religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.

Recent events have highlighted the enormous impact of the increased movement of refugees due to conflicts and forced migration ([United Nations, 2022](#)). As the *Education and Training Monitor 2021* (European Commission, 2021a) illustrates, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep inequalities and heightened the need for everyone to take responsibility for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners with greater attention to well-being.

Such an approach aligns with the thinking around a new social contract for education, based on co-operation and inclusion, as outlined in the [Reimagining our futures together](#) publication (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). This examines the future role of education and stresses the need for **education to be a 'shared social commitment' – one of the key human rights – strengthening everyone's capacity to care and co-operate across all levels of society** (ibid., p. 47).

As countries are currently not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets by 2030, action is urgently needed (UNESCO, 2018a). There is a need for **greater clarity around the principles underpinning a more holistic approach to investing in quality**. This is a key feature of the Education 2030 Agenda and a core component of the right to education.

This means that national legislation and policy must recognise the rights of all learners and actively prevent **discrimination, stereotyping and marginalisation that are evident for all learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education for different reasons**.

While 68% of countries have some sort of definition of inclusive education, only 57% of these definitions cover multiple marginalised groups (UNESCO, 2020a).

The Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960) commits States Parties to forbid all forms of discrimination in education and to achieve equal educational opportunities. **Legal frameworks that enshrine both equality and anti-discrimination offer much stronger legal protection and a more supportive legal environment**. National strategies that target certain minority groups should be extended to tackle all forms of discrimination and enforce the right to education, to ensure that every learner matters equally (UNESCO, 2017).

As the world seeks to rebuild more inclusive education systems, **all education actors must widen their understanding of inclusive education to include ALL learners** (UNESCO, 2020a). At the heart of future planning is a need for clarity about what inclusive education means. **Inclusion and equity should not be seen as separate policies, but as principles that inform all national, regional and local education policies** across all levels and sectors. In short, one all-encompassing system is needed for all learners, with policy-makers and stakeholders sharing responsibility for each individual's success.



The increasing diversity and the complexity of learners' needs will require **flexible funding and resource allocation to enable schools and communities to increase their capacity to respond to diversity and support all learners together** without a formal diagnosis or label. Further policies relating to governance, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation, teacher professional learning, and curriculum and assessment are needed (UNESCO, 2020b) to address current challenges and recognise that schools cannot work alone (Council of the European Union and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, 2017).

Partnerships and networks with stakeholders and local communities will become increasingly important as institutions (such as governments, ministries and schools) organise and collaborate in different ways to establish cross-sectoral working across all system levels (OECD, 2020a). Crucially, there will be a greater need for **multi-dimensional and intersectional approaches to promote equity and inclusion** and prepare resilient individuals equipped to engage with others in increasingly complex and diverse societies (Cerna et al., 2021). The Agency ecosystem model (European Agency, 2017) illustrates this complexity; it considers the interactions between system levels as well as processes essential to learner-centred education.

These changes call for greater **flexibility across education systems**, with less reliance on single institutions and/or schools and a changed role for education professionals. **Education systems should support local schools and teachers – from early childhood to higher education – to develop their capacities to respond to diversity** and collaborate across sectors (UNESCO, 2020b). This may involve more personalised pedagogies, use of digital technologies, and varied learning pathways. Increasingly, **countries should foster stakeholder engagement – in particular valuing the voices of learners in all development processes to ensure learner-centred provision for everyone.**

Education systems must aim towards the provision of opportunities for all learners to fully participate and learn in their local schools. The right of all children to inclusive education is paramount. Parents should not be faced with having to express their preference for an education that ensures that their child's needs are met (which may imply placement in a special school or separate classroom) or ensuring that their child has the same rights and opportunities as other learners (through placement in a mainstream school).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the right to education of many learners, as education systems were not well prepared for school closures. The lack of connectivity and digital tools, social isolation and difference in support for home schooling, among other things, increased existing inequalities (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romani and Reimers, 2022; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Post-pandemic, there is an opportunity to **rethink the resilience of education systems**. Such a rethink should take account of the **increasing need for innovation, flexibility, cross-sectoral working and a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention, as the full impact on young people's learning, mental health and well-being** becomes evident.



THE LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY CONTEXT FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Agency work focuses on supporting its member countries to adopt a rights-based, inclusive approach to their legal and policy frameworks. Such an approach is needed to safeguard the right to inclusive education for all learners and ensure that no-one is left behind (UNESCO, 2021). The revised *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems* reflects this rights-based approach for **all** learners.

However, the Agency position recognises that Agency member countries are at very different points in their thinking around the rights of learners who – for whatever reason – are vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive settings. This background document to the *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems* outlines the key factors and steps for working towards a rights-based approach for all learners. It highlights essential background information that puts the position paper into the wider context of international and European Union (EU) developments.

The information is aligned with the Agency publication, [Key Principles – Supporting policy development and implementation for inclusive education](#) (European Agency, 2021a). This sets out an overarching principle around an agreed concept of rights-based inclusive education, stating that **there must be a clear concept of equitable, high-quality education to inform a single legislative and policy framework for all learners.**

The right to education

The first international legally-binding instrument to enshrine the right to education was the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960). In addition to prohibiting any form of discrimination in education, it addresses equality of opportunity, access to free education and the rights of minority groups. Article 4 details the duties and actions of States Parties (UNESCO, 2021).

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966) further reinforced the right to education. Articles 13 and 14 have particular significance within the United Nations (UN) human rights legal framework as they form part of the International Bill of Rights (UNESCO, 2021).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), one of the most widely ratified treaties, affirms the right of the child to education and the State's duty to ensure that primary education is free and compulsory (United Nations, 1989). It also states that school discipline should be administered in a manner consistent with a child's human dignity and encourages States to ensure regular school attendance and the reduction of drop-out rates.

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) enshrines the right of persons with disabilities to education and notes that States Parties should 'ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning' (United Nations, 2006). Importantly, the right to education is not limited to access; it also includes



an entitlement to quality and inclusive education according to the principles of non-discrimination and equality.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment No. 13 on the right to education ‘imposes three types or levels of obligations on States parties: the obligations to respect, protect and fulfil’ (1999, p. 10). UNESCO notes that these obligations must comply with the essential features of the right to education, set out in the 4As framework (Tomaševski, 2001), which states that education must be:

- **available** at all levels in sufficient quantity with schools in all locations, including remote areas;
- **accessible** with schools developed around the principles of equality and non-discrimination, eliminating administrative, economic and physical barriers that may exclude part of the population from education;
- **acceptable** to children and parents (i.e. relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality), with respect for parental freedom;
- **adaptable** with support for teachers and schools to meet the unique needs of all individual learners and respond to society’s changing needs, as well as local needs and contexts (UNESCO, 2021).

This right was further embedded in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with SDG 4 committing all countries to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UNESCO, 2015, p. 15).

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights notes that, at national level:

... legislation should be comprehensive and explicit enough to address situations in which tradition, freedom of choice, parental consent or urban segregation are used to legitimise discrimination and high concentrations of Roma children, children with a migrant background or children with disabilities in specific schools (2017, p. 19).

The paper stresses that the right to inclusive education should be an integral part of domestic legislation, with ‘a system of targeted sanctions ... against decisions and measures which infringe on this right’ (ibid.).

Within the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission aims to provide equal opportunities for under-represented groups:

Regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education, and access to goods and services available to the public (2018, p. 11).

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance General Policy Recommendation No. 7 (2018) highlights that segregation is explicitly considered a form of discrimination. Moreover, General Comment No. 4 on the UNCRPD further clarifies inclusive education and states that ‘the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the general education system should be prohibited’ (Committee on the Rights of Persons with



Disabilities, 2016, p. 6). Section III, paragraph 40 clearly states that the Convention is ‘not compatible with sustaining’ both mainstream and special or segregated education systems (ibid., p. 11).

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights further strengthens this point, highlighting that:

To ensure the non-discrimination perspective, laws and policies should explicitly comprise a “no-rejection clause”, forbidding the denial of admission into mainstream schools and guaranteeing continuity in education (2019, p. 12).

They note that such action should be reinforced by ‘the provision of reasonable accommodation’ for learners with disabilities, with ‘impairment-based assessment for the assignment of schools’ being discontinued and ‘support needs for effective participation in mainstream schools assessed’ (ibid.).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted ‘the need to address longstanding structural challenges’, in particular the ‘well-being and mental health of children, learners and educators’ (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 5). It has also:

... reinforced the need to ensure inclusive high-quality education and training, including ECEC [early childhood education and care], and to make it available and accessible to all learners, regardless of their gender, specific socio-economic, ethnic, religious or cultural background, specific educational needs, or other personal circumstances (ibid.).

Furthermore, the pandemic has compounded inequalities in education. The European Commission points to evidence that tracking policies (i.e. the separation of learners into different academic or vocational education pathways or schools) can ‘reduce education equity’, with ‘mixed effects on efficiency’ (European Commission et al., 2022, p. 12). It suggests that ‘delaying tracking to later ages may promote the equality of educational opportunities’ (ibid.). It also notes that despite evident benefits from reducing school segregation, ‘desegregation policies have not been widely implemented in European countries’ (ibid.).

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the fact that education is key to making societies sustainable and resilient. The European Commission sees ‘opportunities for innovation’ arising from the disruption caused by the pandemic, as well as a greater focus on learners’ ‘life satisfaction’, ‘decision-making skills and psychological coping mechanisms’, which are ‘crucial for lifelong learning and for individuals to lead meaningful lives’ (2021a, p. 3). Such skills and abilities:

... lay the foundations for self-awareness, relationship building and forming resilience, enabling individuals to adjust and to overcome personal adversity, long-term life challenges and societal shock (ibid.).



Justification for inclusive education

UNESCO examines the progress evident in relation to inclusive education for persons with disabilities. It summarises the justification for inclusive education as follows:

There is a **human rights** justification; education is the right of the individual learner, and not, in the case of children, the right of a parent or caregiver. Parental responsibilities in this regard are subordinate to the rights of the child (General Comment 4, 2016). Learning with peers in the community where ... [the learner lives] promotes a sense of self-worth and dignity, equal access to opportunities and other services in the community [...].

There is an **educational** justification; the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and thus benefit all children. This can lead to the potential for education innovation – challenges presented by individual needs can motivate and inspire new modalities of teaching and learning provided there is “sensitivity to contextual realities ... and ... an understanding of the kind of provisions that would optimise and engender quality and equitable education for all children” (Singal, 2019). Once these are established it will lead to improved academic outcomes, including for learners with disabilities.

There is a **social** justification; inclusive schools are able to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together, forming the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society. This leads to improved social integration, greater resilience and better preparedness for the world of work for learners with disabilities.

There is an **economic** justification; it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of schools specialising in different groups of children. If access is only made possible in segregated special schools, there will always be large numbers of children with disabilities (especially in remote and poor regions) who do not have access to education. Furthermore, segregated schooling does not build inclusive communities where persons with disabilities can contribute socially and economically through the job market, which would ensure returns to education as for non-disabled children and reduction of loss of GDP. By isolating or excluding persons with disabilities, [society is] ... depriving the rest of the community of their potentially substantial social and economic contributions (UNESCO, 2019, p. 14).

The International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021) sets out the need to ensure the right to quality education throughout life as the foundation for a new social



contract. This will involve ‘strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good’ (ibid., p. 2). It states:

As a shared societal endeavour, education builds common purposes and enables individuals and communities to flourish together. A new social contract for education must not only ensure public funding for education, but also include a society-wide commitment to include everyone in public discussions about education. This emphasis on participation is what strengthens education as a common good – a form of shared well-being that is chosen and achieved together (ibid.).

A broader definition of inclusive education

In developing a concept of inclusive education that fully reflects the right of **all** learners to high-quality inclusive education, reference should be made to the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960), supported by the UNCRC, the UNCRPD and the full range of human rights treaties to ensure full participation of all minority groups who may be vulnerable to exclusion. This includes developing multi-level approaches to diversity to take account of intersectionality and the impact of concentrations of diversity (OECD, 2018). As the OECD [Strength through Diversity](#) work highlights, there are different dimensions of diversity that:

... warrant reflection about the implications that diversity has on education systems and conversely, the potential role education systems play in shaping these trends and building more sustainable, cohesive and inclusive societies for tomorrow (OECD, 2020b, p. 7).

Legislation and policy must consider the rights of all learners and actively prevent discrimination, stereotyping and marginalisation that affect **all learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education for different reasons**.

At EU level, the European Commission Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 aims to:

... take into account the combination of personal characteristics, such as gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation and disability that can represent specific challenges for migrants (European Commission, 2020, p. 6).

It also builds on the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025, the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

At local level, schools that pay attention to the varied needs of diverse learners achieve better results. Schools that attend to gender issues and linguistic and cultural diversity have a positive effect on all learners (European Commission, 2017).



However, the European Commission states:

Some EU Member States face difficulties in providing pupils with disabilities access to inclusive, quality education. In some cities and regions, a significant share of school pupils does not speak the language of instruction at home. Especially newly arrived migrant children need targeted language programmes to better integrate into school. In a number of countries, Roma and other ethnic minorities lack access to high quality education (ibid., p. 5).

The Council of the European Union notes:

Efforts must continue in order to ensure truly inclusive systems, in which all learners receive a high-quality education and their well-being and mental health is promoted and protected. This, coupled with prevention and support measures based on learners' individual needs and improved quality lifelong guidance, is crucial in bringing down the rate of early leaving from education and training and in steering learners towards the successful completion of upper secondary (or equivalent) education and continuing into further education and training or higher education (2021, p. 11).

As the OECD points out:

Equitable education systems are those that ensure the achievement of educational potential is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, special education needs and giftedness (2020b, p. 20).

Key requirements for a single legislative and policy framework

In developing a single legislative and policy framework, **inclusion and equity should not be seen as separate policies, but as principles that inform all national policies** – for example, those that deal with the curriculum, assessment, school evaluation, teacher education and budgets. They must also inform all stages of education and be consistent across sectors, for example with health and social care (UNESCO, 2020b).

One particular challenge is the **development of flexible funding and resource allocation systems**. As the Agency notes:

Flexible financing systems must ensure a school-development approach that builds learning communities through the development of innovative and flexible forms of teaching that combine performance and equity. The main message underpinning this issue is supporting school teams to take responsibility for meeting all learners' needs (European Agency, 2018a, p. 11).

The European Commission suggests that, despite different country contexts, 'there are similar governance and funding challenges' across Europe (2017, p. 10). 'These include defining clear responsibilities for funding and adapting the school network to demographic changes' (ibid.). The Commission recognises that 'making the best use of



limited resources to enhance the performance of all' learners is of critical importance but that 'at a comparable level of spending, some Member States achieve better results than others' (ibid.). It suggests that 'strengthening cooperation between education and economic policy areas can improve the evidence-base and generate consensus about "what works" in education investment' (ibid.).

An analysis of country reports in the Agency's Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems project (European Agency, 2018a; 2018b) indicates that increased spending on the education of learners with special educational needs in need of support is directly linked to an increase in the number of learners in need of support. This trend suggests that some schools use input funding mechanisms as a financial opportunity to overcome difficulties in meeting learners' needs. Financial constraints may lead to strategic behaviour where schools directly link the support learners may need with an official decision (European Agency, 2016).

This, in turn, shows that the implementation of inclusive education is directly affected by how funds are distributed, to whom they are addressed and the extent to which they enable stakeholders to act inclusively.

The need for effective and equitable funding and resource allocation highlights the importance of governance mechanisms that combine decentralised and flexible education with clear principles and social justice requirements (ibid.).

To support policy for and implementation of inclusive education, **an effective governance plan is needed, outlining clear roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders**. The OECD report on *Governing Education in a Complex World* suggests that effective governance can be identified by:

- focusing on 'processes, not structures';
- flexibility and adaptability to 'change and unexpected events';
- working through 'building capacity, stakeholder involvement and open dialogue';
- requiring a whole-of-system approach ('aligning roles, balancing tensions');
- harnessing 'evidence and research to inform policy and reform' (Burns and Köster, 2016, p. 230).

Linked to both funding and governance is the **development of effective quality assurance mechanisms and accountability frameworks that support inclusive policy and practice**. UNESCO states:

Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning should not only serve the function of collecting data on inclusion but also be inclusive in methodology and actively foster inclusion ... Collecting data on inclusion can itself be part of making schools and systems more inclusive. The choice of indicators directs attention to issues that may have been ignored (2020a, p. 84).

Quality assurance mechanisms should be broadened to go beyond learner competences to include areas such as school climate and learner well-being. Schools and local stakeholders should invest in capacity building to monitor learner progression and school development with appropriate tools and indicators, using data for on-going improvement.



They should move from ‘formal compliance with rules and procedures’, to a more supportive school-development approach that ‘raises standards and improves learning outcomes’ for all learners (European Commission, 2017, p. 11).

Due to ‘social, demographic, cultural, economic, scientific, environmental and technological changes, the world of education’ and the role of teachers and trainers are changing (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 11). ‘Demands, responsibilities and expectations’ are increasing, with an effect on the competences required as well as on well-being and ‘the attractiveness of the teaching profession’ (ibid.).

Initial teacher education needs to combine pedagogical theory with both subject knowledge and classroom practice. Student teachers ‘need to be prepared for collaborative work’, ‘dealing with diversity’ and ‘using digital technologies’ (European Commission, 2017, p. 8). On-going professional learning needs to be ‘accessible, affordable and relevant’, ‘involving schools and teachers in identifying’ relevant areas to ‘help improve its quality’ (ibid.). ‘To improve pupils’ learning experience, teachers need to be able and willing to work and learn in teams’ – with others in school, ‘in multi-professional school teams and with external partners’ (ibid., p. 9).

A final requirement is **a single curriculum and assessment framework that includes all learners.** UNESCO (2020a) notes the need to prevent the preferences of the majority population from violating the needs of minority populations at risk of exclusion. It states that:

Inclusive curricula do not lower standards or reduce knowledge, which would compromise students’ future opportunities; rather, they are flexible and involve interactive or group work to facilitate learning and enhance achievement (Flecha, 2015) (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 117).

To ensure flexibility to meet all learners’ requirements, accommodations or adaptations will be needed that maintain curriculum standards and expected outcomes but focus on processes to enable participation and improve access to learning materials. These could include, for example, providing enlarged print (Mitchell, 2014) or collaborative teaching (Tremblay, 2013). Modifications can also allow for different individual learner outcomes, for example assigning fewer or more targeted questions on a common task.

The Council of the European Union and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States acknowledge that:

... a high quality education and training should ensure that all learners acquire the competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) required to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development (2017, p. 1).



Operational elements

The recent Agency [Key Principles](#) report (European Agency, 2021a) sets out a number of operational elements for rights-based inclusive education. Eight operational strategies, structures and processes are considered essential for inclusive policy and practice:

- Structures and processes to **enable collaboration and effective communication at all levels** – between ministries, regional- and local-level decision-makers and between services and disciplines, including non-governmental organisations and schools.
- A strategy to **increase participation in quality inclusive early childhood education** and support families experiencing disadvantage.
- A strategy to **support all learners at times of transition between phases of education** – and particularly as they move into adult life – through vocational education and training, further and higher education, independent living and employment.
- Structures and processes to **facilitate co-operation between schools, parents and members of the community** to support inclusive school development and enhance learner progress.
- A **system for data/information collection** that:
 - provides feedback to inform on-going improvement across the whole system (e.g. monitoring access to formal and informal education, participation, learning and accreditation);
 - supports decision-makers at all levels to identify ‘signals’ that indicate the need for urgent action regarding schools needing additional support.
- A strategy to **develop specialist provision to support all learners** and increase the capacity of mainstream schools, detailing cross-sectoral working and professional development for all staff.
- A strategy to develop and **support school leaders who work with others to create an inclusive and equitable school ethos** with strong relationships, high expectations, proactive and preventative approaches, flexible organisation and a continuum of support to intervene when learners are at risk of failure and exclusion.
- A **guidance framework to develop learning and teaching environments** where learners’ voices are heard and their rights fulfilled through personalised approaches to learning and support.

These findings, based on an analysis of Agency work covering the past decade, are in line with work by key European and international organisations.

A European Commission Staff Working Document notes that the task of ‘ensuring that all learners develop the competences they need and reach their full potential, irrespective of their background’ has become more challenging, due in part to increased diversity and inequality in society and schools (European Commission, Directorate-General for



Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2017, p. 5). It states that ‘the complexity of learning environments and learners’ needs means that schools cannot address these challenges alone’ (ibid.) and that collaboration at all levels is therefore a vital element of inclusive education.

The Council of the European Union and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States invite Member States to:

... consider a whole school approach encouraging the engagement both with the whole school community and with a wider range of stakeholders alongside the community at large to deal with issues on which schools do not and cannot possess the relevant expertise. This will help to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education for all (2017, p. 2).

A further key element is participation in inclusive early childhood education and care, which has many benefits for individuals and for society. Such provision should:

... include children with diverse backgrounds and special educational needs, including disabilities, avoiding segregation and incentivising their participation, regardless of the labour market status of their parents or carers (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 11).

An ‘inclusive, democratic and participatory’ environment that embraces and integrates the voices of all children should be fostered (ibid., p. 13).

A successful inclusive education system requires a focus on preparing learners for adult life and on-going learning opportunities, transitions between education phases and, as stated above, collaboration between partners – in particular parents and the local community.

In an Informal Conference held in response to the COVID-19 crisis in October 2020, Ministers of Education recognised that the education offered today must reflect the kind of society countries wish to build tomorrow. The Conference reaffirmed that ‘democracy, human rights and the rule of law’ must be reflected in the pandemic response, which will:

... encompass all school subjects and academic disciplines, encourage interdisciplinary learning, teaching and research, as well as closer cooperation across educational stages and at points of transition, and make good and responsible use of the pedagogical and technological opportunities at our disposal (Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and Council of Europe, 2020, p. 3).

Ministers also called for the role of stakeholders, including staff, learners, parents and civil society, in developing education policy and practice to be ‘strengthened and given greater recognition’ at both national and local levels (ibid., p. 5).

A culture of continuous improvement can only be established when evidence and data are gathered and used effectively with stakeholders, to provide information on what works and what issues require further attention. In the 2018 Brussels Declaration, UNESCO



committed to ‘strengthening monitoring of inclusion, equity and quality’ (2018b, pp. 3–4). The Declaration suggests that this includes:

... optimizing education governance systems and the use of existing indicators and ensuring more disaggregated data to better track inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, language, income, disability status, migratory status and geographical location (ibid., p. 4).

UNESCO calls for the meaningful involvement of young people, learners, teachers, leaders, representative organisations, communities, parents, civil society and academia to strengthen:

... the capacities of public authorities and stakeholders, to monitor and evaluate equity and quality in education and training and to ensure more transparent reporting for public accountability (ibid.).

The European *Education and Training Monitor* provides support for monitoring. It is published yearly to review progress and analyse data by gender, socio-economic status, special educational needs, and minority or migrant background (for example, European Commission, 2021a).

Regarding learners with disabilities, the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006) calls for data collection to highlight gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes and to identify those at risk of being left behind and the barriers to inclusion. Data can support governments to:

... develop evidence-based policies and monitor their implementation (e.g. via resources, equipment, infrastructure, teachers and teaching assistants, anti-bullying strategies, parental involvement) and the results (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 65).

UNESCO also highlights a common dilemma, noting:

Outcomes can be monitored at the population level; service delivery can be monitored at the student level through administrative systems that identify needs. Understanding the purposes and types of inclusion-related data can therefore ease dilemmas of identification: Identifying groups for statistical or policy purposes need not create a false dichotomy between ‘normal’ and ‘special’ groups that distorts efforts at inclusion. For instance, collection and use of administrative data can occur without assigning corresponding labels in the classroom (ibid., p. 67).

In relation to SDG 4 focusing upon equitable and inclusive education, the benchmark-setting process is an indication of country commitment. It can focus action, helping to identify common challenges and ways of addressing them (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021).

Moving towards more inclusive provision calls for a new role for specialist provision that supports all learners in mainstream settings. Florian and Sretenov emphasise that an



inclusive pedagogical approach is about ‘extending the scope of ordinary provision to include a greater diversity of children’ (2021, p. 38). It does not ignore individual differences between learners or ‘rule out the use of specialists or specialist knowledge’ (ibid.). Whereas the ‘additional needs approach’ focuses on learners who have been identified as needing additional support, ‘the inclusive pedagogical approach focuses on ... *relationships* in the community of the classroom’ (ibid.).

In addition to increasing complexity in schools and communities, higher levels of school autonomy have led to more responsibility for school leaders. Consequently, they require additional support to enable them to develop innovative approaches and prepare school staff for increased collaboration and shared responsibilities. The European Commission stresses that: ‘The recruitment, preparation and professional development of school leaders is a crucial factor in improving school performance’ (2017, p. 9).

A key leadership task is to ensure educational success for all learners through effective and engaging learning environments. The Council of the European Union (2021) recognises that academic failure and early leaving from education and training reduce socio-economic opportunities. Truly inclusive systems provide a high-quality education and protect learners’ well-being and mental health. When paired with ‘prevention and support measures based on learners’ individual needs’, these measures can reduce early leaving rates and support the successful completion of education and a move into further learning opportunities (ibid., p. 6).

A further key factor in learner engagement is promoting learner participation in decision-making and listening to learner views. The Council of the European Union and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States assert:

Mainstreaming multilevel governance when promoting young people’s participation in decision-making processes fosters inclusive and resilient societies, strengthens social, civic and territorial cohesion, and enhances links between European and local level policies ... At the same time, it empowers young people by creating opportunities for them to put into practice and improve the knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes they need to fully participate in diverse societies and to be prepared for future challenges (2021, p. 10).

Post COVID-19, there is greater recognition of the need for approaches such as blended learning:

... to improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education and training, such as better learning provision in rural and remote areas, including the outermost regions and island communities, and for other learners who may not attend the school site full time: those who are part of traveller communities; young carers; those with health issues or residing in hospitals and care centres; those engaged in high-performance training; and those in vocational training or paid work (European Commission, 2021b, p. 11).



The Commission concludes:

All environments and tools should be equally accessible to minority groups, children with disabilities and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and do not lead to discrimination or segregation (ibid.).

Finally, in the *Revision of the EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child*, the Council of the European Union stresses the importance of co-operation between countries 'to enhance children's ability to participate in decision-making and processes which concern them' at all system levels (2017, p. 12).

In the *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020* recommendations, UNESCO (2020a) provides a summary of key considerations for inclusion in education. These align with the operational elements underpinning the *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems*:

- Widen the understanding of inclusive education: It should include all learners, regardless of identity, background or ability. [...]
- Share expertise and resources: This is the only way to sustain a transition to inclusion. [...]
- Engage in meaningful consultation with communities and parents: Inclusion cannot be enforced from above. [...]
- Ensure cooperation across government departments, sectors and tiers: Inclusion in education is but a subset of social inclusion. [...]
- Prepare, empower and motivate the education workforce: All teachers should be prepared to teach all students. [...]
- Collect data on and for inclusion with attention and respect: Avoid labelling that stigmatizes (ibid., pp. 20–22).



SUPPORTING COUNTRIES IN THEIR POLICY DEVELOPMENT WORK

In supporting policy-makers in its member countries to develop high-quality inclusive education for all learners, the Agency will align all of its work with and for member countries with the shared vision that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.

The vision has and will continue to provide a focus and direction for all Agency work with member countries. Alongside this vision, this background information paper identifies the essential features of inclusive education systems to help to align member countries' work and inform continuous improvement.

The Agency's Multi-Annual Work Programme (MAWP) 2021–2027 (European Agency, 2021b) sets out a framework and rationale for its work. It describes the activities the Agency will implement to meet member countries' identified priorities in working towards the Agency vision. These priorities – and the Agency MAWP – have been informed by a recent [analysis exercise](#) (European Agency, 2021c) that mapped Agency work since 2011 to identify recurring messages and 'gaps' in overall coverage of the [inclusive education ecosystem](#) (European Agency, 2017).

The *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems* will continue to guide the implementation of the MAWP. The MAWP is developmental in nature to allow scope to agree the exact focus of some thematic activities in the medium to longer term. Importantly, the MAWP also supports EU and international-level policy goals and initiatives.

The MAWP reflects the Agency's intention to further strengthen its role as an active agent for policy change. As such, the Agency is able to provide key policy-makers in member countries with evidence-based information and recommendations on how to implement inclusive education systems (Council of the European Union, 2018).

The Agency will provide country representatives with activities (processes) and resources (outputs) that aid policy development and implementation by:

- exploring policy development and implementation issues and priorities;
- developing resources to support self-reflection on key issues;
- sharing information about other member countries' policy and practice, taking account of country context.

In particular, aligned with the Agency position, **countries should be supported to develop a single legal framework that incorporates a right-based approach and attends to equality and anti-discrimination.** This could be achieved by one overarching activity to develop a comprehensive framework and mechanism for examining and monitoring the implementation of inclusive education policy. This is in line with two key priorities for Agency work with member countries:

- monitoring and evaluating policy implementation for inclusive education;



- developing multi-level/multi-stakeholder quality assurance and accountability frameworks for inclusive education.

This will require a cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary policy and practice approach, in line with a further priority for future Agency work.

Crucially, the Agency will ensure that all work is interconnected. There will be a clear focus on the identified priorities for Agency work with its member countries, aligned with the underpinning principles for inclusive education, as outlined in the Agency position and this accompanying background information paper.

A key aspect of the ultimate vision for inclusive education is an **awareness of a broader definition of inclusive education**. Looking at learners through a ‘single’ lens can lead to marginalisation and exclusion. Increasingly, it is recognised that learners’ identities overlap. They can embody multiple dimensions of diversity and be exposed to ‘different types of discrimination and disadvantages that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities’ (Lavizzari, 2015, p. 5).

These identities can be due, among other factors, to:

... gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion and other beliefs and attitudes (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 4).

Future Agency work will be aligned with thinking around learners who are vulnerable to exclusion for any single or multiple reasons.

Increasing diversity requires greater co-operation with a wider group of stakeholders/actors (health, employment, social sectors, civil society, etc.) to achieve policy goals, with a reduction in ‘silo working’. Such practice – even more crucial in the light of current challenges – depends on shared understandings about key goals and concepts. This aligns with two further priorities: developing strategies to support collaborative, cross-sectoral working across all levels and sectors, and ensuring the effective translation of national policies to regional, local and school levels. In particular, this may support countries’ efforts to reduce the policy-practice gap.

Responding to increasing diversity requires a focus on increasing all schools’ capacity to look holistically at learner support. This is more likely to lead to positive action, enabling prevention and intervention approaches and reducing the need for compensation at a later stage. The Agency is in a strong position to support this capacity building through cross-sectoral co-operation, as well as through school leadership and teacher professional learning.

In the same way, the position should enable the development of the Agency’s relationships with member countries to meet the demand for tailored support for individual country contexts. This will include coherent policy approaches and a focus on countries’ priorities, including policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation, quality assurance and inclusive accountability.



Working from where countries are

In aiming to provide member countries with targeted support towards inclusive education systems, the Agency must recognise that **all countries are at different points in their thinking and action around the vision** that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers. In their policy and practice, countries have different understandings of and ways of operationalising key concepts such as inclusion, inclusive education and, particularly, learners who are vulnerable to exclusion.

The groups of learners considered ‘vulnerable to exclusion’ and the groups of policy-makers and practitioners responsible for meeting their needs differ greatly across countries. These **differences in country positions in relation to the vision for inclusive education systems need to be identified, understood and taken into account** to guide future collective Agency work towards the vision of inclusive education systems.

The Agency will aspire to organise work in small groups of countries with shared interests (cluster-based activities) and will use peer-learning approaches to develop reflection tools and outputs that provide countries with more targeted and individualised information. This will help to develop policy that is adapted or ‘translated’ to different contexts and various system levels to ensure effective implementation of national policy and address disparities and equity gaps between regions, local communities and schools.

Finally, in the Agency’s role as an agent for change for inclusive education, a key task will be to develop and apply self-review tools to support reflection and inform all work. Through the evolving Country Policy Development Support activities, the Agency will provide feedback to countries on how to develop and improve their work. In addition, the principle of continuous improvement will apply to all Agency working procedures.

In conclusion, the Agency position and this background information paper will continue to provide the focal point and inspiration for taking forward work with member countries in the coming years.



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