

**Celebrating 25 years on the path to inclusive education**



policy change  
**schools**  
capacity building

all learners  
**#EASNIE** **policy-makers** cross-sector collaboration

stakeholder involvement  
right to education building resilience **knowledge base**

self-review intersectionality working with countries

experience exchange social inclusion equal opportunities

**European Agency** policy implementation

country policy development support systemic approach

**inclusive education** participation evidence-based

active agent of change **accessibility**

**Celebrating 25 years on the path to inclusive education**

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25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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# Contents

<b>Preamble</b>	9
Visionary European framework for developing inclusive education policy and provision	10
25 years of taking the inclusive education agenda forward	12
<b>The organisation and our member countries</b>	16
The Agency formula: working for and with our member countries	20
<b>Looking back</b>	32
Thoughts from the Agency's 'founding father'	33
Handing over the Agency to its member countries – conference in Stockholm, 21 September 1999	37
Agency work helping both on a policy level and in daily work in classrooms	40
Striving to improve education	44
<b>Reflections on changes and developments in thinking around inclusive education</b>	52
How key concepts have changed	53

Policy developments at international and European level	66
The Agency – developing as an agent for change	95
The way forward	109
<b>How Agency members' thinking has changed over the last 25 years</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Looking forward – what will the future hold for the Agency?</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>152</b>



A close-up photograph showing a group of people's hands stacked together in a circular pattern. The hands belong to individuals of various skin tones and nail colors, including red and dark brown. Some hands are wearing black wristbands. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting.

25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## Preamble

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This book celebrates 25 years of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency). It begins with messages from the Agency's Chair and the Director, followed by sections on:

- The organisation and our member countries: we look at the Agency's work *for and with* member countries.
- Looking back: our history across a quarter of a century.
- Reflections on changes and developments in thinking around inclusive education.
- Looking forward: we end by considering what the future may hold for the Agency.

Throughout this book, you will find statements from colleagues and member country representatives outlining the Agency's influence on them and their work.

We hope that the information here will interest those who have followed the Agency's progress throughout the years, as well as those of you still getting to know us.

This book serves as a snapshot of our work. For more information and resources, please visit the Agency website: [www.european-agency.org](http://www.european-agency.org).

# Visionary European framework for developing inclusive education policy and provision

**Don Mahon, Chair of the Agency**

In 1996, the Agency was established with the goal of increasing collaboration among European countries in the field of inclusive education. By 2015, the Agency member countries had agreed their joint ultimate vision for inclusive education systems, which is 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'.

The *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems* acknowledges that countries work towards this vision in different ways, depending on their historical, political and societal contexts. The Agency member countries agreed that inclusive education systems are a vital component at both European and national levels to create the socially inclusive societies that they all align themselves with, both ethically and politically.

What was once a network of 15 countries across Europe is now consolidated as an agent for change in inclusive education systems and a trusted partner for its member countries, with close collaborative links with the European Union (EU) Institutions and the United Nations (UN).

The *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching* encourages countries to benefit from the Agency's guidance and expertise to 'implement and monitor successful inclusive approaches in their education systems'.





The Agency undertakes this work in alignment with international and EU policy initiatives on education, equity and the rights of all learners.

I am proud of the many Agency activities which set out expert advice for policy-makers and professionals across a broad range of areas and of the Agency's role in providing technical support to countries that wish to develop and reform their education systems. And our efforts do not stop at Europe's borders. The Agency strives to build synergies for wider impact and support international policy initiatives, such as with our recent contributions to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *2021 Global Education Monitoring Regional Report*.

For the Agency, our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a milestone that coincides with significant developments that will shape our work over the next decade. Our current seven-year work programme focuses on further strengthening our efforts to support countries in changing, developing and implementing policies on inclusive education and to provide them with information and outputs on topics they have identified as priorities.

I would like to use this opportunity to say thank you to the family of Agency member countries for your dedication and commitment to the field of inclusive education and to the Agency.

Thanks also to our European and international partners for the positive collaborative relationships we share with them.

I look forward to our continued collaboration. We learn best when we learn together!

# 25 years of taking the inclusive education agenda forward

**Cor J. W. Meijer, Director of the Agency**

I am pleased to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the Agency's journey from an experimental framework for European collaboration, to an acknowledged and trusted partner that our member countries turn to in their efforts to make their education systems more inclusive and equitable.

The Agency today is far from our humble beginnings in 1996, when there were only 15 member countries, a director and one staff member.

Since then, the Agency network has more than doubled in size, to 31 European countries and 35 jurisdictions. Similarly, the Agency team has steadily increased and now over 30 staff members and consultants from 15 different countries are involved in the Agency's work, reflecting our truly European nature.

The Agency's ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers. The focus of our work (and the debates with the member countries) has moved from looking into questions such as '**what** is inclusive education' and '**why** is inclusive education needed', to '**how** can we implement inclusive education'.



2014 was a landmark year for the Agency as the name changed from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. This reflected the on-going paradigm shift towards a rights-based approach supporting the active participation of all learners.

Another significant development is that, over time, we have moved from knowledge building, to a focus on advice and consultancy, and now to supporting the development and implementation of inclusive education policies and influencing such policies in our member countries.

One of the Agency's unique characteristics is our ability to combine the perspectives of policy, practice and research to provide evidence-based information and guidance on implementing inclusive education.

Another unique feature is our ability to be formal and informal at the same time. The involvement of the countries, the methodologies and the outputs are very formal but, at the same time, the 'family' of country representatives, experts and staff members know each other so well that we can have informal, honest, candid discussions.

Following active exchanges with our Representative Board members, 2021 marked the beginning of a new seven-year work programme period where the focus is on further strengthening the Agency's position as an active agent for change in policy and practice, offering policy development support to member countries and at European level.



I am very proud of the Agency's achievements, which have been possible thanks to the dedication and commitment of our member countries and staff who continue to develop together.

This book tells the story of the Agency – how the field of inclusive education has evolved over the past 25 years and the role the Agency has played.

I hope you will enjoy reading it!

## Austria



Germain Weber, Representative Board member, and  
Eva Prammer-Semmler, National Co-ordinator

“ As a founding member country, Austria looks back on many years of successful co-operation with the Agency. Agency activities have had a notable impact on Austria’s reform of teacher education. Sharing relevant international experiences and findings from Agency projects has had a decisive effect on the national legal framework for inclusive teacher education curricula. Thanks to the Agency for 25 years’ work promoting inclusive education throughout Europe! ”

## The organisation and our member countries

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has a unique position at European and international level. This section gives an overview of our Agency and how we work. It covers how the Agency is organised, how we work with and for our member countries, and the varied activities we undertake to work towards inclusive education for all learners.

The Agency is the only European body maintained by its member countries with the specific mission of helping them to improve the quality and effectiveness of their inclusive provision for all learners. In its 25<sup>th</sup> year of operations, the Agency had 31 member countries covering 35 jurisdictions. The Agency acts as a platform for collaboration and an active agent for change in policy and practice for the ministries of education in our member countries.

Comprised of member country ministry representatives, the Representative Board is the Agency's governing body. It is responsible for approving multi-annual and annual work programmes and budgets, thematic work areas and activity plans. The Representative Board decides on the specific priorities for the Agency's work programmes, ensuring that our work aligns with the priorities of the ministries in our member countries. Representative Board members are the political-level representatives to the Agency. National Co-ordinators assist them and help co-ordinate the flow of information to and from member countries.

### Representative Board

A Representative Board member from each member country and the Chair

### Management Board

5 Representative Board members and the Chair

### Agency Staff Team

Led by the Agency Director

### National Networks

Combining the perspectives of policy, practice and research



The Representative Board elects the Management Board from its members on a rotating basis. The Management Board is responsible for working with the Director to ensure that plans and decisions are implemented efficiently and effectively. It further helps to prepare decision-making in the Representative Board. The Management Board members also review the Agency's budgets and accounts before these are presented to the Representative Board for final approval.

The Agency Director is responsible for our day-to-day operations. The Director and the Assistant Director form the Executive Management, which is responsible for strategic planning, organisational developments and overall activity co-ordination and implementation.

The Agency has a Secretariat in Odense, Denmark, and an office in Brussels, Belgium. In addition to these two offices, the majority of our staff work from home-based offices in countries across Europe.



The previous Agency Secretariat in Middelfart, Denmark



The current Agency Secretariat in Odense, Denmark



25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## The Agency formula: working *for* and *with* our member countries

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One of our Agency's most unique qualities is how we work not only **for** but also **with** our member countries. Member country representatives are directly involved in all aspects and phases of our work, from identifying priorities and making decisions about activities, to validating and implementing findings and recommendations.

Since its foundation, Agency staff and member country representatives have worked closely together to develop the Agency into an organisation that focuses on inclusive education and acts as an active agent for change in policy and practice. Our staff work directly with country representatives and nominated country experts to develop relevant evidence-based information for policy development, monitoring and review. Together, they provide member countries with a wide variety of opportunities for networking, peer learning and self-review.

### ***Network of countries, each with its own starting point***

All Agency work aims to support policy-makers' efforts to translate identified inclusive education policy priorities for all learners into actions that can be implemented. This means we provide country representatives with activities (processes) and resources (outputs) that:

- explore policy development issues;
- support self-reflection;



Bi-annual meeting, 2015, Rome, Italy

Bi-annual meeting, 2017, Qawra, Malta

- share information among other member countries on country-specific issues within their education systems;
- aid policy review and development.

In this work, we acknowledge that every country has its own starting point. This is a strength of our working procedures: Agency staff and member country representatives all play an active role in the work, working closely together and learning from each other. Together, they provide a reliable reflection of the reality of inclusive education across Europe, with consistent information, guidelines and recommendations that can be related to individual countries' national contexts.

#### ***Collecting input from peers on issues important to own agendas***

As well as being the framework for our formal activities, the Agency's European network enables country representatives to gather input from their peers across Europe – informally and on their own initiative – on issues that are important for their own country agendas. Member country representatives use this opportunity, for instance, when preparing new policies or legislation. With help from colleagues in other member countries, they can quickly establish an overview of how other countries manage specific issues. Our Agency network also enables member countries to organise study visits and peer-learning activities to collect input from peers.



## Thematic activities

The Agency's thematic activities are always designed to respond to our member countries' specific needs and priorities. Right from the beginning in the 1990s, surveys involving country representatives and their networks have formed the basis for identifying the priorities selected for the Agency's multi-annual work programmes.

Thematic activities with our member countries include meetings, conferences, workshops, seminars, case study visits, peer learning and cluster activities. They involve a variety of stakeholders in the field: policy-makers, researchers, school leaders, teachers, parents, families and learners.

Country representatives approve concrete activity plans and are directly involved in validating and implementing findings and recommendations. A recent example is the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) project, where one of the key outcomes was a self-reflection tool of inclusive leadership for school leaders and policy-makers. A cluster of member countries was involved in piloting the tool before it was made available to all member countries.

## Data collection work

Data collection has been an on-going activity for over 20 years. Currently this work is done in the framework of the European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education (EASIE). A dedicated area on the Agency website presents statistical data supported by relevant qualitative country



Supporting Inclusive School Leadership logo



European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education logo

information. This aims to inform country-level work on learners' rights issues and debates on equity and access to inclusive education.

Country representatives agree the overall parameters for annual data collection. A network of nominated national data experts provide country data based on these decisions and identified issues such as out-of-education learners.

Overall, EASIE work provides our member countries with information on whole potential populations that can be used in relation to reporting requirements linked to the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) and EU objectives for education and training.

### **Country Policy Review and Analysis and Country Policy Development Support**

Member country representatives have been directly involved in developing the Agency's Country Policy Review and Analysis (CPRA) activities that started in 2014.

CPRA uses a peer-learning methodology, enabling country policy-makers to learn directly from each other. It aims to aid country reflection on the development of policy for inclusive education and stimulate policy discussion in the countries concerned.



Country Policy Review and Analysis logo



In this work, Agency staff, in collaboration with country representatives, analyse policy information provided by the individual countries. The analysis is based on identifying the different ‘types’ of policy actions (i.e. prevention, intervention, compensation) suggested by the Council of the EU in 2011. Agency staff apply the **prevention-intervention-compensation** (PIC) model to determine whether existing policy actions in countries are designed to:

- **prevent** different forms of educational exclusion before they happen;
- **intervene** to ensure that good quality inclusive education is available for all learners at all times;
- **compensate** with specific actions and provision when prevention and intervention are not enough to adequately meet learners’ needs in inclusive settings.

Based on the CPRA work, country representatives are now involved in developing the Agency’s new Country Policy Development Support (CPDS) activities. The collaborative CPRA development work has shown that the measures and policy priorities included in the CPRA analysis grid can be used as a tool for guiding national-level work on the development of inclusive education policies.

Building on the overall CPRA work, all of our future activities with member countries will therefore feed into the CPDS activity.

Taking findings that have proven useful for supporting countries, CPDS will further develop the working processes from the CPRA activities. The goal is to establish a comprehensive framework

and methodology for member country representatives. It will enable them to examine and monitor the effective implementation of policy frameworks for inclusive education systems in their countries, based on the priorities they have identified. From 2022 onwards, priorities include monitoring and evaluation, cross-sector working, multi-level/multi-stakeholder quality assurance and accountability frameworks that support and ensure the effective translation of national policies to regional, local and school levels.

### **Building synergies for wider impact**

The Agency strives to ensure interconnected work, where all activities inform our overall mission of being an active agent for change in policy and practice.

Our activities are funded by an EU Operating Grant. We receive additional funding for supplementary assignments, such as country audits, as well as work for the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) on Technical Support Instrument actions. (See below for more information on the Technical Support Instrument).

Knowledge building through thematic activities under our EU Operating Grant and country-specific work, such as country audits and Technical Support Instrument actions, ensures synergies between all our activities. Lessons from the country-specific work feed back into thematic activities under the Operating Grant, thereby improving them.



# Preventing School Failure

## Policy for Preventing School Failure within the Ecosystem of Inclusive Education Systems

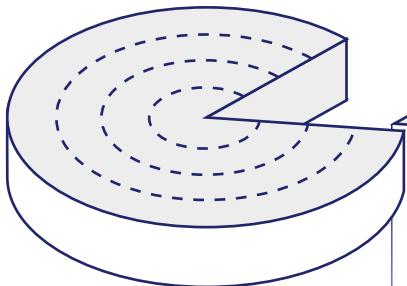
This infographic was developed as part of the Preventing School Failure (PSF) project. Adapted from the Agency's ecosystem model of inclusive education systems, it focuses on the four ecosystem levels and represents the elements of the model that are relevant for preventing school failure.

Within the PSF project, the model summarises the inclusive policy areas that are particularly important for preventing school failure. The specific areas are linked to wider policy aims that are key priorities for preventing school failure.



## POLICY AIMS

1. Increasing engagement and reducing early school leaving
2. Targeting low levels of academic achievement
3. Promoting a whole-school development approach to teaching and learning



### Individual level

- Strengthening personalised approaches
- Addressing low academic achievement as early as possible
- Reducing grade retention



### School level

- Developing inclusive school leadership
- Broadening the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy
- Providing career support and flexible career pathways
- Supporting learner health and well-being
- Focusing on successful transitions over time



### Community level

- Improving access to and availability of community-based support services
- Promoting co-operation between external agencies/services and schools
- Meaningfully engaging with families



### National/ Regional level

- Reducing social inequality, promoting equity and tackling poverty
- Supporting cross-sectoral collaboration between Ministries of Education, Health, Social Care, Housing and Labour
- Improving school access and attendance
- Developing effective ongoing monitoring systems and quality assurance mechanisms

Therefore, the Agency makes a systematic effort to integrate findings and effective working procedures from all activities – including additional contracts and consultancy tasks – into our wider work. This is, in fact, one of the main parameters of our current Multi-Annual Work Programme (2021–2027), which will both add value to collective work and ensure that all member countries benefit.

Country-specific work, such as country audits and Technical Support Instrument actions, offers peer-learning opportunities to our member countries and the country representatives involved as experts in these activities, who share experiences of policy development and implementation. Peer-learning possibilities within these activities potentially contribute to further exchanges between country policy-makers beyond specific country actions.

### ***Country audits***

The country audits in Malta (2013–14) and Iceland (2015–16) kicked off our Agency's involvement in country-specific work.

Malta commissioned the Agency to carry out an external audit of special needs and inclusive education policies and practice across state, church and independent schools in the country. In Iceland, Agency staff and consultants conducted activities in co-operation with, but independently of, local stakeholders. The external audit aimed to provide recommendations that

support evidence-based practice and decision-making, promote self-review across all levels of the system, and support longer-term development work in Iceland.

#### ***Technical Support Instrument***

Since 2018, the Agency has been acting as a technical provider for the European Commission within the framework of the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) (previously the Structural Reform Support Programme – SRSP) under DG REFORM. TSI offers EU member states tailored technical expertise to design and implement reforms.

At the time of writing, we have completed actions in Poland, Cyprus, Czech Republic and Greece and one is on-going in Portugal. These actions involve assisting countries in preparing, implementing or monitoring reforms in legislation or policy for inclusive education. We expect to continue our involvement in future TSI actions.

This work has brought together member country representatives and experts from the Agency network. It further develops knowledge and skills to address national, regional and local-level needs.





Inclusive Education in Action website

### ***Close collaborative links with UNESCO***

Our Agency maintains active, mutually beneficial relationships with key bodies and organisations in the field of special needs and inclusive education. These relationships are essential for our work and for improving inclusive education systems across Europe and beyond. They provide opportunities for sharing information about work in Agency member countries with a wider audience and for gaining relevant information that can be shared in member countries. One notable example is the Agency's collaboration with UNESCO.

Recently, the Agency and some of our member countries contributed to the UNESCO 2021 *Global Education Monitoring Regional Report* on inclusion and education in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. This work offered the member countries involved the opportunity to reflect on their own inclusive education systems. Country representatives shared lessons from this work with the Agency network for the benefit of all Agency member countries.

Another example is our continued co-operative work with UNESCO to develop and promote the Inclusive Education in Action website. This website provides target audiences with inclusive education resources and case studies from around the world. It aims to inform the work of policy-makers, including those from our member countries, as they move towards inclusion.



## Looking back

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Jørgen Greve had the idea to create the Agency in 1990. Six hectic years later, the Agency was established. During a three-year trial period, it was funded by the County of Funen in Central Denmark and the Danish Ministry of Education. In September 1998, the member countries informed Margrethe Vestager, the then Danish Education Minister, that they were ready to take full responsibility for the Agency. They formally took over on 1 August 1999. At the time, there were 17 member countries.

# Thoughts from the Agency's 'founding father'

Jørgen Greve, former Director and Chair of the Agency



The idea of creating the Agency came to me when I read the *Resolution of the Council and the Ministers for Education of 31 May 1990*. In it, the EU member states agreed to intensify their efforts to integrate children and young people with disabilities into ordinary systems of education. I knew from my work that different European countries had very different approaches, so I thought it would make sense to create a mechanism to help with the transfer of knowledge, experience and practice examples across countries.

The first step was to ensure political and financial backing for the idea with the local, regional and national education authorities in Denmark. Next, it was necessary to share the idea at the European level, both via the Ministry of Education and by involving the County of Funen and my own Special Needs Education Department in relevant European activities.

In 1992, I recruited a full-time co-ordinator to help promote the idea. Shortly after, we became involved in the European Commission's HELIOS II programme – very appropriately in the thematic working group focusing on co-operation between mainstream and special education. When the HELIOS II programme was coming to an end in 1996, we were able to offer the Agency as a permanent structure for continuing the collaborative activities in the field of special needs education.

We met many obstacles along the way – financial, ideological and personal, but more than anything some people's fear of stepping into the unknown, trying to do the impossible.



Jørgen Greve had the idea to create the Agency in 1990 when he was head of the Special Needs Education Department of the County of Funen in Denmark. **In August 1996, the Agency was established.** In November 1996, the official inauguration took place. For the first three years, the County of Funen and the Danish Ministry of Education funded the Agency's operations. The County of Funen also made available a fully renovated building with office facilities and computer equipment, including access to a new technology called 'the internet'!

Fortunately, I have always believed that intuition is more important than facts, so miraculously we managed to share our enthusiasm and obtain political and financial support from some very brave and visionary people, first in my own County of Funen and later in the Ministry of Education. We also managed to involve some very resourceful people from across Europe in the early phases, so I never really doubted we would succeed.

Once the Agency started operating, we made sure to involve the member countries in the decision-making procedures so that they had real influence on how we took things forward. We also managed to recruit staff with the expertise needed and who were crazy enough to give up their safe jobs because they could see the bigger idea with the Agency.

I thoroughly enjoyed my role as the first Director of the Agency. I believe I was the right person at the time and it was a fantastic experience. However, when the time came for me to step down, I was glad to pass on the baton. Besides, I had the privilege of serving as Chair of the Agency for quite a long period.

Mentally, I have never really left the Agency. I follow its activities closely and it gives me great pride to see how the next generation is continuing the incredible journey that started in 1990.

The Agency had two staff members when it started in 1996: **Jørgen Greve**, Director, and **Ole Lissabeck Nielsen**, Operations Manager, both from Denmark.

In 1997, the first three project managers were appointed: **Victoria Soriano**, Spain, **Cor J. W. Meijer**, Netherlands, and **Amanda Watkins**, United Kingdom (England).

In 2005, Jørgen Greve decided to step down and was succeeded by the Agency's current Director, **Cor J. W. Meijer**. **Ole Lissabeck Nielsen**, **Amanda Watkins** and **Victoria Soriano** all stayed on as Assistant Directors. **Jørgen Greve** continued as Chair of the Agency from 2005 to 2011.



Jørgen Greve (left) and Ángel Gabilondo Pujol, then Education Minister of Spain, in 2010

At the very first Agency meeting of member countries in November 1996, the country representatives agreed on the first three priority areas they wanted the Agency to address: **early intervention, teacher support** and **financing of special needs education**. In 1996, the Agency obtained European Commission funding for its Teacher Support project. By 1997, the Agency had received its first assignment from the Commission. This was in the form of an evaluation study that resulted in a report entitled *External Evaluation of Socrates: Participation of People with Disabilities*. In 2002, the Agency was awarded a long-term EU operating grant.



The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education was established in 1996 as an initiative of the Danish Government, endorsed by the member countries' education ministers.

In 1999, following a three-year trial period funded by the Danish education authorities, the member countries took over running and funding the Agency. This formally established the Agency as a European organisation with the mandate to act as its member countries' platform for collaboration in the field of special needs and inclusive education.

# Handing over the Agency to its member countries – conference in Stockholm, 21 September 1999

Margrethe Vestager, Danish Minister of Education in 1999

## *Excerpts from Margrethe Vestager's speech*

Dear colleagues and other participants in this historic meeting, where the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education is heading for a new future as a joint organisation for 17 European countries.

I am very pleased to be here today to hand over a task which Denmark has begun ... but which is now being delivered into the hands of a number of other European countries. ...

I am first and foremost grateful for the positive and constructive attitude which all the participating countries have shown towards the initiative – initially by agreeing to participate in an experiment which was not particularly precise or well-defined.

And now when all the 17 countries have announced that they have so much faith in the project that they are also ready to take part in its financing. ...

I believe that there is a strong desire among all the participating countries to make our ... education accessible to all – irrespective of the differences there may be between the pupils' prerequisites and needs. ...

Inclusion has become a key concept which not only reflects a beautiful principle but also something which we take seriously in the concrete everyday reality. ...



It is this foundation that the European Agency has been built on and which is to be its strength and inspiration in the future. ...

Education and training is not only to be a reality for some, it should be a reality for all. We should not operate with minimum criteria for suitability for education. No matter how different we are, we have potential for developing faculties and talents and acquir[ing] skills which will benefit ourselves and our society. ...

I believe that in all the countries of Europe we have this objective in mind. None of us have achieved it yet. There are many barriers which have to be overcome and many initiatives which have to be taken. ...

The co-operation on and in the European Agency may further this process and give us strength in our endeavours as well as inspire us to continue and not lose sight of the objective.

I wish this important European co-operation ... well in the future.

And I do this in a firm belief that this little Danish baby has now become a young European and – to be more precise – a European who is capable and willing and able to stand on his or her own feet.

I wish you all the best of luck.

**“ Sharing experience and insight is one of the best ways of converting problems into possibilities. It is this foundation that the Agency has been built on and which is to be its strength and inspiration in the future.”**



## Belgium (French Community)

Patrick Beaufort, Representative Board member

“ Belgium is happy to have been a member of the Agency since its establishment. For the French Community, the Agency has a particular importance on three levels – research, resources, and formal and informal exchanges. The Agency presents, helps in thinking, accompanies those who ask for it, but it never judges, and this is probably what has made it successful for 25 years. We hope to celebrate the Agency’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary together! ”

## Agency work helping both on a policy level and in daily work in classrooms

Per Ch Gunnvall, former Chair of the Agency and Representative Board member for Sweden

I started as a Representative Board member for Sweden in 2001 and was elected to serve on the Management Board between 2004 and 2006. The Agency had just been established and accepted among the European countries, as an organisation to support and develop special needs education for learners with different kinds of needs.

I retired from my position as Deputy Director General of the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools in 2007. I later had the pleasure of being back in the Agency to guide the organisation as Chair (2011–2017) in all the challenges we faced.

One of the key terms at that time was ‘inclusive education’. General public education should have an inclusive nature. This meant that teachers needed to be not only professionals in teaching a subject, but also skilled to support all children in a way that stimulated and encouraged them in learning.

The Agency started out as the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. When we had meetings with the European Commission and other international organisations, they often asked how our work with special needs was connected to mainstream education. They also wanted to know if our work involved finding out how mainstream education could support learners with special needs in inclusive settings. Despite the Agency’s focus on special needs education, from the beginning we tried to identify policies and guidelines on how to develop both legislation and daily practice in the classroom, so learners with special needs were included in mainstream education.



Over time, a discussion started about changing the Agency's name to make its vision clear for all countries and easier to understand for the European Commission, which supports the Agency's work. Some member countries were eager to keep special needs in the Agency's name; others wanted to mention inclusive education. So, in 2014, it was agreed that the name would change to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

The focus of the Agency's work has shifted from learners with special needs towards **all** learners. It aims to have an impact both at the national level in legislation and curricula and on daily work at the regional and local level, in the school and in the classroom. It focuses on each learner's needs and how they can be supported in education.

During my time at the Agency, we launched the 2014–2020 Multi-Annual Work Programme. This marked the beginning of the Agency's Country Policy Review and Analysis work.

The Agency Country Policy Review and Analysis (CPRA) activity marked the beginning of work that placed a greater emphasis on supporting policy self-review and development with individual countries. The Agency developed CPRA with and for member country representatives to provide them with a reflection on their country's policies for inclusive education. Building on the CPRA work, all future Agency activities with member countries will feed into the Country Policy Development Support (CPDS) activity, which is essential to the Agency's role as an agent for change in policy and practice in inclusive education.



When I was Chair, the Agency also held various events, including European hearings in 2011 and 2015 that gave learners a voice on inclusive education. Young people with and without disabilities gave their views on inclusive education and what the next steps could and should be. The second event resulted in the *Inclusive Education: Take Action! Luxembourg Recommendations*, which were presented to the Education Committee of the Council of the EU in December 2015.

The Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education project (2014–2017) concluded with a conference in Malta, which was an official event of the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the EU. It was also my last bi-annual meeting as Chair.

There is no doubt that the Agency's work has had an impact in member countries. It helps both on a policy level and in daily work in classrooms.

Per Ch Gunnvall graduated as a teacher. In 1973, he was appointed to a position at the Swedish National Board of Education. From 1991–2007, he was Deputy Director General of the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools.



Per Ch Gunnvall, bi-annual meeting, 2015, Riga, Latvia

Per Ch Gunnvall served as Agency Chair for two terms (2011–2017). Before that, he was the Swedish member of the Agency's Representative Board (2001–2007) and served on the Agency's Management Board in the period 2004–2006.

**“**The Agency has been responsive to societal changes and new demands within our member countries. **”**

## Striving to improve education

**Ana Magraner, former Chair of the Agency**

Early this century, I had a very rewarding encounter with the (at that time) European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. I was on a study visit to Norway.

I was impressed by the participants' enthusiasm and by the efficiency of the Agency's small team. They all had in common their firm belief in the benefits of working together towards their objectives for inclusive education.

I witnessed the Agency's contribution to the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003. Recognising the Agency's consistent and specific work, the European Parliament and Commission made it a direct beneficiary of an EU Operating Grant.

From the very beginning, the Agency made the most of the framework the EU offers to its members and associated countries: to practise the 'European culture' of sharing and learning from each other. This was the main aim of the Agency's founders 25 years ago.

Throughout my time as Chair, I had the honour of accompanying the Agency in its development as an agent for change and in its increasing recognition at European and international level.

This recognition is particularly evident in the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching*, which encourages member states to 'make effective use' of the Agency to develop their inclusive education systems.



It is also worth highlighting the key technical support the Agency has been providing to the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme (now the TSI). This helps countries to address their individual challenges in their objective of education system reform.

The Agency has always been responsive to societal changes and new demands within our member countries. It can be difficult at European level to deal with different countries' varying circumstances. However, in the field of education, situations may differ but there is always a common interest: to improve the quality and inclusiveness of education policy and practice for all learners.

Country representatives create a valuable communication channel for the Agency's work and results. They have sometimes had to show persistence (even courage) in convincing key decision-makers in their countries of the need to provide an adequate policy framework and the necessary means to fulfil the objective of a fair, inclusive education system.

I must mention the pandemic that shocked the world in 2020 and its profound impact on education. Yet education was one of the fields that reacted effectively and quickly to face the unexpected and where both sides – the education community, as well as learners and their families – met the difficult situation and the needs that arose. The Agency, too, immediately responded to the new situation by moving to online working and I was grateful and ready to embrace the opportunity to chair my last bi-annual meeting online.



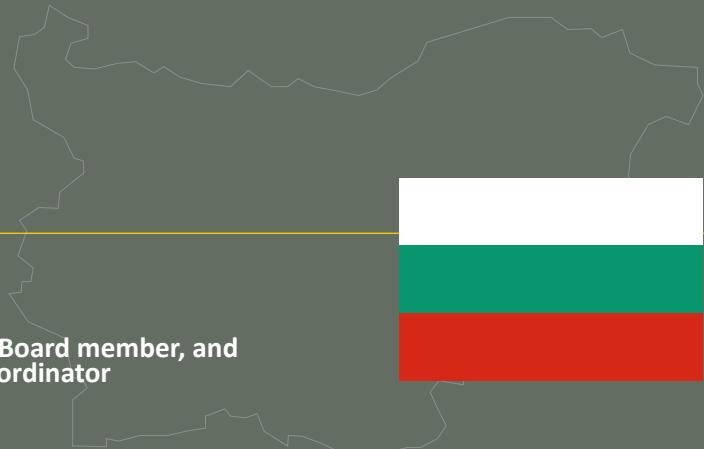
It was my honour and a great responsibility to chair the Agency for almost four years. I now have the pleasure of congratulating and thanking the very many people who, for 25 years, have devoted their efforts and work to the Agency's objectives – striving to improve education.

Ana Magraner worked for the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture. She first worked in the field of culture and, from 1996, mainly in the field of education. In her last Commission post, she was Desk Officer for Spain and Portugal in the field of Education and Training in Europe 2020 until 2013. Ana Magraner was Chair of the Agency in the period 2017–2020.

## Bulgaria

**Greta Gancheva, Representative Board member, and  
Kaloyan Damyanov, National Co-ordinator**

“ The ‘Towards a European Education Area – Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education’ conference took place in Brussels on 21 June 2018 under the aegis of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU and was co-organised with the Agency. It provided an opportunity to share and discuss inclusive education values at both political and practical levels. We are convinced that the Agency will continue to develop its thematic and activity portfolio and we are happy to partner with it. ”

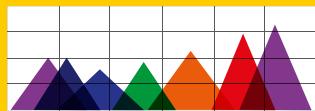




The first European hearing, 'Young Views on Special Needs Education', takes place in Brussels

## Activity Milestones

1999



The Agency first collects data on the numbers of learners identified as having special educational needs in **17 member countries**

2003

The Agency holds its second hearing, under the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, resulting in the *Lisbon Declaration – Young People's Views on Inclusive Education*



2007

The Agency takes part in the UNESCO IBE International Conference on Education, 48<sup>th</sup> session, 'Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future', in Geneva

2008



UNESCO starts collaborating with the Agency on Inclusive Education in Action

2009



The Spanish Ministry of Education and the Agency host a conference on promoting social cohesion as an official European Union Presidency event. The conclusions impact on the *Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training*



The international conference on '**Inclusive Education in Europe: Putting theory into practice**' is held in Brussels

2010

2011

2013

2013

2014



The European Parliament hearing '**Young Views on Inclusive Education**' is held in Brussels



The Maltese Minister for Education commissions an external audit assessing special needs and inclusive education in Malta

The Agency starts working on **Country Policy Review and Analysis** as a tool to support reflection on the development of country policies for inclusive education



The Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture commissions the Agency to conduct an external audit of Iceland's system for inclusive education



The Agency publishes its first Cross-Country Report, based on the first **European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education** dataset, focusing on the 2012/2013 school year



The Agency is invited to participate in two Education and Training 2020 Working Groups. These are on **Schools** and on **Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education**

2015

2016

2017



Luxembourg hosts the fourth Agency hearing, '**Inclusive Education: Take Action!**'

Under the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Agency hosts an Education and Training 2020 peer-learning activity on '**Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education**'



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The Agency works with **UNESCO** and the **Network of Education Policy Centers** to produce the 2021 *Global Education Monitoring Regional Report* on inclusion and education in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia

- The Agency is invited to be a technical provider in the **European Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme** actions in Cyprus and Poland. This leads to further actions over the following years

2018



**'Towards a European Education Area – Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education'**, a conference under the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, shares the Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems project findings

2019



The Agency participates in a UNESCO meeting formulating the *Cali Commitment to equity and inclusion in education* in Cali, Colombia

2020

The Agency is selected to take part in three European Commission Working Groups: on **Early Childhood Education and Care**; on **Schools**; and on **Equality and Values in Education and Training**

2021

## Reflections on changes and developments in thinking around inclusive education

This chapter reflects on changes in thinking and developing policy priorities over the past 25 years. It begins with an overview of the key conceptual changes (i.e. from special educational needs, to special needs education and inclusive education) and considers how the Agency has been influential in these changes, taking an increasingly important role in the development of inclusive education across Europe. It goes on to review the main international- and European-level policy developments and the Agency's responses to them. Finally, it reflects on the Agency's work with member countries on the journey towards inclusive education.

## How key concepts have changed

This section provides an overview of the development of key ideas over the past 25 years – from special educational needs, through special needs education towards inclusive education.

It illustrates the Agency's role in supporting this complex journey through conceptual changes and changes in related terminology and highlights some on-going debates that might inform future work.

### Special education/special educational needs

The term 'special education' dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was used to refer to the education of learners with impairments who needed support from specialised staff, mostly in special schools or institutions outside the mainstream school system.

The range and severity of a child's **special educational needs** (SEN) were usually decided by comparing that child's performance with so-called 'typically developing children' of a similar age, often focusing on areas such as cognition, language, and social and emotional development.

Generally, the cause of learning difficulties was considered to be **within** the child (a deficiency model). Diagnosing difficulties and planning programmes of intervention and support attempted to make the child fit the system rather than the other way round.



Often, processes of identification, classification and referral to special services that aimed to meet the needs of learners led to their exclusion. Specialised staff, rather than the class teacher, took sole responsibility for meeting the learners' needs and they were marginalised from the school/class community.

Although special education was separate from the mainstream school system, the education of learners with disabilities was a step forward. They had previously been considered 'uneducable', only able to access provision administered by health services – for example, training centres.

As attention to the civil rights of all minority groups grew, representatives of these groups became more vocal and people with disabilities began to challenge segregated education. They pointed out that it was stigmatising and limited their opportunities. This debate raised issues of equal access and the need for improved educational opportunities.

The concept of special educational needs was – and still is – a social and cultural construct; there has never been an agreed definition of SEN that can be used in country comparisons. Not all countries define SEN in their legislation and different groups of learners are often included in definitions (for example, gifted and talented learners). The number of learners identified as having SEN in each country varies, not because of the actual incidence of impairments but because countries organise their systems of funding, provision, assessment and categorisation of disabilities and special needs in different ways.



## Cyprus

**Andreas Tsiakkios, Representative Board member**



“From 2005 (when Cyprus became a full member country) to today, the Agency has influenced our policy and practice in many different ways. The Agency has provided us with opportunities for networking, peer-to-peer learning and self-review at the level of policy, practice and research. The work within the Structural Support Reform Programme (two phases), under the European Commission’s DG REFORM, is an example of close collaboration between the Agency and the Cypriot Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, in relation to the Agency’s technical support to make the education system more efficient and inclusive. Now, the Agency’s work is more important than ever to its member countries and we wish it all the best in the future.”

Over time, the terminology has moved from ‘special education’ to ‘special needs education’, indicating the start of a shift in thinking, from a focus on the learner (special educational needs) towards a focus on the provision that may be needed by learners who experience difficulties at school (special needs education).

### **Special needs education**

Definitions of special needs education in many countries were (and continue to be) based on an idea of normal distribution. In this model, education provides for most learners, with something additional or different for those considered to be of exceptionally high or low ability.

The term ‘special needs education’ began to extend the idea of special educational needs beyond learners with disabilities to include learners who appeared to be failing in school for a wide variety of reasons – for example, children living in poverty or those from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Special needs education, however, continued the deficit or medical model that still saw the problems as being within the learner.

In parallel, the term ‘integration’ was used from the 1970s, for example in HELIOS II, a European Commission programme that aimed to promote the integration of people with disabilities. The programme identified and analysed innovative practices and supported information exchange and co-operation among the governments of the member states, European Community bodies,



international organisations, organisations of disabled people, social partners, etc. (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 1997).

The HELIOS II programme included a thematic Working Group on Integrated Education. Here, integration was seen as the opposite of segregated special schooling and continued to be linked to disability. Learners with special needs were expected to 'fit into' the usual practices and approaches of mainstream education, being 'normalised' or 'assimilated'.

This focus on 'placing' learners with special needs into mainstream schools continued with little regard for the quality of the education. In practice, learners in so-called integrated settings spent much of the day away from their peer group.

For some countries, however, integration did encompass a wider view with some interpretations that shared some principles with inclusion. Despite this development of ideas, the term 'integration' was widely used in European policies and debates until the 2000s.

### A move to inclusive education

In most European countries, the thinking behind inclusive education has grown out of discussions around the issues above – specialist segregated provision, integration and mainstreaming.



Inclusive education has developed from a single-layered concept, focused on ‘mainstreaming’ learners with disabilities or special needs into regular schools (UNESCO, 1994), to a multi-layered concept. The latter is concerned with developing equitable quality education systems for all learners by removing barriers to their presence in mainstream schools, full participation in school and community, and achievement of valued goals (including those wider than academic learning).

Inclusion, then, requires a move away from a concern with the categories a learner may or may not fall into, to focus on the barriers experienced by some learners that lead to marginalisation. Overcoming these barriers is key to developing an effective education system for all.

Despite this new way of thinking, many countries continue to use categorical descriptions of disability or some process of classification to determine eligibility for services, to plan for special needs education and to gather data about the effectiveness of services provided.

As this single-layered definition of inclusion continues to be used in many countries and contexts, so the tension between inclusion as a placement issue and inclusion in learning opportunities remains. The exact meaning of the term ‘inclusion’ has been widely debated. In the Agency’s work, the situation is even more complex when translations of ‘inclusion’ and related terms into other languages are considered.



## Germany

**Daniel Bognar, Representative Board member for Hessen Land**

“The Agency’s work makes it clear: we are Europeans. And Europe is diverse. As a result, I’m always learning new things by exchanging on the advantages and disadvantages of allocation methods or support systems – just two of the many issues Agency members and staff discuss in our meetings.”



Trends in European education show that countries with a two-track approach (education in a mainstream school and education in a special school) are moving towards a multi-track system, offering a continuum of services between the two approaches. Special schools are also developing into resource centres to support mainstream schools, contributing to professional development and approaches to support both learners and teachers.

Inclusive education challenges the concept of special needs education as ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’ the education provided for most learners. Despite this, it has often replicated rather than replaced the structures and processes of special needs education. This shows the importance of sharing clear understandings of both language and underpinning ideology with all stakeholders. Otherwise, new terms (‘inclusive education’) may replace old (‘special education’) with little or no change in policy and practice (European Agency, 2015a).

Moving towards a rights-based approach needs a change in educational culture from a focus on individual support (often based on a medical diagnosis), to a system that supports schools to increase their capacity and capability to respond to the diverse needs of all learners.

Rather than trying to ‘fix’ learners, by providing compensatory support to fit them into existing arrangements, schools need to transform their organisation, teaching and classroom environments to respond in flexible ways and work towards preventative approaches.



ICT for Information Accessibility in Learning conference in Riga, Latvia, 2015

Inclusive education requires that all learners are taught according to their aptitudes and interests. Where this is not the case, the school system itself contributes to learners' failure to achieve in academic and other areas. Importantly, countries should 'ensure that accountability measures are aligned with inclusive education policy' (European Agency, 2019, p. 11) and that inclusion is not seen as being resource intensive or a cause of extra work for school staff. Teachers should take responsibility for all learners and ensure that everyone belongs in their local community school, with opportunities for all learners to participate and achieve.

### **Inclusive education as a rights-based normative issue**

Inclusive education is a political aspiration and an educational methodology, closely connected to the principles and actions of fairness, justice and equity.

While many laws and policies promote inclusion, implementation remains complex and work continues to move away from specialist provision and special needs practices (such as identification and assessment of individual needs and individualised approaches). Although countries support the right to education for learners who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, problems of inequality and discrimination within the education system persist.



The changes in thinking outlined here are reflected in the often-quoted typology below:

- Inclusion as concerned with disability and ‘special educational needs’.
- Inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions.
- Inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion.
- Inclusion as the promotion of the school for all.
- Inclusion as ‘Education for All’.
- Inclusion as a principled approach to education and society (Ainscow et al., 2006).

In a speech at an international conference on ‘Inclusive Education: A Way to Promote Social Cohesion’ in 2010, Cor J. W. Meijer, Agency Director, noted the following inter-related dimensions needed for a truly inclusive, rights-based education system:

- The right to education – education granted to everyone without discrimination.
- Rights in education – rights of learners should be respected within the learning environment and be reflected in curricula, materials and methodologies.
- Rights through education – democratic values and respect for human rights should be promoted (Meijer, 2010).

Mr Meijer said:

... the discussion about the relevance and necessity of social cohesion as well as inclusive education and the influence of inclusive education on social cohesion are purely normative issues. And we should keep them there! (*ibid.*, p. 9).





## Hungary

László Kiss, Representative Board member

“ Management Board meetings, as well as the bi-annual meetings, provide a great opportunity to learn about each other’s public education systems, share good practices, exchange information and network. Hosting Agency events provides an opportunity for us to engage more directly with policy-makers in professional discourse on improving access to inclusive education. It also gives us the chance to present our own practice in more detail. ”



## Policy developments at international and European level

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This section reviews international and European policy developments relevant to the shift from special educational needs through special needs education to inclusive education. These developments across Europe and beyond correspond to four core ideas set out by Opertti, Walker and Zhang (2014) that relate to this continually evolving journey towards inclusion: the human-rights-based perspective (1948– ), a response to children with special needs (1990– ), a response to marginalised groups (2000– ), and transforming education systems (2005– ).

### Policy developments at international level

The right to free education for everyone, ‘at least in the elementary and fundamental stages’, and the need for education that promotes ‘understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups’ was first set out in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1948, Article 26). By the 1960s, international declarations began to express the need to commit to non-discrimination in education. In particular, the *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (UNESCO, 1960) referred to the barriers in education and called on countries to recognise and remove them. It defined discrimination as:

... any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education (Article 1).



Young people speaking at the 'Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education' European hearing, organised by the Agency and the Portuguese Ministry of Education in 2007

In the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989), Articles 28 and 29 obliged the countries that signed and ratified it to ensure the right to free and compulsory primary education for all children and to respect children's backgrounds (e.g. family, cultural identity, language, values, etc.). It also underlined, in Article 23, the need to provide free education for the 'special needs of a disabled child'. It required countries to ensure that:

... the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development (Article 23).

A year later, the *World Declaration on Education for All* (UNESCO, 1990) called on countries to remove educational disparities. The Declaration made a distinction between 'underserved children' and 'disabled persons' (UNESCO, 2020). The latter were mentioned as persons who needed to be an integral part of education. The 'underserved children' who experienced education disparities were defined as:

... the poor; street and working children; rural and remote populations; nomads and migrant workers; indigenous peoples; ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities; refugees; those displaced by war; and people under occupation (UNESCO, 1990, Article 3).



In the 1990s, international documents endorsed the commitment to inclusive education, in which the role of special needs education was seen as fundamental. In particular, *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994), commonly known as the *Salamanca Statement*, marked the beginning of a journey from special needs education to inclusive education. It called on all countries and international organisations to move towards inclusive schools for all and ‘new thinking in special needs education’ (*ibid.*, p. 9).

In particular, it encouraged countries with special schools to reduce the number of learners who attended them and to develop them as a resource for mainstream schools. Countries were also encouraged to prepare mainstream schools to adequately support learners with special needs and ensure that education in special classes was the exception.

The *Salamanca Statement* encouraged international organisations ‘to endorse the approach of inclusive schooling and to support the development of special needs education as an integral part of all education programmes’ (*ibid.*, p. x).

The *Salamanca Statement* had a strong influence on national and international policy documents that signposted several key guiding principles. As Meijer and Watkins note, these can rightly be considered ‘successors’ of Salamanca (2019, p. 707). Examples include the UNCRPD (UN, 2006), the *Incheon Declaration* (UNESCO, 2015) and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UN, 2015).



Over the past 25 years, the Agency's influence has grown and our opportunities to work with international agencies have increased. The Agency has been involved in the conceptualisation and writing of influential documents, from the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) and the *World Report on Disability* (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011a), to more recent work with UNESCO, such as *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* (2017) and the *2020 Global Education Monitoring Report*. This on-going international collaboration has further raised our Agency's profile, so it is now recognised as a well-established and highly valued organisation with the expertise to lead change across countries moving towards inclusive education.

According to Florian, the *Salamanca Statement*'s achievements have been three-fold:

It challenged the idea that some children do not belong in regular or mainstream schools; it called into question the structures of schooling that rely on different forms of provision for different types of learners; and it introduced the idea of inclusive education to the wider education community (2019, p. 692).

Reflecting on international agreements, the 2000 World Education Forum adopted *The Dakar Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2000). It states a commitment to previous influential documents (i.e. the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Salamanca Statement*). The goal of 'Education for All' is central and the first priority area is 'access and equity', which entails paying:

... special attention to street and working children, nomadic communities, children in remote environments and areas of conflict, minority groups, HIV/AIDS orphans, child prisoners and disabled children (ibid., p. 27).

Detailing the concept of equity, *The Dakar Framework for Action* draws attention to the needs of different groups of learners. It asks countries to commit to inclusive education by ensuring access, quality learning and full participation for all children and adolescents. Education for All frameworks were a significant element of *The Dakar Framework for Action* and the role of special needs education was not the focus of discussion.

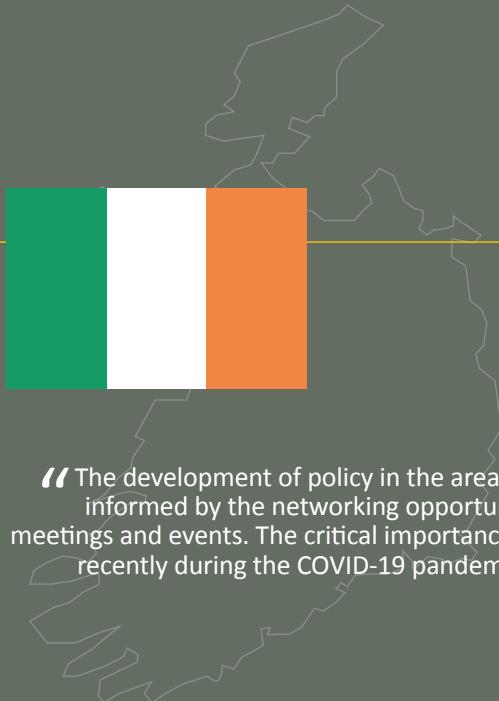
In 2006, the UNCRPD (UN, 2006) provided further support for inclusive education. Article 24 on Education set out 'the right of persons with disabilities to education' and required States Parties to sign and ratify the Convention to 'ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning'. All Agency member countries have ratified the UNCRPD.

The UNCRPD, like the *Salamanca Statement*, required all persons with disabilities to be included in the education system, with access to inclusive, quality and free education in the communities in which they live, with an entitlement to individualised support in mainstream settings. The Convention also introduced the concepts of 'discrimination on the basis of disability' and 'reasonable accommodation' (*ibid.*, Article 2), which are essential elements for inclusive education.

Another significant document is *Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future*, by UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) (2008a). The accompanying reference document detailed three conceptual dimensions:

- Special needs education (remedial and corrective responses to learners with special needs in segregated settings)
- Integration (the placement of learners with special needs in mainstream settings followed by the rise of special classes and special teachers)
- Inclusive education (effective learning opportunities for all learners) (UNESCO IBE, 2008b).





## Ireland

**Brendan Doody, Representative Board member**

“The development of policy in the area of inclusion and inclusive practices in Ireland has been informed by the networking opportunities that arise both formally and informally at Agency meetings and events. The critical importance of the Agency network was perhaps best exemplified recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, when school systems around Europe moved online. ”

It also identified the four key elements of inclusive education:

- ‘Inclusion is a process’.
- ‘Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers’.
- ‘Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all learners’.
- ‘Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement’ (*ibid.*, p. 18).

Noting that inclusion is often thought of ‘simply as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings’, UNESCO IBE recognised the international movement towards seeing inclusion ‘more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners’, aiming to ‘eliminate social exclusion resulting from attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability’ (*ibid.*, p. 5).

The document stressed that ‘inclusion is about the development of mainstream schools, rather than the reorganization of special schooling’ and suggested that:

The aim has to be to increase the capacity of all mainstream schools, so that they can meet the needs of all children, whilst offering them similar rights and opportunities. This has implications for a changed role for special schools in the medium term and the disappearance of special schools in the longer term, without losing their know-how and resources (*ibid.*, p. 25).



Finally, the document acknowledged that, despite the focus of previous international key documents on education for all, new approaches and strategies needed to be adopted to reach out to those who were still excluded, considering access but also ‘fundamental issues linked to quality and equity—key elements in building the foundations for inclusive societies’ (*ibid.*, p. 31).

The *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education* defined inclusion as a process that responds to the needs of all learners, increases their participation in ‘learning, cultures and communities’ and eliminates exclusion (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8). The Guidelines repeated the message from earlier documents – emphasising the need for a shift in policies, school and class practices, and school culture. Significantly, the Guidelines stated a three-fold justification for inclusive education:

- the **educational justification** (inclusive schools develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all learners);
- the **social justification** ('inclusive schools are able to change attitudes' and promote non-discrimination);
- the **economic justification** (having schools for all is less costly than having 'different types of schools specialising in different groups of children') (*ibid.*, p. 9).

In 2011, the World Health Organization and the World Bank jointly produced the *World Report on Disability* (2011a), to support the implementation of the UNCRPD. The Report is for all stakeholders





(e.g. governments, civil society organisations and disabled people's organisations) and suggests some steps to improve the lives of people with disabilities. It targets the barriers faced by people with disabilities in areas such as health care and employment, as well as barriers to the implementation of inclusive education for this group of learners. Some of the suggested changes to national systems and schools include clear policy direction and commitment to inclusive education; long-term funding; teacher education for inclusion; changes in curricula, teaching methods, materials, assessments and examination systems; and removal of physical barriers. The Report Summary, however, noted that 'some children will require access to additional support services including specialist education teachers, classroom assistants, and therapy services' (2011b, p. 16).

The report *Equity and Quality in Education* (OECD, 2012) aimed to identify the barriers that hinder school completion for a significant number of learners across countries. It provided suggestions to increase school participation and the achievement of a basic minimum level of skills to enable learners to contribute to the economy. These suggestions included eliminating grade retention, avoiding early tracking, managing school choice to avoid segregation, developing funding strategies to respond to learners' and schools' needs, and designing upper-secondary education pathways to ensure completion. The report underlined that equity goes 'hand-in-hand with quality' (*ibid.*, p. 14).



25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

It defined the key concept of equity on the basis of fairness and inclusion, as follows:

Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion) (*ibid.*, p. 9).

The report mainly used the terminology of 'disadvantaged' schools and learners and referred extensively to gender and ethnic background inequalities worldwide. It also provided some information on inequalities concerning learners with disabilities.

Another significant development, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015), emphasised the need for inclusive education at the global level. SDG 4 highlighted the need to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (*ibid.*).

Target 4.5 states:

By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (*ibid.*).



The 2015 World Education Forum, organised by UNESCO and other UN bodies and international organisations, held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, adopted what is commonly known as the *Incheon Declaration* (UNESCO, 2015). Driven by the commitment to achieve SDG 4, the *Incheon Declaration* set out a vision to guide education policies up to 2030.

According to this vision:

**Inclusion and equity** in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all. We therefore commit to making the necessary changes in education policies and focusing our efforts on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind (ibid., p. 7, emphasis in the original).

A decade after the UNCRPD, *General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education* (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) was issued. It further clarified inclusive education and the obligations on State Parties stemming from Article 24. According to Hunt, *General Comment No. 4* ‘fills the void left by the *Salamanca Statement* ... by defining inclusive education and some of its principal features’ (2020, p. 11). In particular, *General Comment No. 4* stated that the ‘exclusion of persons with disabilities from the general education

system should be prohibited' (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, p. 6) and that the UNCRPD 'is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: a mainstream education system and a special/segregated education system' (*ibid.*, p. 11).

A *Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* again repeated the commitment to SDG 4 and highlighted the focus on all learners with the core message that 'every learner matters and matters equally' (UNESCO, 2017, p. 12). The Guide defined inclusion as 'a process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners' and equity as the 'concern with fairness, such that the education of all learners is seen as having equal importance' (*ibid.*, p. 13). The Guide provided examples of the challenges for inclusion across countries and proposed an assessment framework to support self-review, considering four dimensions: concepts, policy statements, structures and systems, and practices.

The UNCRPD (2006) and *General Comment No. 4* (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) are legally binding international human rights instruments that safeguard the right of learners with disabilities to inclusive education. Nevertheless, some argue that the *Salamanca Statement* had and still has a greater impact at global level (Graham et al., 2020).

Twenty-five years after the *Salamanca Statement*, in 2019, a special issue of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* reviewed its impact. Authors from different countries outlined some of the tensions and complexities as they evaluated the Statement's impact on national policy





## Luxembourg

Gil Steinbach, former Representative Board member

“ Luxembourg hosted the HELIOS II final conference, ending with the *Charter of Luxembourg* (1996). From the outset, we supported discussions and initiatives aimed at creating a European network of specialists in the field of special education.

Over the years, the Agency has established itself at European – and even international – level as a respected and indisputable reference point in the field of special education, integration and inclusion in schools.

While the Agency has developed over 25 years to become a respected and established partner in the world of education, politics and society at European and international level, it is important to stress that it does not act for (or on behalf of) children and young people with special needs, but has always been willing and able to listen to these young people who speak, assert, criticise and praise. ”

developments. These tensions included a continued focus on deficit in special education discourse, which has been used to support resistance to change (Ainscow, Slee and Best, 2019) and the application of traditional special educational knowledge and practices in mainstream schools (Nteropoulou-Nterou and Slee, 2019). The journal also noted that while the enrolment of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools has increased, transition to later years of schooling often remains low (Singal, 2019).

Reflecting on international documents, the *2020 Global Education Monitoring Report* (known as the GEM Report) assessed the progress made towards SDG 4 on education (UNESCO, 2020). The title *Inclusion and Education: All Means All* reflects the focus on inclusive education for all. The GEM Report drew attention to the barriers to inclusive education faced by many countries and identified several challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. These include the different understandings of inclusion, the absence of data on learners who are excluded from education, inconsistent national policies, and the persistence of parallel systems and special schools.

### **Policy developments at European level**

This section reviews how key European documents and programmes have promoted integration and inclusive education over time and expanded thinking from special needs education to a broader concern with the inclusion of all learners.





*The Resolution of the Council and the Ministers for Education meeting within the Council of 31 May 1990 concerning integration of children and young people with disabilities into ordinary systems of education* (Council of the EU and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, 1990) was adopted unanimously by the Council of the EU and the Ministers for Education. The Resolution's opening statement suggested that:

... the education policy of all the Member States is evolving towards integration, in all appropriate cases, of children and young people with disabilities into ordinary systems of education, with the support as appropriate of the specialized sector and/or services in varying degrees according to each state (ibid., p. 1).

Member states were called upon to direct their efforts and political will towards implementing pragmatic and concrete measures to integrate children and young people with disabilities into mainstream education. The need for special education to be 'at the disposal of mainstream education' was also raised (ibid.). The Resolution referred mainly to the integration of 'children and young people with disabilities', but also made reference to their 'special needs'.

Between 1993 and 1996, the EU funded the HELIOS II programme, focused on the integration of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. Participants from all EU countries took part in thematic working groups, exchanging ideas and practices on four key sectors: social integration and independent living; education; functional rehabilitation; and economic integration.

In the summary of the main results of the HELIOS II programme, the move from integration to inclusive education for learners with disabilities is described through a set of principles, strategies and proposals (European Commission, 1996). Importantly, the end of the HELIOS II programme marked the beginning of the Agency, as it was set up as a permanent structure aiming to continue collaborative activities in the field of special needs education.

As part of the global evaluation of the EU SOCRATES action programme in 1999 (Teichler, Gordon and Maiworm, 2001), the Agency carried out an evaluation of the participation of young and adult learners with physical, motor, sensory or intellectual disabilities (European Agency, 2000). In centralised actions (such as Comenius 2 and 3.1), many projects had targeted either disadvantaged groups or learners with special needs in separate programmes.

The Agency evaluation pointed to the need to improve access to information (for example, about the support available) as a first step to increase the participation of learners with disabilities. The evaluation also recommended more effective dissemination of examples of good practice to encourage greater integration of learners with a disability.

Despite the lack of data on which to base a more detailed analysis, the evaluation activities showed that the SOCRATES programme had taken forward the broad equal opportunities agenda. This Agency work was also influential as it led to the 'mainstreaming' of special education into lifelong learning programmes.



The *Council resolution of 5 May 2003 on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training* invited member states to:

... encourage and support the full integration of children and young people with special needs in society through their appropriate education and training, and their insertion in a school system which is ... adapted to their needs (Council of the EU, 2003, p. 1).

This Resolution encouraged member states to ensure lifelong learning for people with disabilities, adequate support for learners who need 'special education and training', and initial and in-service teacher training for 'special needs' (*ibid.*, p. 3).

By 2008, the *Communication on Improving Competences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools* (Commission of the European Communities, 2008) recognised that achieving inclusion while supporting those with specific needs involved re-thinking policies for organising learning support, improving collaboration between schools and other services, and implementing personalised learning. This Communication underlined increased diversity in school classes on the basis of 'gender, socio-economic groups, ability or disability, mother tongues and learning styles' (*ibid.*, p. 6).

It referred to inclusive school systems, recognising the:

... importance of early learning opportunities and of inclusive school systems that integrate students from all backgrounds into mainstream education, while giving additional support for disadvantaged students and those with special needs (*ibid.*, p. 7).

The Communication commented that, despite political intentions, more than 2% of learners across the EU were still taught in segregated settings 'because of their special educational needs' (*ibid.*, p. 10).

The following year, the *Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ('ET 2020')* linked inclusive education with learners 'from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs and migrants' (Council of the EU, 2009, p. 3). Member states were encouraged to develop co-operation to:

Promote inclusive education and personalised learning through timely support, the early identification of special needs and well-coordinated services.

Integrate services within mainstream schooling and ensure pathways to further education and training (*ibid.*, p. 9).



While these Council conclusions still used ‘special needs’ as a generic term, inclusive education was seen as a means of promoting equity, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, learners with special needs and migrants. The conclusions referred to personalised learning and targeted support and placed a growing emphasis on social inclusion and the development of learning communities.

Likewise, the *Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training* maintained that high-quality systems for all that foster early intervention and personalised, inclusive approaches can be ‘powerful drivers in fostering social inclusion’ (Council of the EU, 2010, p. 3). With regard to early and school education, these Council conclusions invited member states to:

Promote successful inclusive education approaches for all pupils, including those with special needs, by making schools learning communities in which a sense of inclusion and mutual support is nurtured and in which the talents of all pupils are recognised.

Monitor the impact of such approaches, in particular with a view to raising access and graduation rates of learners with special needs at all levels of the education system (*ibid.*, p. 5).

The *2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission* reflected the international rhetoric at that time and referred to:

Inclusive education, equality, equity, non-discrimination and the promotion of civic competences (Council of the EU and the European Commission, 2015, p. 2).

Effective action to respond to diversity in all its forms and to provide inclusive education and training for all learners ... focusing on disadvantaged groups such as learners with special needs, newly arrived migrants, people with a migrant background and Roma (*ibid.*, p. 4).

Also in 2015, the *Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education* noted an agreement to strengthen actions in the field of education to ensure:

... inclusive education for all children and young people which combats racism and discrimination on any ground, promotes citizenship and teaches them to understand and to accept differences of opinion, of conviction, of belief and of lifestyle, while respecting the rule of law, diversity and gender equality (EU Education Ministers, 2015, p. 3).

This Declaration referred to all children and young people, attending to quality inclusive education and mentioning a wide range of disadvantages that could potentially lead to marginalisation and social exclusion.





'Young Views on Inclusive Education' hearing at the European Parliament in Brussels, 2011

Quality inclusive education was also highlighted in the *Council conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school* (Council of the European Union, 2015). The conclusions suggested local- and school-level collaborative practices to alleviate educational disadvantage and reduce early school leaving, stating that:

Ensuring that every young person has equal access to quality and inclusive education and the opportunity to develop his/her full potential, irrespective of individual, family-related or gender-related factors, socioeconomic status and life experiences, is key to preventing marginalisation and social exclusion, as well as reducing the risk of extremism and radicalisation (*ibid.*, p. 2).

In 2017, the opening paragraph of the Conclusions on *Inclusion in Diversity to achieve a High Quality Education for All* (Council of the European Union, 2017a) re-stated the commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 and to recent EU communications. These Conclusions underlined a broader approach that stressed that:

... inclusive high quality education should be seen in a life-long perspective covering all aspects of education. It should be available and accessible to all learners of all ages, including those facing challenges, such as those with special needs or who have a disability, those originating from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds or geographically depressed areas or war-torn zones, regardless of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (*ibid.*, p. 3).

In the same year, the *Commission Recommendation of 26.4.2017 on the European Pillar of Social Rights* reinforced the principles of equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion, reflecting a focus on lifelong learning as follows:

Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market (European Commission, 2017, p. 6).

In addition, the *Council Conclusions on school development and excellent teaching* set out the following priority actions to ensure high-quality and inclusive education to develop the talent and potential of all learners:

... investing in timely and targeted support for learners with special educational needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds and at particular risk, using a wide range of means, including providing better access to inclusive settings and focusing on transitions within the education system and from school to the labour market (Council of the EU, 2017b, pp. 4–5).

These Council Conclusions also reinforced the importance of peer-learning and peer-counselling activities and the exchange of experiences and best practices to promote and support inclusiveness in education.



The *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching* (Council of the EU, 2018) supported quality inclusive education for diverse groups of learners, highlighting the benefit of using the Agency's expertise. The Recommendation reminded member states of the commitment to the UNCRPD:

Ensuring effective equal access to quality inclusive education for all learners, including those of migrant origins, those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, those with special needs and those with disabilities — in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities — is indispensable for achieving more cohesive societies (*ibid.*, p. 3).

Despite the many conclusions and recommendations, and the development of a broader view of inclusive education, the plans for a European Education Area by 2025 noted that: 'Education is failing to reduce inequalities linked to socio-economic status, despite the fact that the highest performing education systems are those that put a premium on equity' (European Commission, 2020, p. 6). The Commission highlighted the overrepresentation of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds among underachievers and suggested that, to 'turn the tide':

... Educational attainment and achievement should be decoupled from social, economic and cultural status, to ensure that education and training systems boost the abilities of every individual and enable upward social mobility (*ibid.*, p. 7).

The Commission again reinforced the need for education systems at all levels to comply with the UNCRPD.

More recently, the *Council conclusions on equity and inclusion in education and training in order to promote educational success for all* invited member states to implement educational policy measures to ‘enhance equal opportunities and inclusion’ by:

... addressing the increasing diversity of learners and enhancing access to high-quality and inclusive education and training for all learners, including from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as learners at risk of poverty and social exclusion and learners with specific learning needs, persons with disabilities, lower qualified/skills persons, persons with migrant backgrounds, persons from minorities and learners with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location, gender and/or their socio-economically disadvantaged situation (Council of the EU, 2021, p. 15).

These Council conclusions further extended consideration of vulnerable groups and referred to current educational challenges, including those that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusions suggested that the member states ‘reduce early leaving’ and ‘low achievement’; ensure a ‘baseline level of proficiency’ for all learners; create safe and supportive environments for all, including online environments; and establish ‘quality assurance processes’ for ‘equity in access, inclusion and educational success’ (*ibid.*).



In addition to its contributions at international level, our Agency has had a significant influence at European level. Over recent years, closer collaboration with the EU Institutions has increased our impact on EU-level guidance, conclusions and recommendations, many of which reflect the Agency's leading role in developing an understanding of inclusive education. As a result, our work in addressing the challenges posed by the implementation of inclusive education in countries is also widely recognised.

Participants in the Agency's fourth hearing, 'Inclusive Education: Take Action!', ► under the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2015





25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



## The Agency – developing as an agent for change

The idea for the Agency as an organisation that aimed to facilitate countries' efforts towards the integration of learners with disabilities was originally conceived by the education authorities in Denmark. The contributions of the County of Funen in Central Denmark and the Danish Ministry of Education were key in making the vision a reality.

At the end of the EU HELIOS II programme in 1996, Agency work with our original member countries was guided by principles laid down in the *UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (1993), the Resolution concerning integration of children and young people with disabilities (Council of the EU and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, 1990), the *Charter of Luxembourg* (European Commission, 1996) and *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994).

From the beginning, our Agency has played – and continues to play – a unique role in the field of special needs and inclusive education. We have aimed to build knowledge and support the transfer of information between countries, using country strengths to inform further development. Recognising that all our member countries are at different points on the journey to inclusion, the Agency has led debate on relevant issues, for example inclusive education, equal opportunities and accessibility, and promoting quality education for all.

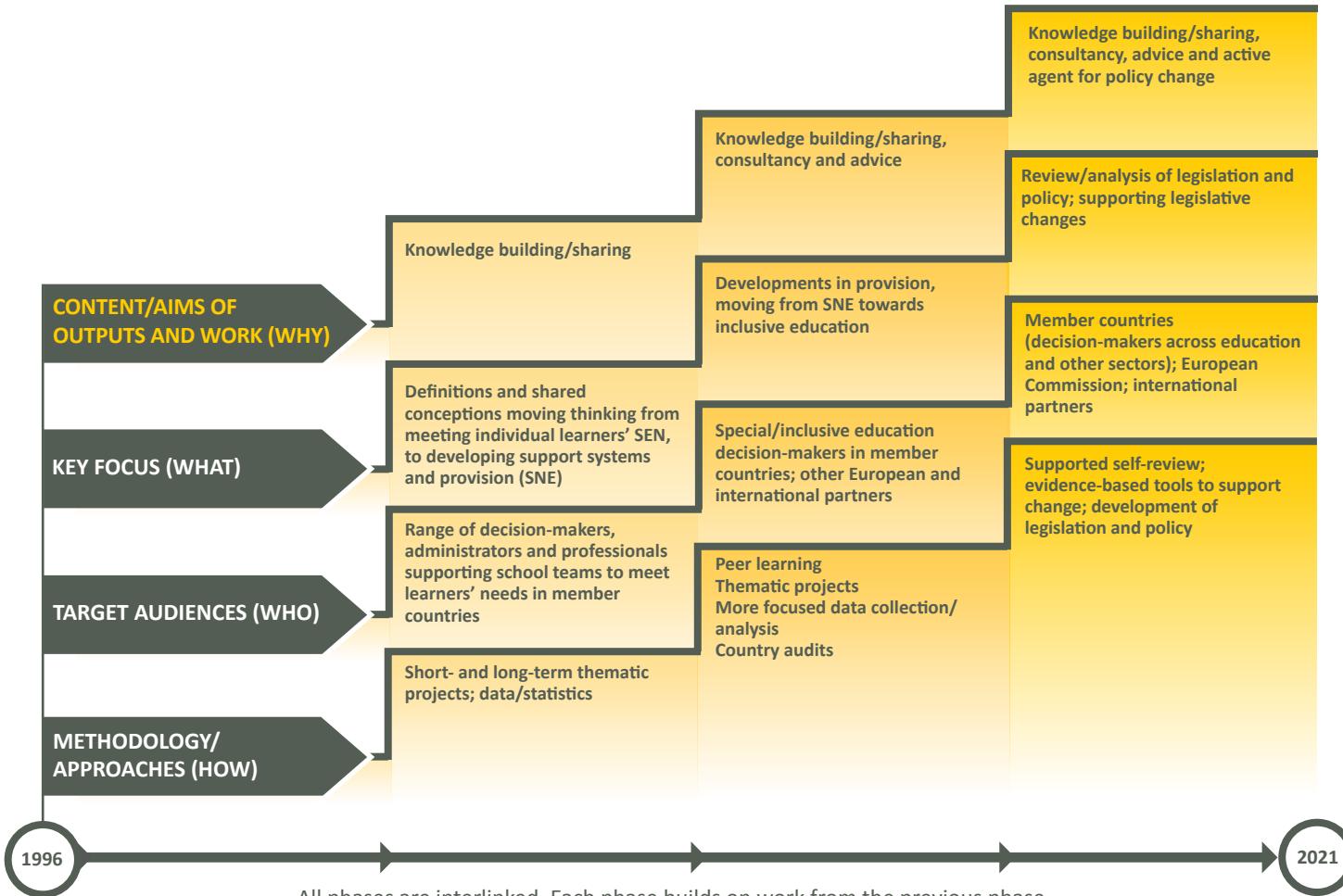
It is possible to identify a ‘direction of travel’ across all Agency work from 1996 to the present. Our focus has moved from special needs education as an approach for some learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities, to inclusive education as an approach for improving the quality of education for all learners. These evolutionary phases cannot be clearly separated from one another and were not the result of conscious decisions. They came about largely due to the influences both internationally and across Europe reviewed in the previous sections.

The development phases (summarised in the infographic on the right) can be considered in terms of:

- aims of outputs for member countries (the **why**);
- essential focuses of attention (the **what**);
- target audiences for those outputs (the **who**);
- methodologies used to achieve those aims (the **how**).

This gradual but significant shift in our work over the past 25 years can be traced through our work on Key Principles to support policy development and implementation for inclusive education. From the first edition in this series in 2003, through further publications in 2009 and 2011, to recent work in 2021, each report synthesises the main findings and recommendations from Agency work during the relevant time period.





### **Knowledge-building phase: special educational needs and special needs education**

During the knowledge-building phase, the Agency worked closely with our member countries to clarify the why, what, who and how of our work. In particular, we focused on gathering knowledge in key thematic areas, such as transition, financing, teacher training and support, and classroom practice.

In 2003, the report *Key Principles in Special Needs Education – Recommendations for Policy-Makers* (European Agency, 2003a) focused on aspects of special needs policy that were considered effective in supporting the inclusion of learners with SEN in mainstream provision. The emphasis was mainly on the placement of learners with SEN, but other principles guided our work: a framework of law and policy that supports inclusion; resourcing arrangements that promote inclusion; effective arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and accountability; and a focus on widening access and opportunity.

The report encouraged a move away from a medical model and the concept of ‘handicap’, towards approaches to overcome barriers to learning and assessment. As in the *Salamanca Statement*, the Agency considered the developing role of separate special schools and encouraged countries to decrease the number of learners in fully separate (segregated) provision.

At this time, the Council of the EU recognised our role in networking and sharing information, inviting member states to:

... enhance sharing information and experiences ... at European level, involving, as appropriate, the European organisations and networks with relevant experience in this field such as the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2003, p. 2).

### **Advice and consultancy phase: increasing learner diversity**

Moving into the second phase, we continued knowledge building but also extended our activities to provide consultancy and advice to member countries (e.g. in audits) and other organisations (e.g. World Health Organization, World Bank, UNESCO, OECD). Our focus moved from special needs education to the development of inclusive education. It is important to stress that the move from one phase to the next was gradual; the Agency maintained its work from the first phase while, at the same time, developing an advisory/consultancy role.

The policy documents published at European and international level increasingly focused on the inclusion of all learners in education. However, they named specific groups of learners – for example, learners with special needs, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and learners at risk of exclusion and segregation (UNESCO, 2009; Council of the EU, 2009; 2010). During this period, policy documents with a focus on learners with disabilities, such as the UNCRPD (2006) and *Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future* (UNESCO IBE, 2008a), influenced policy developments across countries.



Agency work, for example with UNESCO on *Inclusive Education in Action* in 2009/2010, contributed as thinking about inclusive education began to shift towards improving learning opportunities for all learners. This was reflected in our work with member countries.

In 2009, the second edition of Key Principles (European Agency, 2009) recognised the need to focus on recommendations for policy-makers in both mainstream and special needs education to maximise the impact on inclusive education. The report noted that ‘inclusion concerns a wider range of learners than those identified as having special educational needs’ (*ibid.*, p. 15) and underlined the need for legislation that promotes inclusion through a single legal framework, taking a rights-based approach in all educational sectors and levels. It also stressed the need to go beyond access to also ensure participation and to meet the diverse needs of all learners without labelling or categorising.

The 2011 Key Principles had a sharper focus on policy implementation, and effective practice was considered to ‘apply equally’ for all ‘learners with and without disabilities’ (European Agency, 2011, p. 13). Importantly, the report raised the need to listen to learners. This development builds on the European hearings the Agency held in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 (see European Agency, 2003b; 2008; 2012; 2016a). At the European Parliament hearing in 2011, the young delegates discussed their right ‘to quality of education, to choice and to equality and respect’ (European Agency, 2012, p. 11). They argued that inclusive education is not just about being together in the same place, but about having friends and good relationships with peers. They stressed that ‘inclusive education is the first step in being full members of society’ (*ibid.*).



The original Key Principles cover image, from a drawing by Daniela Demeterová, Czech Republic

In 2013, the Maltese Ministry for Education asked the Agency to conduct an external audit of the country's special needs and inclusive education system. During 2014, we developed a standards-based audit approach, working closely with the Ministry team who prepared a critical reflection on current policy and practice. A review of recent research placed the work in Malta in a wider context and provided a conceptual framework for data collection, raising key factors for final reporting.

The critical reflection and research review led to the development of standards that were then used to analyse and evaluate data – including background information and input from focus groups, school visits and a survey of key stakeholders. All data was then analysed against the standards to inform recommendations, critical levers for development and future work. Our approach aimed to promote an improvement cycle of review and reflection, and support evidence-based practice and decision-making.

We reached a further landmark in 2014 when we changed our name from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. This reflected the on-going paradigm shift towards a rights-based approach supporting the active participation of all learners (Meijer and Watkins, 2019).



The 2021 Key Principles logo



### **Leading and supporting change at policy level: inclusive education for all learners**

In the last decade, the Agency has been increasingly committed to leading and supporting policy change to develop inclusive education for all learners. As before, this new phase evolved while we continued our focus and methodologies from the previous two phases (e.g. thematic projects, data/statistics, peer-learning activities).

Importantly, during this phase, our auditing work developed further in response to a request from the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for an audit that would build on an internal evaluation of the implementation of inclusive education policy. The work centred on a cycle of review and reflection to answer the questions: Are we doing what we believe is the right thing, in the right way? And through this, will we improve the quality of education? The development of standards (aspirational statements) as quality assurance indicators or benchmarks for self-evaluation was a particular feature of this work, which included extensive stakeholder involvement.

Follow-up in both Malta and Iceland has shown that the audits have supported further development, for example exploring leadership, training, support systems, flexible curricula and assessment, and community engagement. In Malta, this has included learners and parents working with decision-makers; in Iceland, minimum levels of service provision for supporting inclusive education in all schools.



At the same time, we have developed new and innovative elements in our work, such as supported self-review of countries, collaborative policy review and analysis activities, and the provision of evidence-based tools to actively support policy change at country level.

In 2015, our member countries agreed on the *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems*. It sets out a commitment to ensuring meaningful, high-quality inclusive education for all learners (European Agency, 2015a).

The Agency position notes that the operating principles of inclusive education systems are:

... equity, effectiveness, efficiency and raising achievements for all stakeholders – learners, their parents and families, educational professionals, community representatives and decision-makers – through high-quality, accessible educational opportunities (*ibid.*, p. 2).

We have further expressed our dedication to inclusive education systems through several activities aligned with international- and European-level priorities and recommendations for inclusive education.



Our Country Policy Review and Analysis (CPRA) work is one such example. It demonstrates how we used the broader European and international policy context to develop a policy analysis and review framework with 12 policy measures for inclusive education systems (see European Agency, 2016b and the earlier section in this book on Country Policy Review and Analysis and Country Policy Development Support). The CPRA outputs for each country contributed to international-level requests directed to ministries of education, for example European-level work associated with Country-Specific Recommendations, and to international-level work linked to the reporting process followed by ministries of education for the UNCRPD.

The CPRA activities have paved the way for Country Policy Development Support (CPDS), which will be organised around interconnected priorities identified by member country representatives. The CPDS activity will be central to our role in leading policy change and will involve close examination/review of countries' policy frameworks for inclusive education to tailor future activities to country contexts, using a range of flexible working processes.

The CPRA work raised our Agency's profile and our focus on evidence-based information has continued and further developed in line with our growing importance as an active agent for change in policy and practice. The audit work in Malta and Iceland (European Agency, 2014; 2017) was a further significant development (see above) and helped in the development of the *Analysis Framework for Mapping Inclusive Education Policies* (European Agency, 2018a) as a sound basis for providing technical support to more countries (i.e. Cyprus, Poland, Greece, Czech





Republic and Portugal) through the European Commission Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP), now re-named the Technical Support Instrument (TSI).

Through the SRSP, we actively supported ministries of education to develop policy and legislative frameworks and plan implementation and evaluation activities. During this work, the Agency facilitated stakeholder involvement (including education policy-makers and those from other sectors, parents, learners and representatives from the voluntary sector and other organisations) and organised peer-learning activities to exchange policy and practice with other country decision-makers. The deliverables produced have been practical, aiming to support countries to make changes as appropriate to their own context.

Since 2021, the new TSI, managed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM), continues to provide tailor-made expertise to EU member states to design and implement reforms. The support is demand-driven and does not require co-financing from member states. We expect to continue to play an important role in facilitating policy developments through collaborative work with individual countries.

Within the last five years, the Council of the EU has repeatedly invited its member states to make use of our Agency's expertise in inclusive education. The *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching* suggested that countries could benefit from the Agency's guidance and expertise to 'implement

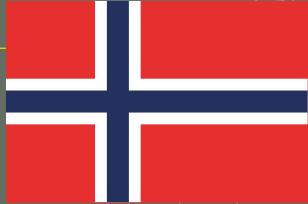


and monitor successful inclusive approaches in their education systems' (Council of the EU, 2018, p. 4). *The European Parliament resolution of 30 November 2017 on implementation of the European Disability Strategy* also promoted Agency work (European Parliament, 2017).

We will build on our experience to date to strengthen our role in legislative and policy change in the coming years, supporting countries through the reform process, from the development of assumptions that underpin legislation to the implementation of a more inclusive education system.







## Norway

**Bodil Hafsås, Representative Board member**

“Over 25 years, the Agency has contributed knowledge and inspiration for the development of an increasingly inclusive education system. It has provided a highly valuable platform to develop a common basis for discussing and developing inclusive education systems. The Agency has facilitated peer learning from both similarities and differences among the member countries.”



## The way forward

In our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, a review of our work since 2011 produced the latest Key Principles publication (European Agency, 2021). This aims to move thinking on regarding policy development and implementation, bridging the policy–practice gap. It aligns with our 2015 *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems* and presents evidence-based principles to support dialogue about key questions to raise awareness and further develop thinking and language around inclusive education.

The 2021 Key Principles are in line with recent European and international policy documents, such as the *Council conclusions on equity and inclusion in education and training in order to promote educational success for all* (Council of the EU, 2021) and the *2020 Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020) and will guide our future work with our member countries. In particular, this work shows a change of emphasis by helping decision-makers to consider the dynamic education system as a whole, highlighting the important connections both within and between system levels and organisations and institutions. As a basis for country review, it can also help to assess the potential impact of planned changes towards more inclusive practice and provide a basis for a coherent action plan to put policy into practice.

The Key Principles report recognises an on-going dilemma presented by the paradigm shift: how to fulfil the rights and meet the needs of some learners (for example, learners with disabilities) who require additional support, while working towards equitable education for all. It highlights the



growing need to take account of intersectionality – the interconnected nature of all social categorisations – when considering the needs of all learners. For example:

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

The 2021 Key Principles report includes an overarching principle around a widely agreed concept of rights-based inclusive education, set out in a single legislative and policy framework for all learners with five requirements:

- Flexible funding and resource allocation
- Clear governance through all system levels
- Comprehensive quality assurance and accountability with a focus on equitable opportunities for all learners
- A continuum of teacher professional learning
- Inclusive curriculum and assessment frameworks for all (European Agency, 2021).

Monitoring both the effectiveness (full participation and raised achievement for all) and cost-effectiveness of inclusive education is also a priority, but doing so in a way that avoids labelling or categorising learners. Teacher professional learning for inclusion is also a challenge

for decision-makers developing policies to provide coherent learning around inclusive education for all teachers at different levels of their career, from initial teacher education to induction, in-service teachers' professional learning and teacher educators' professional learning.

Building on CPRA work, the report calls for a change in emphasis over time in the policy approaches taken, with an increase in prevention and intervention measures and a decrease in the compensatory approaches that exist for learners who are not fully included in the education policy framework.

As identified in the *2020 Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020), on-going challenges include the continued presence of systems of special provision in many countries, with stakeholders who resist a move towards inclusive education; absence of data on learners excluded from education; poorly targeted finance/resources and un-coordinated governance with inconsistent laws and policies. In some cases, inclusive education can become a new name for a system of integration, focusing on placement rather than quality education for all learners together.



The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted issues of inequity in education across Europe and exposed the inadequacy of many traditional structures and processes in education systems. As Watkins, Donnelly and Meijer point out:

... many of these are the very same structures and processes that need to be transformed to make education systems more inclusive and ensure that all learners, in particular those from disadvantaged groups, are included (forthcoming, p. 15).

Collaborative work should ensure availability of a flexible continuum of provision and resources with the effective translation of national policies to regional, local and school levels. If all the components set out in the 2021 Key Principles are present, then all levels of the education system should become more equitable, effective and efficient in valuing learner diversity and raising the achievement of all learners and education system stakeholders.

## Slovakia

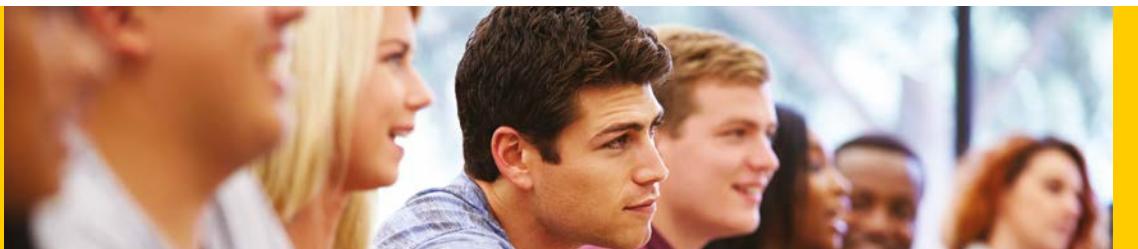
Maria Tekelová, former Representative Board member



“ The Agency has given us the opportunity to enjoy direct access to information at an international level and, together with colleagues from other European countries, to address issues related to our common new challenge and commitments. With thanks for the work so far, we wish the Agency much success in the next 25 years in continuing its inspiring and beneficial work for all member countries, as well as countries and institutions outside the network. ”

## How Agency members' thinking has changed over the last 25 years

This section presents reflections from member country representatives, past and present, on their work with the Agency and its influence on their roles within their respective countries.



## Being involved has strengthened me as a civil servant and inspired me as a person

**Theo Mardulier, Representative Board member for Belgium (Flemish Community)**



The year 1996. It feels like yesterday that, having just missed the ferry, I stood in a van in silence with colleagues from other countries waiting for the next ferry to travel from Copenhagen to Middelfart for our first Agency meeting.

Representatives from a much smaller number of member countries than today found themselves in a new, unique organisation, initiated by the Danish minister and a number of pioneers from the HELIOS programme, for the education of people with disabilities.

A close-knit Agency family soon emerged, where an 'Agency competition' repeatedly broke the ice during bi-annual meetings and managed to transcend language and cultural diversity.

The Agency has gone through many changes since then:

- The number of member countries has increased significantly.
- The way of working has become more and more professional, by involving experts from the education field in the various projects.
- We went from mapping aspects of the education of learners with special educational needs



National Co-ordinator for Belgium (Flemish Community) for the period 1996–2005 and Representative Board member for Belgium (Flemish Community) since 2005.

Management Board member elected by the Agency member countries for the period 2019–2022.

Belgium (Flemish Community) became a member country when the Agency was formed in 1996.

in the various countries, to more in-depth analysis and the creation of added value around various topics.

- The Agency now has a legitimate ambition to be even more of a driver of change, facilitating and supporting member countries in the challenge of achieving inclusive education.

It is my conviction that the only path to happiness for us as a society, and education as an essential social sector, is the inclusive way.

There are also things that have not changed in the Agency:

- A welcome for each new member.
- The pursuit of togetherness and well-being of all.
- The professionalism and passion with which everyone – from the Chair, Director, staff and Secretariat, to Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators – is committed to improving the education of learners with special educational needs.

The privilege of being involved in this for 25 years – meeting interesting colleagues, seeing great examples, listening to passionate speakers – has reinforced my belief in inclusion, strengthened me as a civil servant and inspired me as a person.

Being able and allowed to belong is a fundamental need of every human being.



25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## A ‘think tank’ in the field of inclusive education to mobilise and facilitate change

**Athina-Anna Christopoulou, Representative Board member for Greece**

The Greek Ministry of Education’s involvement with the Agency dates back to 1996, when the Agency was founded.

This co-operation has continued throughout these 25 years, during which the Agency has evolved to become an internationally recognised organisation working to combat discrimination and barriers in education. As such, it ensures the provision of more equitable education systems in its member countries.

Since 1996, numerous policy-makers, experts and stakeholders from Greece have participated in a wide range of Agency thematic activities and initiatives.

In this context, my personal involvement in the Agency’s activities started in December 2016. Since then, I have been fortunate to collaborate closely with the Agency on various programmes, including two flagship activities: Country Policy Review and Analysis and the Structural Reform Support Programme action entitled ‘Promoting inclusive education: addressing challenges in legislation, educational policy and practice’, in which the Agency has been the technical provider.



Representative Board member for Greece since 2016.

Management Board member elected by the Agency member countries for the period 2020–2023.

Greece became a member country when the Agency was formed in 1996.

Re-tracing work that has been done during recent years, I can confirm that the Agency has been an important co-traveller in the Ministry's on-going journey towards inclusion.

We have received exemplary support in our efforts to set the inclusive education agenda and improve provision for all learners at all levels of education. Also notable is the Agency's organisational capacity to respond to all demands, including the practical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To this effect, at a policy level, the Agency has given us valuable assistance in effectively reviewing existing provision and designing several legislative provisions, such as the National Strategic Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the field of education.

Moreover, at a practical level, working with the Agency and its country network has been inspirational. We have identified good European practices in the field of inclusion, developed common principles and designed protocols, tools and guides addressed to schools that are aligned with both European Commission priorities and the imperatives of the UNCRPD.

From this perspective, the Agency is worthy to be considered a 'think tank' in the field of inclusive education and an organisation whose capacity to mobilise and facilitate change is highly trusted.



## Slovenia

Alen Kofol, former Representative Board member

“ The Agency is an example of a community built on respect and mutual trust among all the stakeholders in the educational process of children with special needs. This is the key cornerstone for achieving a balance between the social and academic aspects of inclusion. The projects that the Agency works on have significantly affected Slovenian legislation. They affect not only the legislation itself, but also the way head teachers, teachers and parents' associations think and work. ”

# The Agency has given me many university degrees in the field of inclusive education

**Guðni Olgeirsson, former Representative Board member for Iceland**



I am very grateful for all the opportunities the Agency has given me personally and professionally, all the way from its early years to the present. It was inspiring to get to know key people in Europe at national level, as well as the Agency experts and staff.

That's not to mention all the meetings throughout Europe with insights into local situations and contexts. It has really been a privilege for me to be part of the Agency's history. It has helped me in inter-ministerial work at home and in other international work I have been part of since my Agency time.

My first encounter with the Agency was at the bi-annual meeting in Austria in September 1998. I knew some of the Nordic partners before that, but this meeting in Austria was very memorable, both for the dynamic, informative and relaxed atmosphere in the meetings and the activities outside the meetings in the beautiful surroundings. The curling competition in the ice caves in the Alps is still vivid in my memories from the early days and how this group of experts from all around Europe enjoyed working together and also having fun.



National Co-ordinator for Iceland for the period 1999–2001 and Representative Board member for Iceland for the period 2001–2016.

Management Board member elected by the Agency member countries for the period 2014–2016.

Iceland became a member country when the Agency was formed in 1996.

I did not expect such a mood in European co-operation at this level. It was an excellent first impression and I already felt that the Agency was somewhat special.

I now realise that I was a formal representative involved in the Agency for 18 of its 25 years! During that time, the Agency expanded hugely due to many new countries joining and changed its focus from special needs education to inclusive education systems development.

As regards its added value, I would say the Agency is very important to facilitate capacity building and system development throughout Europe to improve inclusive education. I think that the Agency's work is very professional and practical, so policy-makers can implement key principles at national level. As an organisation, the Agency has a major impact on developing inclusive education in Europe.

In Iceland, we have used the Agency's work to develop policy guidelines and regulations on inclusive education and would consider that an added value. What's more, the Agency audit in 2017 on the implementation of inclusive education was crucial for strengthening inter-ministerial and multi-stakeholder co-operation to uplift and develop inclusive education in Iceland.

There are various examples of Agency work being used in Iceland, but the most recent is the *Financing Policy Self-Review Tool*. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture used it in a pilot project with the participation of local municipal authorities.

It is a huge achievement that, for 25 years, the Agency has maintained a network at European level, with participation at ministerial level, and a dynamic, flexible and professional learning community that works to uplift, build capacity and develop inclusive education systems in Europe.

There are so many things that the Agency has meant for me professionally – I feel that the Agency has given me many university degrees in the field of inclusive education!



25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



## The Agency audit on inclusive education – a big achievement for Malta

**George Borg, former Representative Board member for Malta**



Malta joined the Agency in 2005 with observer status, and I was nominated as Malta's first Representative Board member.

My first participation was during the bi-annual meeting held in Athens in September 2005. I immediately realised that this was important for our Ministry to participate in, due to the highly professional country representatives attending these meetings.

The Agency's work and activities have helped a lot in inclusive education policy development and implementation in Malta. Participation in the Agency's research projects helped me and my department to understand better where we stand as a country in the various aspects being reviewed.

The Agency member countries elected me to the Management Board for 2011–2013 and it was a remarkable professional experience. I was also honoured in this capacity to be chosen to participate in meetings between the Agency and the European Commission, which contributed to the Agency's vision and future work plans.



Representative Board member for Malta for the period 2005–2016.

Management Board member elected by the Agency member countries for the period 2011–2013.

Malta became a member of the Agency in 2005.

A concrete example of the impact of such work is when the Agency accepted the Maltese Minister for Education's request in 2013 to carry out an audit on inclusive education in the country. This research project paved the way for a new way of working with the Agency. This, I feel, was a big achievement for me personally, for inclusive education in my country, and for the Agency and its member countries.

The Agency's work has helped me in my professional career and has meant a lot to me. So much so that I finished my career doing Agency activities! The Agency's bi-annual meeting in Malta in 2017 was held during Malta's Presidency of the Council of the EU. Our on-going commitment to the Agency's work is exemplified by the fact we hosted the Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education final project conference during this exceptional period.

## Spain



**María Montserrat Pascual Contreras, National Co-ordinator**

**“** Our recently approved Education Law points to our fundamental commitment to ensuring every learner’s right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. We want to continue advancing, in the framework provided by the Agency, towards the objective of eliminating barriers that inhibit the presence, participation or learning of all learners in our education system. **”**

## Major steps towards more inclusive schools in my country – how the Agency's work helps us

**Marjan Zandbergen, Representative Board member for the Netherlands**

It was 1996 when I was asked to stand in for a colleague at one of the first meetings of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, as it was called then, in Middelfart in Denmark.

Alongside that serious work, there was certainly time for relaxation in the beginning when we were building the Agency. I remember the games we played, the visits to places of interest, the goose (the Agency mascot at the time) who travelled to the country that would be organising the next meeting. Those activities were a perfect opportunity to exchange experiences with other countries.

What started as an initiative by Denmark, supported by 14 other countries, is now a renowned institution with over 30 member countries.

I am proud that I could contribute to that development, not only as a Representative Board member, but also for some time as a member of the Management Board.



Representative Board member for Netherlands since 1997.

Management Board member when the countries took over the Agency in 1999 and elected by the Agency member countries for the period 1999–2003.

Netherlands became a member country when the Agency was formed in 1996.

The Agency also contributed to my personal development and I learned a lot from – and about – other countries during the bi-annual meetings. I was honoured to be able to hold two of those meetings in the Netherlands.

The last one was during the Agency's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with a seminar on the role of education in response to the migrant crisis across Europe. There was also time for a visit to the Rijksmuseum to see paintings by Rembrandt, for a boat trip and for dinner in Muiderslot Castle.

During the bi-annual meetings, we discuss the projects, budgets and other serious matters, such as on-going and new activities. The Netherlands has participated in a lot of projects, such as Transition from School to Employment, Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education, Inclusive Early Childhood Education and, more recently, Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems and Country Policy Review and Analysis.

All Agency activities have contributed to the development of a more inclusive education system in the Netherlands.

I am happy that we have taken some steps and are continuing to take bigger ones towards more inclusive schools in my country. The Agency's work helps us with that.

I have learned a lot of things that have helped me with my work at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in the Netherlands. Thank you for that.

# Providing reliable knowledge, while accompanying us in public dialogue, motivating and supporting us in our search for solutions

**Elżbieta Neroj, Representative Board member for Poland**

My first encounter with the Agency was in the autumn of 2010, when I started working at the Ministry of National Education and I was offered the position of Representative Board member. My work with the Agency and my own journey towards inclusive education began then and continues to this day.

The Agency is unique for me for several reasons. It supports decision-makers to build an education system that takes learners' diverse developmental and educational needs into account. It respects each learner's rights and uniqueness, and its work is based on building a community of representatives from different countries working towards common goals and sharing the same values.

Looking back at the Agency's main developments and achievements, in my opinion, the name change was a milestone, reflecting a significant shift towards solutions that support all learners. This was also evident in the *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems*, which was developed with the member countries to set out their understanding of inclusive education.



Representative Board member for Poland since 2011.

Management Board member elected by the Agency member countries for the period 2014–2016.

Poland became an Agency member country in 2004.

Another important moment was when the Agency undertook advisory activities that helped individual member countries review their own legislation and education policies from the point of view of inclusive education.

In my professional life, the Agency's collegial, relational and participatory way of working has had a huge impact on me. It has unleashed creativity and allowed me to appreciate dialogues where different positions and approaches create space to build new insights. This, along with the opportunity to be a part of an international network of professionals who share information and experience, has enabled experts from different fields to collaborate and develop new solutions in Poland.

For Poland, the Agency's added value is that participation in its work has allowed us to look at how different solutions can be used to achieve the objectives of inclusive education. It has provided an opportunity both to look at solutions that work in national contexts and to share practices from Poland. Polish experts – headteachers, teachers and academics – tell us that their participation has confirmed the validity of their efforts and given them motivation for further work. Our involvement has influenced the on-going changes in how inclusive education is understood in Poland, from educating learners with special educational needs alongside their peers, to quality education for all learners.



As a result of our co-operation with the Agency, between 2018 and 2021, the action ‘Supporting the improvement of quality in inclusive education’ was carried out in Poland within the framework of the European Commission’s Structural Reform Support Programme. Together with the Agency, we developed a set of recommendations and legislative changes. Their introduction will help to increase the inclusiveness of the Polish education system.

The stakeholder consultations conducted during the action opened a public dialogue, showing how much there is to be done. One of the mothers participating in the consultation quoted the poet Adam Nowak: ‘Call it what it is, and it will change in a twinkling’; aware of the challenges, we are setting out on a path towards the goal of continuously improving the quality of inclusive education in Poland.

The Agency has not only provided us with reliable knowledge, but has also accompanied us in this dialogue, motivating and supporting us in our search for solutions.



## The Agency brings together representatives from all its member countries, empowering policy-making on inclusive education

**Filomena Pereira, Representative Board member for Portugal**



Arriving at the Agency in 1996 was a natural step in my professional path. In Portugal, the education community was experiencing, with great enthusiasm, times of change. In 1991, for the first time, a law had been passed establishing that all learners, regardless of their condition, had the right to attend any school.

Collaborating and working on the Agency's initial activities, with a small group of countries and professionals – where everyone had a common vision based on knowledge, professional values of excellence, empathy, availability and a great enthusiasm to make schools places where everyone wants to and can be – was, and continues to be, one of the most enriching experiences of my career.

The Agency brings together representatives from all its member countries. The evidence-based information and guidance it gathers are of great value, empowering policy-making on inclusive education. The professionalism of all the Agency team members, as well as their empathy, willingness to help and commitment to inclusive values, must be highlighted and acclaimed.



Representative Board member for Portugal since 1996.

Agency Management Board member during the trial period 1996–1999 and later elected by the Agency member countries for two periods (2002–2007).

Portugal became a member country when the Agency was formed in 1996.

All the Agency work, resources and publications are very valuable for policy-making and inclusive practices. Portugal has always been actively involved in the Agency's activities. Those that have had a major impact on Portugal include Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems (2016–2018), Country Policy Review and Analysis (2016–2017), Inclusive Early Childhood Education (2015–2017), Vocational Education and Training (2010–2012), Teacher Education for Inclusion (2009–2012) and Early Childhood Intervention (2003–2005).

I remember with particular pleasure 17 September 2007. In the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Portuguese Ministry of Education, in co-operation with the Agency, organised the parliamentary hearing 'Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education'. It resulted in the *Lisbon Declaration*. Thanks to this, at European level, political space was given to the value of self-determination.

At present, the Agency is working directly with Portugal, providing technical support under the European Commission's DG REFORM (former Structural Reform Support Programme). This action aims to design a system to monitor the implementation of the legal framework for inclusive education in Portugal. It is due to end in 2022.

Today, 25 years after its foundation, we have an Agency that is increasingly convinced of the values it started with. In all its areas of action, the Agency maintains the high standards and rigour that, throughout its growth, have undoubtedly made it a true partner, friend and guide of its member countries regarding the implementation of inclusive policies and practices.

## United Kingdom (England)

Chris Eridani Ball, Representative Board member



“ The Agency has played an important role in the recognition and celebration of practices that increase learner voice. This has included opportunities to celebrate examples of inclusive practice, such as the poster exhibition at the bi-annual meeting in Berlin and the recent gathering of case studies of learner and parent voice. Importantly, it has also brought together young people with and without disabilities from across Europe to share their views – most recently at the fourth European hearing on inclusive education, ‘Inclusive Education: Take Action!’, in Luxembourg in 2015 – and to make recommendations to ministers. Work in this area has supported and helped to sustain national work on learner voice. ”

## A school for all

**Aurora Lindberg, Representative Board member for Sweden, and Elisabeth Högberg,  
National Co-ordinator for Sweden**

When the *Salamanca Statement* came about in 1994, Sweden had recently introduced new school curricula. At this time, the Swedish school system was thoroughly decentralised and independent schools were established with funding from the municipalities, so every learner – free of charge – could attend an independent school.

The curricula of 1994 had the vision of a school for all, but with an emphasis on goals and raising achievement. How to support learners with special educational needs was highlighted and their support was established by separate curricula, which is still the case today.

So, in 1996, the establishment of the Agency and the opportunity for collaboration across Europe were very interesting for Sweden as a recent (1995) EU member.

How do other countries operate to offer schools for all and support learners' needs? How do they perform? Ylva Johansson, the then Minister of Education – who is now Sweden's EU Commissioner – decided that Sweden should join this new network, the Agency.

In 2019, when policy for inclusive education in Sweden was analysed within the Agency's Country Policy Review and Analysis activity, it was stated that the right of all learners to education is enshrined in the law, which adopts the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The concept of an inclusive school is indeed enshrined in our law. However, there is still much work to do to meet the needs of every learner, especially those vulnerable to exclusion.

In 2021, the curricula were adapted, with new timetables and syllabi, to make them more similar to each other. This makes it easier for local schools to offer more flexibility in curricula for learners with disabilities based on their right to high-quality education.

By collaborating with countries across Europe, we have increased our knowledge and experiences of how to develop a school for all with quality education, especially for those vulnerable to exclusion. We distribute newsletters about our European collaboration to some 1,500 stakeholders and we have a Swedish reference group with other agencies, universities and schools. We collaborate with project experts and with the Ministry of Education in official research to influence national policies. In the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, we have priorities to make better use of this valuable collaboration.

Our challenges for the coming years are the increasing inequity between schools and learner achievement. A new policy has been published with three national priorities for education: raise achievement, more equitable schools and good quality teaching. The policy includes work to develop indicators connected to the three priorities for better monitoring schools, as well as having dialogues about outcomes and the need for support with local decision-makers, school leaders and national agencies. An important added value in facing our challenges will be the knowledge we gain from working together with the Agency. Good examples include the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership and the Inclusive Early Childhood Education projects.



Of course, there is still much to do to implement the vision of high-quality, inclusive education for learners, together with their peers in the local community, but one important cornerstone for that is our on-going collaboration with the Agency to realise a school for all!

Aurora Lindberg, Representative Board member for Sweden since 2020.

Elisabeth Höglberg, National Co-ordinator for Sweden since 2016.

Sweden became a member country when the Agency was formed in 1996.

In Sweden, the Ministry for Education has four national agencies to implement national policies and support schools and stakeholders. When the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools was established in 2008, one of its missions was to represent Sweden in the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Prior to that, the former Agency for Special Needs in Sweden had had the mission since 1996, having been assigned it by the Ministry of Education.



25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education is established with 15 countries as an initiative of the Danish Government, endorsed by the member countries' education ministers. A Secretariat is set up in Middelfart



The Secretariat moves to its current location in Odense

## Operational Milestones

1996

1999

2004

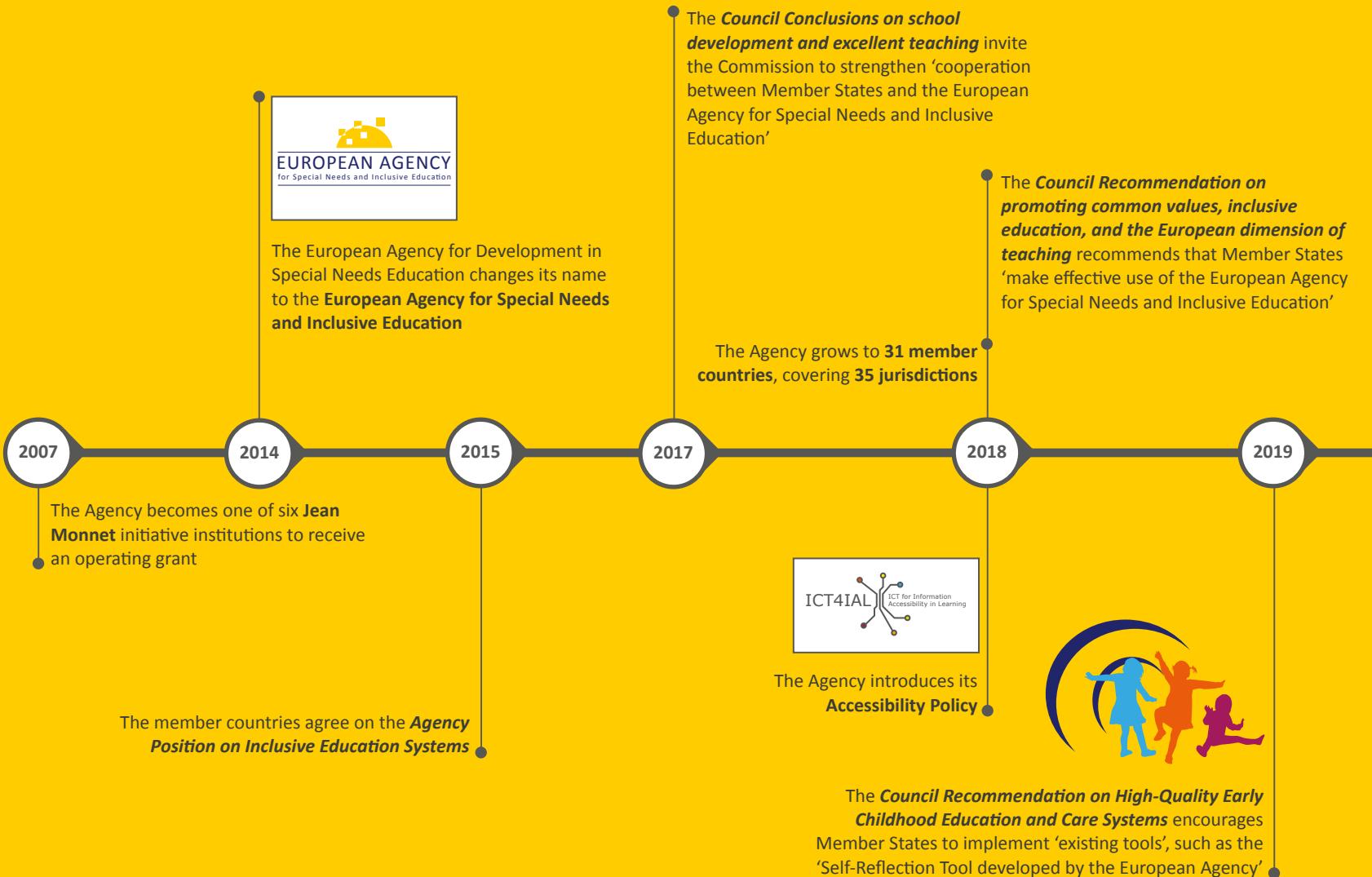
2006



The Agency opens a liaison office in Brussels with the ambition to tie in further with European Union-level policy

Member countries take responsibility for the Agency, which is now established as a European organisation and a platform for member collaboration

A European Commission Decision provides recognition for the Agency and ensures the possible provision of an operating grant





## **Looking forward – what will the future hold for the Agency?**

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Our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary has been an important time of reflection for the whole Agency family. It has involved a shared process of looking back in order to celebrate and learn from past challenges and achievements. But importantly, our 25<sup>th</sup> year has been a time for looking forward to prepare for new challenges and the new realities of education in an ever-changing global context.

Looking ahead to the short-, medium- and long-term future, the Agency's role as an active agent for change in policy and practice will be more important than ever in addressing several on-going challenges in the field of inclusive education. Despite many developments in inclusive policy and practice over the past 25 years, around 1.5% of learners of compulsory school age are still educated away from their local community peers. Many school teams still face difficulties in accessing the resources and professional development they feel they require to meet all learners' diverse needs. Most importantly, within and among countries, there is still the need to develop a shared political will and a common understanding around the concept of inclusion.

Our 25<sup>th</sup> year has been marked with the adoption of a new multi-annual work programme incorporating a number of features that aim to meet the demands of the changing educational landscape in the short and medium term.

As a fundamental principle, all Agency members have agreed that, going forward, a crucial element within all our work must be a greater emphasis on listening to the voices of learners and their families.

We have been including learners and their families as active stakeholders in our activities in different ways since our very beginning. In addition to learner involvement in project work, since 2003 we have organised four European hearings with the aim of listening to the voices of learners – those with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities – and promoting their involvement in inclusive education policy debates.

Two key messages from the young people involved in the hearings now guide the thinking behind the Agency's new work programme:

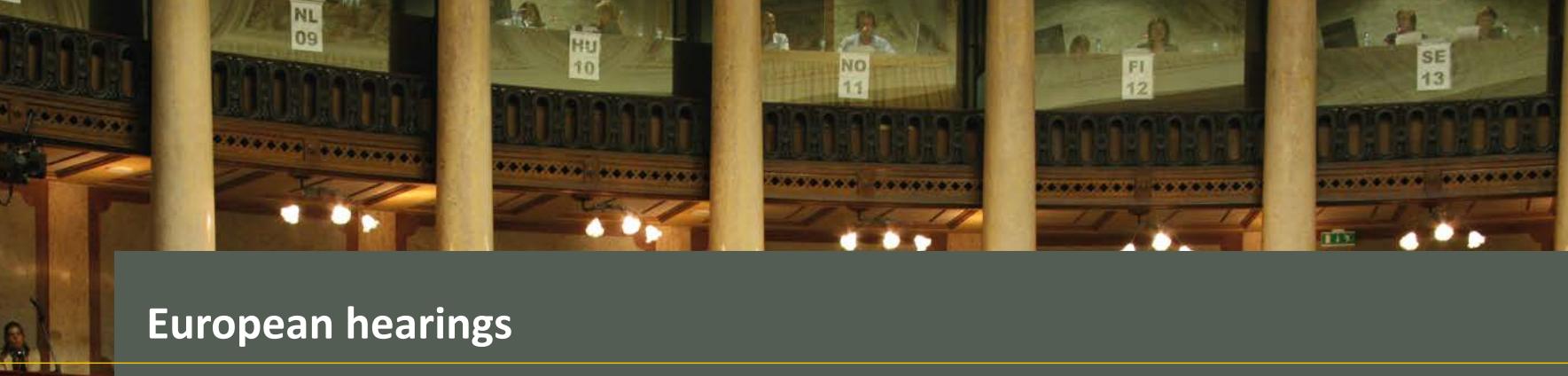
Firstly: '**Learning together in schools enables all learners to find their place and be included in society**'.

And secondly: '**Everything about us, with us! Young people should be directly involved in all decision-making concerning them**'.

Responding to this call, we will not only continue to promote learner voice and participation in our work, but will act upon these voices, repositioning them within our activities as key drivers for educational change and reform.

All Agency members have also highlighted that, while some policy priorities and challenges for education do not differ significantly from those in earlier years, there is now a clear need to focus on issues around monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation. Significantly, our members agree that effective developments in policy monitoring and evaluation must go beyond education circles to incorporate thinking, approaches and contributions from other sectors, such as health and social care.





## European hearings

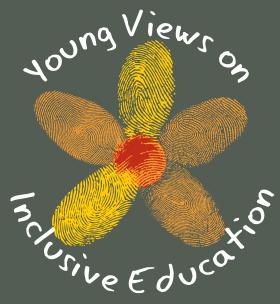
In total, over 300 young delegates, from all Agency member countries, participated in the four hearings, alongside national and European policy-makers and professionals. The delegates included learners both with and without special educational needs, as inclusion must be discussed with all and by all. All the hearings included working groups of young people, where they expressed their views on how inclusive education is implemented in their educational settings, the main challenges and their suggestions for improvement.

Learners shared their views on their right to education (access), their rights in education (learning and participation) and their rights in wider society (achievement). Key messages from learners included the importance of barrier free schools, raising awareness, changing attitudes and combating stereotypes to support their longer-term social inclusion and ensure they become full citizens in their local communities.

▼ Young Voices: 'Meeting Diversity in Education' hearing in the Portuguese Parliament, 2007



▲ 'Inclusive Education: Take Action!' hearing logo



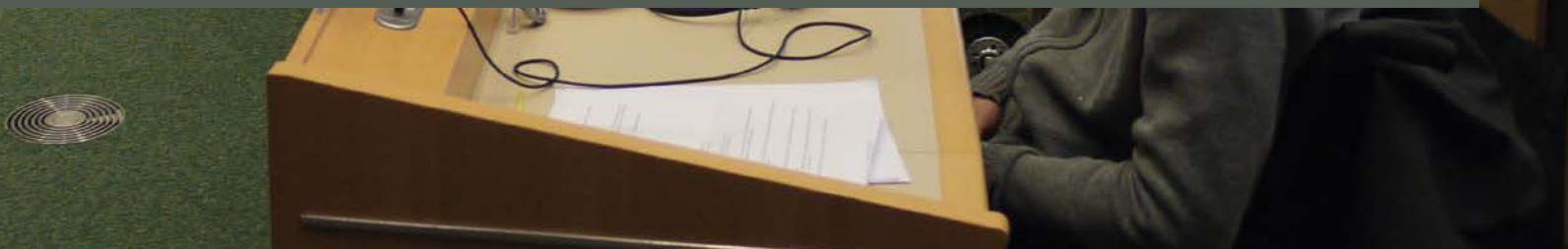
Two hearings took place at the European Parliament in Brussels: 'Young Views on Special Needs Education' in 2003 and 'Young Views on Inclusive Education' in 2011. The former took place within the framework of the European Year of People with Disabilities.

Another, entitled 'Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education', was held at the Portuguese Parliament, in co-operation with the Portuguese Ministry of Education and the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, in 2007. This hearing resulted in the *Lisbon Declaration*, which summarises the common issues highlighted and agreements shared by all the young delegates.

The fourth hearing, 'Inclusive Education: Take Action!', took place in 2015, in co-operation with the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the EU and the Luxembourg Ministry of Education, Children and Youth. The delegates' proposals were summarised and formed the basis for the *Luxembourg Recommendations*, which aimed to support the implementation of inclusive education. The Recommendations were presented at a Council of the EU meeting in November 2015.

'Young Views on Inclusive Education' hearing logo ▲

'Young Views on Inclusive Education' hearing in the European Parliament, Brussels, 2011 ▼



As a result, all aspects of future Agency work will place a greater emphasis on supporting countries to develop effective cross-sector and cross-system co-operation. However, to do this, the Agency itself must work in new, more individualised ways with its member countries. As a result, our work will be organised around small working groups of countries with shared interests and activities will use peer learning whenever possible.

If we are to support policy-makers' efforts to translate identified policy priorities for high-quality inclusive education for all learners into practical actions for implementation, we must ensure we are able to provide all our member country representatives with activities and resources that help them explore policy development issues, support self-reflection and then aid their policy review and development.

Building on aspects of our past and current work, a central focus for all future Agency activities will be the Country Policy Development Support (CPDS) activity. The overall goal for CPDS will be to support countries from where they are in their policy development work. It will aim to develop a comprehensive framework and mechanism for examining and monitoring developments in the implementation of inclusive education policy in countries. This development work will be organised around the countries' inter-connected priorities of monitoring and evaluation, cross-sector working, multi-level/multi-stakeholder quality assurance and accountability frameworks that support and

ensure the effective translation of national policies to regional, local and school levels. Crucially, this more individualised policy development work will aim to support each member country – as well as the Agency collectively – to monitor policy developments towards rights-based education for **all** learners. And so, in the medium to longer term, we will take an active role in systematically observing and then reflecting on opportunities for and barriers to the implementation of inclusive education as an approach to high-quality education for all learners.

This role will necessarily involve ensuring the flexibility to respond to unforeseen challenges (such as the global COVID-19 pandemic) while guaranteeing the fundamental principles of equity, accessibility, sustainability and quality assurance are applied to all aspects of our collective work. Throughout all of this work, we will endeavour to help shape developments in policy thinking around inclusive education.

The conceptual shifts recognised by and in policy-makers and practitioners, documented throughout the articles in this anniversary publication, reflect a direction of travel away from **some** towards **all**. In all countries, the development from special needs education, to integration and then towards inclusive education has been characterised by a specific focus on a few learners and a few specialist teachers in a few separate settings, shifting to a wider focus on more learners and more teachers in a wider range of educational settings at all levels.



The future challenges for the Agency and our member countries involve ensuring that individual learners' needs are genuinely being effectively met, while simultaneously promoting a clear and wide understanding of inclusive education as an approach for all – all learners, all teachers, all policy-makers, all of society.

In the longer term, inclusive education must become the 'new normal'. And just maybe – hopefully! – in another 25 years' time, we will not even be talking about 'inclusive' education, as all educational opportunities will be naturally and truly inclusive.



That is quite an ambition and one that might seem a long way off. Achieving it will most definitely necessitate a continued belief in an idea – a vision – that has sustained and guided our Agency's work over the last 25 years: inclusion is a journey we must all undertake. No-one has all the answers on the right way of getting there and we might take different paths and face different obstacles along our way. But, whatever path we take, our journeys will be easier if we take them together!



## United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)

Ricky Irwin, Representative Board member

“ The final product of the Country Policy Review and Analysis will be valuable not just for Northern Ireland’s Independent Review of Education, but for the Department of Education as a whole, by providing an independent analysis of the Department’s policy framework, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and outlining examples of innovative practice in other European nations. The work may also assist the Department with reporting for the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. ”

A photograph of a classroom scene. In the foreground, a young boy with light brown hair, wearing a teal t-shirt, is seen from behind, with his right hand raised. To his right, another child with blonde hair, wearing a plaid shirt, is also raising their hand. In the middle ground, a child with dark curly hair, wearing a pink shirt, is visible. Behind them, a child in a red shirt is sitting on the floor. In the background, a teacher with dark hair, wearing a grey cardigan over a white top, is smiling and holding a blue book. The room has wooden shelves and a window in the background.

25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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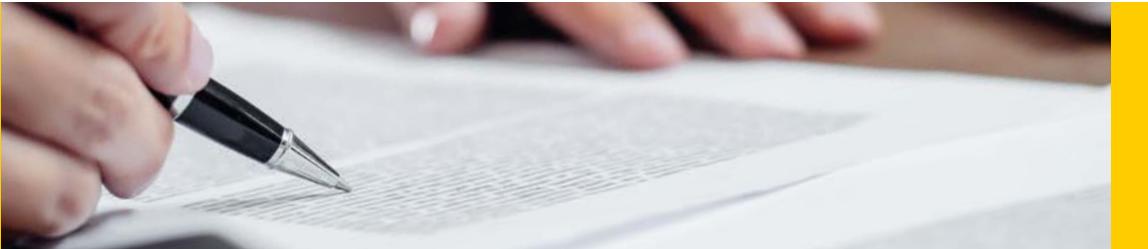
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25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary





