ADDRESSING REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN THE CZECH EDUCATION SYSTEM

Supporting the implementation of measures to promote more inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all learners in Karlovarský and Ústecký regions

Peer Learning Activity on Governance and Financing

Stimulus Discussion Paper

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*This paper is an extract of the full paper linked to the SRSP Action. The full version is available in English only.*

Stimulating discussions about education systems

Education systems in Europe are moving forward towards inclusive, fair, and quality education for all. Due to specific historic, social, economic, and political contexts, countries, regions, and municipalities are confronted with different challenges at different points during this process. While this fact makes simple comparisons or one-to-one adoption of other countries’ solutions difficult, it also creates a unique opportunity to learn from each other.

Starting points for discussions are the current strengths and challenges in the Czech Republic towards ensuring that all children and youth have access to high quality education across all regions, municipalities, and schools. They are described in the Documentary Analysis (Deliverable 3) and organised around 7 standards that have been agreed-upon with national stakeholders. These 7 standards are being used in this document to help structure discussions and to provide a linkage back to the policy documents and reports used to generate the evidence in the Documentary Analysis.

The 7 standards give a basic structure to this document and ensure the compatibility with previous discussions. It is hoped that this will assist participants to further explore the current situation in the light of current and future policy developments (e.g.,Strategy 2030+). As a first step, this document seeks to provide background information to facilitate understanding and to enable dialogues around educational governance, funding schemes and financing mechanisms in support of inclusive education in the Czech Republic. Reducing inequality in education and increasing the participation of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds has been high on the agenda since 2015, most recently in the Strategy 2020 and the Strategy 2030+.

Although important to identify differences and similarities between countries, regions, and municipalities, internationally comparable indicators will not be used as an entry point for discussion. They can easily become barriers to understanding the complex dynamics and diverse factors contributing to differences between education systems. In addition, indicators provide a glance into the past, but may not reflect most recent developments. In addition, not all relevant evidence is easily quantifiable and therefore could be easily missed.

Reforms must consider the past but ultimately need to be guided by a broad vision of the future, rather than a narrow concern to improve specific indicators. As a consequence, the discussion stimulus paper does not lay out a list of indicators but raises a set of questions that arise from the evidence found through the documentary analysis and the fieldwork (synthesis of the analysis work, presented in Deliverable 4).

The issues raised in this document seek to facilitate discussion and dialogue. Some may prove more important to participants than others. Therefore, a thematic prioritisation, identification of information gaps and requests for further evidence may be a first outcomes of this process.

Interdependency of Educational Governance and Financing

Governance and financing are intricately connected with each other, one could even say they are two sides of the same coin. For example, changes in policy or new governance mechanisms will not be implemented unless resources are made available. So to say, funding is the “fuel” behind governance structures. But even availability of resources will not guarantee full implementation unless there are clear accountability mechanisms. And any change in funding schemes will change the dynamics of governance by creating new incentives for some stakeholders, but possibly not for others.

Stakeholder motivation and work ethos, local culture and value system as well as other factors may change the effects of new financing schemes in unexpected and unforeseen ways. On the other hand, governance interventions can also have unwanted effects. For example, policies aiming at a decrease of students in special schools might result in increased drop-out rates rather than inclusion of students in regular schools as was the case in the Netherlands ([Gubbels et al. 2017](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13603116.2017.1416684?needAccess=true)).

Separate funding schemes for students with special educational needs may be required to ensure necessary support but will likely lead to an increase in identification rates unless other mechanisms to counteract will be implemented at the same time, for example a combination of input and throughput funding (Meijer & Watkins 2019, [Resourcing Inclusive Education](https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/doi/10.1108/S1479-3636202115) by Goldan, Lambrecht, Loreman 2021). Similar balances may be needed between specific (e.g., student with disability) and general population support criteria (e.g., disadvantaged school) or centralised and decentralised funding mechanisms (ibid.).

Top-down and bottom-up dynamics

National education systems are multi-level systems to enable educational governance at national, regional, and local levels. This is necessary to maintain coherence and equity of educational resources, processes, and outcomes while at the same time respond to regional and local differences related to demographics and other regional differences, such as economic, social, and geographic situations.

Inclusive education depends on the participation of all stakeholders and a shared motivation and effort to progressively implement inclusion. This requires a sense of self-efficacy and agency of professionals who are able to initiate change processes in their school and classrooms. School leaders need to provide educational leadership and therefore require a certain autonomy.

Governance mechanisms that rely solely on top-down processes are therefore not compatible with the vision of inclusive education. But a bottom-up approaches will lead to inequalities that are not wanted either. The mid-level governing body therefore has an important role to play in negotiating with national and local decision-makers and balancing differences between local autonomy and accountability. In the Czech Republic, it may be important therefore to strengthen the regions to enable a middle-up-down mechanism for financing and governance.

Interdependency of different policy streams

Educational governance and financing of inclusive education should not be considered as an independent policy stream, rather as a transversal governance and financing issue. For example, introducing a new role (e.g., teacher assistant) or a new mechanism of support (e.g., specialist provision in regular schools) will require changes in training systems, work profiles and competencies of regular teachers and school leaders as well as modes of collaboration and teaching.

Specific initiatives to address one problem area (e.g., Roma inclusion, disparities between regions) may lead to fragmentation and therefore the creation of problems somewhere else. Identifying specific groups (e.g., children with autism, talented children) may result in creating disadvantage for groups that are not identified due to lack of professionals who are able to adequately use well-established and meaningful criteria.

Changing governance and financing mechanisms therefore requires both, a system-centred and a person-centred perspective to analyse potential problems that these changes may have for other policy domains (e.g., teacher education, curriculum development, digitalisation) or other stakeholder groups.

TheStimulus Discussion Paper

The purpose of this paper is to support a process of sharing, exchange, and mutual learning at national and international levels. Although it is important to understand problems, there is always a danger that focusing exclusively on problems may create barriers to solutions. In other words, identified problems are not always the best levers for change and labelling certain groups, entities or realities as problematic creates power differences that interfere with collaboration needed to overcome complex problems.

The basic challenges that the Czech Education system is confronted with in relation to the equalisation of opportunities of all children across all regions are well known. Much evidence has been collected and processed over the past 10 years, by international organisations, by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and other bodies. The evidence is available in the shape of international and national indicators, statistics, policy reviews and evaluation reports. Information can be drawn from this rich body of evidence to respond to specific questions that may arise from the discussions, but dialogue should start with the challenges that stakeholders have identified together.

Educational governance, financing and funding mechanisms have been identified by Ministry stakeholders as a key area of concern. There is a strong interdependence between governance and funding mechanisms, therefore it is important to include both in the discussions. The complex relationships and interdependencies between governance mechanisms, funding schemes and effective provision of inclusive education will be addressed from different perspectives reflected by the 7 standards. The 7 standards have been already successfully used to present the main findings of the documentary analysis and therefore provide a useful linkage between a broader perspective on strengths and challenges, and underlying governance and financing mechanisms.

The development of this document follows the dialogue it seeks to facilitate to ensure that all stakeholder perspectives are taken into account and all-important issues addressed. For this purpose, an online seminar with key stakeholders at the national level will take June 2021. Subsequently, it will be enriched by experiences from other countries as a result of the peer learning activity planned in June 2021. Finally, outcomes will be presented at the end point dissemination conference.

The current document provides a basic structure to facilitate discussion of key issues related governance and financing organised in line with each of the 7 standards.

For each standard, some of the emerging issues from the Documentary Analysis (Deliverable 3) and the final analysis work (Deliverable 4) are picked up and explored in relation to *three topics relevant for governance and financing*.

Each of these three topics is followed by a *key question to initiate discussion* as well as *examples* of how other countries or organisations have addressed the issue.

**1st standard: Governance of policy planning and implementation**

***1. A common vision for policy development***

How can educational governance support all stakeholders to develop and communicate a shared and sustainable vision of inclusive education across multiple strategies and initiatives, across different stakeholder groups and across all levels of the education system?

***2. Governance of diverse initiatives***

Which governance mechanisms could help ensure the effective use of grants, projects, and funds as well as the effectiveness and sustainability of the initiated changes?

***3. Synergies with ongoing reforms: Reform of national curriculum***

Could the current revision of the national curriculum be an opportunity to broaden the discourse on education, integrate inclusive education into the general education policy framework and enhance sustained dialogue on the vision of inclusive education?

**2nd standard: Regional governance mechanisms**

***1. Governance of a decentralised education system***

How could the current fragmentation of school governance be overcome without reintroducing centralised educational decision-making?

***2. Importance of mid-level governance***

How could mid-level governance be strengthened?

***3. Governance for progressive realisation of inclusive practices***

How can different government bodies come together to develop a shared vision and strategy for inclusive education?

**3rd standard: Governance and financing to promote inclusion**

***1. Governance and management of multiple funding sources***

How can educational governance help creating synergies between different funding sources to promote inclusive education?

***2. Governance of funding and service provision***

How can financing and funding support systems ensure an inclusive approach to providing specialist provision?

***3. Funding models for schools***

How can flexible resource frameworks support inclusive education at school level?

**4th standard: Quality assurance for inclusive education**

***1. Integrated information system for monitoring and decision-making***

How can data be developed into a few key indicators for inclusive education?

***2. Accountability systems for quality in education***

Is it realistic to include self-evaluation into a national accountability system?

***3. Effective use of information to guide practice***

How can input, throughput and output information help guide inclusive practices?

**5th Standard: Governance for human and system capacity building**

***1. Governance of professional capacity building***

How can the capacity to implement inclusive education practices by teachers be enhanced?

***2. Capacity building for school governance and educational leadership***

How can effective school leadership help promote inclusive education in regular schools?

***3. Strategies to build capacity of professional support systems***

How should capacity building to strengthen professional support systems be supported?

**6th standard: Governance of coordinating services and stakeholders**

***1. Mechanisms of coordination at ministerial level***

Which mechanisms could be established at ministerial level to promote collaboration across sectors and stakeholder groups?

***2. Coordinating mechanism between service providers***

How can service providers and schools create networks for collaboration and coordination?

***3. Cooperation across stakeholder groups and their organisations***

How can educational governance support and promote cooperation across stakeholder groups?

**7th standard: Governance for equitable learning opportunities**

***1. Governance of educational support***

How can school develop further towards fully inclusive provision of adequate support for all students?

***2. Governance of learning opportunities***

How can schools enact the national curriculum and make it accessible to all students without reducing it?

***3. Family involvement and children’s voices***

How can local authorities and schools actively involve families and community members to support inclusive education?

*This draft document will be expanded and revised in preparation for the end point dissemination conference to respond to information needs and to reflect outcomes of discussions with national stakeholders and the peer learning activity to share country experiences.*

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