



ANNEX TO THE AGENCY POSITION ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The wider policy and practice context for inclusive education systems

This Annex to the *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems* highlights essential background information that puts the position statements into a wider policy, practice and developmental context. The information is not intended to be exhaustive; in terms of scope and coverage, it focuses on those areas of work and key documents that illustrate guiding principles for the Agency's work with its member countries.

Policy promoting the development of inclusive education systems

Increasingly, European level policy has highlighted inclusive education as one of the most important educational imperatives for the development of quality and equity in education. At the same time, there is growing recognition that high-performing education systems are also the most equitable. Underachievement and school failure incur long-term costs for countries, communities and individuals.

The 2010 *Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training* suggest that:

Systems which uphold high standards of quality for all and strengthen accountability, which foster personalised, inclusive approaches, which support early intervention and which target disadvantaged learners in particular, can be powerful drivers in fostering social inclusion (Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 4).

The Informal Meeting of Education Ministers' *Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education*, of 17 March 2015, stresses the need for:

Ensuring 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

and

Combating geographical, social and educational inequalities, as well as other factors which can lead to despair and create a fertile ground for extremism, by providing all children and young people with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to build their own professional futures and pathways to success in society, and by encouraging measures to reduce early school leaving



and to improve the social and professional integration of all young people (Informal Meeting of European Union Education Ministers, 2015, p. 4).

The *Outcome of the Council Meeting* of 18 and 19 May 2015 states that the:

main priorities to be developed in the post-2015 ET 2020 should be promoting inclusive education and active citizenship, increasing youth employability, and encouraging the exchange of best practices (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 5).

Most recently, the *2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) New priorities for European cooperation in education and training* states that:

... education and training systems face the challenge of ensuring equal access to high-quality education, in particular by reaching out to the most disadvantaged and integrating people with diverse backgrounds, including adequately integrating newly arrived migrants, into the learning environment, thereby fostering upwards social convergence (European Commission, 2015a, p. 3).

This report and the accompanying *Staff Working Document* (European Commission, 2015b) argue that effective action for inclusive education and training for all learners is needed, focusing on those with disadvantaged backgrounds, special needs, migrants or with a migrant background and Roma. The final report proposes six priorities for education:

- Relevant and high-quality knowledge, skills and competences developed throughout lifelong learning, focusing on learning outcomes for employability, innovation, active citizenship and well-being;
- Inclusive education, equality, equity, non-discrimination and the promotion of civic competences;
- Open and innovative education and training, including by fully embracing the digital era;
- Strong support for teachers, trainers, school leaders and other educational staff;
- Transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning and labour mobility;
- Sustainable investment, quality and efficiency of education and training systems.

These priorities must be considered imperatives within the context of developing inclusive education systems.



Article 24 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) states that inclusive education offers the best educational opportunities for learners with disabilities. Education directed towards developing ‘their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential’ will enable persons with disabilities ‘to participate effectively in a free society’ (United Nations, 2006).

Together, the UNCRPD and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) provide a framework for a rights-based approach for all children, ensuring that the rights of children with disabilities in particular are not marginalised or forgotten. These international normative instruments also clearly emphasise the concepts of efficiency, effectiveness, equity and inclusion as means to ensure quality education for all.

These concepts underpin Goal 4 of the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals*: ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations, 2015). The aim for target 4.5 is:

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.).

In striving for quality for all learners, policy-makers and other stakeholders should recognise that, as recent research has shown (e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD, 2012), high-performing education systems are also the most equitable. Underachievement and school failure incur long-term costs for countries, communities and individuals.

Efficiency, effectiveness, equity and inclusion in order to ensure high-quality education for all is concerned with all learners at all levels of lifelong learning. It is also understood to be the shared concern of all teachers, learning communities and decision-makers. It is about widening access to all education and promoting opportunities for all learners, including those from various disadvantaged groups, through a shared education for all. It is about raising the achievements – both academic and social – of all learners at all levels of lifelong learning.

An examination of [current European level work on improving education systems](#) shows a number of factors that work towards improving inclusive education to ensure that quality education is accessible for all. These include:

- improving co-operation, including greater involvement of parents and local communities;



- increasing participation in good quality inclusive early childhood education and care and enrolment rates in pre-school education;
- improving the quality of school staff, developing teacher competences and reinforcing school leadership; and
- improving transition from education to work.

The Council Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) also highlight the need to:

- improve student-focused measures, such as personalised learning approaches and more flexible curricula; and
- improve the school ethos and culture so they are geared towards adapting learning environments to individual learning needs.

The CSRs also argue that strategies need to be introduced to reduce the negative effects of early tracking (the early streaming of pupils by ability into different types of provision or schools) and support improvement in schools with lower educational outcomes.

There is recognition at European level that all countries need to develop monitoring strategies, establishing a comprehensive accountability and evaluation framework for education, as well as improve the cost-effectiveness of the education system, combining efficiency, effectiveness, equity and inclusion.

The on-going work at the European level is essentially focused upon a transformative agenda for countries' education systems. Such an approach is reflected in the World Education Forum's *Incheon Declaration*, which argues that inclusion is both a principle and process:

Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda ... No education target should be considered met unless met by all (World Education Forum, 2015).

Developments in thinking about and implementing inclusive education

Since 1996, the focus of Agency work has shifted from special needs education and issues around meeting the identified learning needs of a minority of learners, to inclusive education as providing quality education for *all* learners, from the most to the least able. Work with Agency countries highlights that it is essential that the underpinning ideology associated with the terms used around inclusive education is widely understood. Debate/discussion among all stakeholders is required – otherwise new terms may replace old with little or no change in policy and practice.

Terms such as 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' have shifted from being mainly associated with learners with special educational needs/disabilities – and in



particular their educational placement –, to a focus on meeting the needs of a far wider range of learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion, and further to an understanding of inclusive education as a systemic approach geared towards raising the achievements of all learners, as well as the overall system.

The inclusive education agenda has incrementally highlighted the need to ensure quality for all learners as part of an education system that is concerned with the principles of access, equity and social justice, democratic values and participation and the development of cohesive communities that celebrate and value diversity.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *Salamanca Statement* (1994) and, more recently, the working definitions of inclusive education from the International Conference on Education (2008) and UNESCO *Policy Guidelines* (2009) state that inclusion is an on-going process concerned with respecting diversity and eliminating discrimination. A move to an inclusive system requires the identification and removal of barriers that prevent all learners being present in mainstream settings and participating fully in learning opportunities that allow them to achieve (not only in academic subjects, but also in wider terms that impact on social inclusion).

Moving from a needs-based approach (where the problem is located within the learner) to one that prioritises the identification of institutional barriers at all levels does not ignore individual needs, but takes them into account by planning for a range of responses ‘up front’ (universal design) that ultimately benefits all learners.

A move towards a rights-based approach requires a change in an educational culture where, rather than focusing on individual support (often based on a medical diagnosis), the system provides support to schools to increase their capability to respond to learners’ diverse needs without the need to categorise and label them.

Instead of seeking to fix learners or provide ‘compensatory’ support to learners who are different in order to fit them into existing arrangements, schools need to reform their organisation, teaching and the classroom environment in order to respond in flexible ways to all learners and, ultimately, work towards preventative approaches.

While specialist skills and expertise will always be needed to ensure that learners with particular educational needs can engage with the equitable learning opportunities on offer, specialist services and provision should be provided within a continuum of equitable support within wider ‘learning communities’ which may include dedicated resource bases that support individual learners and their teachers in flexible ways. Schools as supportive learning communities work to ensure all members feel respected, valued and are able to fully participate in the school community.



However, the fact that education systems are exposed to conflicting societal expectations that must be balanced (i.e. selection vs. qualification vs. socialisation vs. stabilisation of existing social order) must be recognised. Schools must be supported to cope with this reality and implement inclusive approaches that are able to deal with this ‘multi-voicedness’ without discrimination and exclusion.

The OECD report *No More Failures* (2007) sets out two dimensions to the notion of equity: fairness (personal and social circumstances not being an obstacle to achieving educational potential) and inclusion (a basic minimum standard of education for all). Both of these dimensions combine to enable learners to develop their capacities and participate fully in society – a human rights imperative.

At the European Parliament Hearing organised by the Agency in 2011, the young delegates discussed their rights ‘to quality of education, to choice and to equality and respect’ (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 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 their peers. They stressed that:

... inclusive education is beneficial for all: it creates the opportunity to learn and share experiences ... inclusive education is the first step in being full members of society (ibid).

In the 2015 European Hearing entitled ‘Inclusive Education – Take Action!’, the participating young people highlighted five important messages during their discussions:

- Everything about us, with us – concerning their direct involvement in all decision-making concerning them
- Barrier-free schools – relating to the elimination of all physical and technical barriers
- Breaking down stereotypes – focusing upon the concept of ‘normality’
- Diversity is the mix, inclusion is what makes the mix work – a slogan proposed by some young people in the hearing
- Becoming full citizens – relating to the impact of inclusive education in being fully included in society.

The young people’s views in all Agency hearings clearly illustrate the importance of the values underpinning inclusive education. These values are at the core of an approach that sees inclusive education as a normative issue and a goal for all countries.



Inclusive education systems as a vision for all learners and wider stakeholders in education give direction to the work of policy-makers. However, how the vision can be enacted and achieved is dependent upon different country contexts and situations.



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