Executive Summary

A view from learning providers and civil society on European cooperation in the field of education and training
INTRODUCTION

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) is a tool which allows Member States to exchange best practices and learn from each other. One of its outcomes is the annual Education and Training Monitor that provides an overview of the performance of education systems in all EU Member States in achieving 6 different benchmarks1.

The statistics provided in the Education and Training Monitor comprise data collected by Eurostat, the OECD and the Eurydice network. Although these sources have useful applications, they focus on the attainment of specific benchmarks based on data gathered by national governments concerning the formal education system, while non-formal and informal learning and the views of education and training providers, learners and their representative associations do not always receive adequate attention.

It is this missing perspective of the educators and learners themselves that provided the impetus for the Lifelong Learning Platform to conduct this study. Involving stakeholders from Austria, Ireland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia, it aims to produce a “reality-check” on the progress towards the ET2020 targets and a snapshot of the situation on the ground through the eyes of learning providers and civil society. It therefore seeks to complement or ‘shadow’ the quantitative analysis of the annual Education and Training Monitor by offering more qualitative insights, hence why we use the term ‘shadow report’.

While not intended as a large-scale statistically representative study, it is a pilot serving as a first attempt to bridge the gap between the institutional framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training and how this cooperation impacts and is perceived by its “end-users”: educators, learners and their representative associations. We hope its findings will offer a useful contribution to reflections on the future of European cooperation in the field at a time when the debate on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 is high on the Union’s political agenda.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EU POLICIES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Respondents had a high level of familiarity with EU initiatives on inclusive education. A significant majority (79%) was aware of both the Paris Declaration and the Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching.

The majority (67%) of respondents were aware of both or one of the targets considered for this study. Nevertheless, still an important number of respondents (33%) replied that they were not aware of any of them before taking the survey.

A majority of respondents (88%) considers that EU policies on inclusive education are having an impact on their intended target groups and that they have shaped their countries’ national policy agenda on the topic. In both cases a slight majority (60%) consider this impact and influence to be strong. In addition, a majority (89%) believes that EU policies are having an impact on educators’ pedagogical approaches, with well over half (64%) considering this impact to be strong.

While respondents feel these policies have had a great impact at the declarative level and can be good strategic papers, there is still not enough action on the ground and often no clear plans for implementing the recommendations. If implemented, there are many issues including regarding adequate monitoring.

During the focus groups, it was underlined that the policy impact and influence of the EU at national level is very important and that having pressure from outside is very good. The European Union policies in the field can have an impact on Member States in terms of addressing the problems in their country.

More specifically, benchmarks are considered important however, they could be more ambitious and they have limited impact without appropriate funding.

Among the main challenges to making education more inclusive, most respondents chose the training for teachers/educators (61%). Furthermore, the lack of funding (49%), regional socio-economic disparities (38%) as well as the lack of cross-sectoral cooperation (e.g. between education institutions and civil society or social services) (36%) were found to have an important impact on this matter.

Inclusive education is the building block of inclusive societies

Although Eurostat lists 8 benchmarks, only partial data are available for the benchmark on learning mobility in higher education and no data is available for the benchmark on learning mobility in initial vocational education and training (IVET), therefore only 6 are covered by the ET Monitor.
ON ADULT PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING

The majority consider that the EU target for their countries is reasonable (78%) and that the current rate recorded for their country reflects their national reality (78%).

The majority (67%) showed awareness of their national strategies to achieve this benchmark. However, an important percentage (33%) seemed to be unaware about their national strategies.

The vast majority of respondents (76%) considered European cooperation useful or very useful in addressing the challenge of promoting adult participation in learning.

During the focus groups it was underlined how important it is to link at EU level the different initiatives coming from Member States.

Concerning the most useful actions that could be taken at European level to promote participation in adult learning, the majority of respondents opted for encouraging cross border exchange of innovating teaching and learning practices (72%), followed by promoting European networks of organisations (40%) and enabling a space for discussion between national policymakers for policy reform (32%).

ON EARLY LEAVING FROM EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The majority consider that the EU target for their countries is reasonable (85%) and that it reflects their national reality (81%).

The majority (75%) of respondents showed awareness of their national strategies to achieve this benchmark. However, still an important percentage (25%) seemed to be unaware about their national strategies.

The vast majority of respondents (75%) considered European cooperation useful or very useful in addressing the challenge of early leaving from education and training.

Concerning the most useful actions that could be taken at European level to address early leaving, the majority of respondents opted for: encouraging cross border exchange of innovating teaching and learning practices (75%), followed by promoting European networks of organisations (41%) and enabling a space for discussion between national policymakers for policy reform (35%).

RECOMMENDATIONS

EU POLICIES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Take measures to support further the implementation of EU policies on inclusive education (and its monitoring) with close involvement of educators, learners and their representative associations which would avoid EU policies staying as mere theoretical documents.

Invest further in cross-sector cooperation (i.e. between education institutions and civil society or social services), which is also a major challenge in making education more inclusive. Fostering cooperation between education institutions and civil society as well as social services is key to tackle this challenge.

Make the training of teachers and educators at all levels a priority in terms of both policy reform and investment. This topic is perceived as one of the biggest challenges in making education more inclusive.
ADULT PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING

Allocate additional and bespoke funds to support the implementation of national strategies aiming to improve participation in adult learning. Although being considered important tools, benchmarks alone are not enough to prompt governments to address this challenge. This allocation should include a nuanced approach to the economic disparities between regions within a country since it was observed that this represents one of the most predominant challenges when it comes to promoting the participation of adults in learning.

Adapt the benchmark of adult participation in learning according to a more holistic lifelong learning approach. It was suggested that currently the indicator used to measure this benchmark provides a limited view on this challenge (i.e. excludes European older than 65 years old). Furthermore, with an increasing ageing population, the age limit on the indicator excludes an important segment of learners.

Adapt the benchmark of adult participation in learning to become more inclusive. Results from the study suggest that, although considered to be important, the current benchmark is not ambitious enough. These allocations should include a nuanced approach to the economic disparities between regions within a country and the socio-economic background of pupils which were among the most predominant challenges regarding this issue.

Stranger support to European networks of organisations. The work conducted by these networks is key for awareness raising on this challenge, allowing EU institutions to reach local and grassroots organisations which many times are not reached by EU campaigns. Furthermore, strengthening these networks would also foster cross-border and cross-sector dialogue and cooperation at European level.

Enable more space for discussion coordinated at EU level on policy reform between national policymakers. This suggests the need to reinforce further the open method coordination tools in the education and training field, which could be addressed in the next steps of implementing the European Education Area.

Implement long term projects. It was suggested that to engage adult learners time is key in order to build trust, which is an issue when it comes to short term projects. Therefore there was a call to allow adult education projects to be implemented for a longer period of time and not depend on deadlines of funding frameworks.

Concentrate on current data collection and setting of benchmarks. It was reported in the study that grassroots level organisations are able to report more accurate figures on ELET which could be valuable for national and EU level institutions in order to better understand and tackle this issue. Furthermore, more specific targets for particular groups such as disadvantaged socio-economic groups would allow the development of more nuanced strategies especially for smaller EU countries. In addition, setting yearly national benchmarks together with regional and national level institutions could support the EU institutions awareness raising initiatives.

Reinforce the cross-border exchange of innovative teaching and learning practices. The results suggest that for learning providers and civil society it is important to exchange experiences regarding best practices and the factors which contribute to becoming successfully inclusive schools. In addition, learning from small countries that manage to have a closer dialogue with their students could shed light on other Member States and for this also EU led exchanges are very important.

Reinforce the cross-border exchange of innovative teaching and learning practices. The results suggest that for learning providers and civil society it is important to exchange experiences regarding best practices and the factors which contribute to becoming successfully inclusive schools. In addition, learning from small countries that manage to have a closer dialogue with their students could shed light on other Member States and for this also EU led exchanges are very important.

Promote further European networks of organisations. It was suggested that strengthening European networks of organisations (from civil society to learning providers and social partners) would allow for greater cross-border and cross-sector dialogue and cooperation as well as channelling the in-depth understanding of grassroots-level organisations on ELET. These exchanges would be very helpful for organisations who seek to better represent their target groups at regional, national and European level. Furthermore, the work of these networks could support the EU institutions awareness raising initiatives.

EARLY LEAVING FROM EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Allocate additional and bespoke funds to support the implementation of national strategies aiming to tackle ELET. Results from the study suggest that, although considered to be important, the current benchmark is not ambitious enough. These allocations should include a nuanced approach to the economic disparities between regions within a country and the socio-economic background of pupils which were among the most predominant challenges regarding this issue.

Reinforce the cross-border exchange of innovative teaching and learning practices. The results suggest that for learning providers and civil society it is important to exchange experiences regarding best practices and the factors which contribute to becoming successfully inclusive schools. In addition, learning from small countries that manage to have a closer dialogue with their students could shed light on other Member States and for this also EU led exchanges are very important.

Enable more space for discussion coordinated at EU level on policy reform between national policymakers. This suggests the need to strengthen further the open method coordination tools in the education and training field, which could be addressed in the next steps of implementing the European Education Area.

Reflect on current data collection and setting of benchmarks. It was reported in the study that grassroot level organisations are able to report more accurate figures on ELET which could be valuable for national and EU level institutions in order to better understand and tackle this issue. Furthermore, tactfully establishing more specific targets for particular groups such as disadvantaged socio-economic groups would allow the development of more nuanced strategies especially for smaller EU countries. In addition, setting yearly national benchmarks together with longer term ones could help countries to better manage expectations and in allocating appropriate resources to tackling ELET.