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**EU Inclusion Strategies Group**

***EDUCATION, TRAINING, LIFELONG LEARNING***

***and their implications for poverty and social exclusion***

*Discussion Paper*

**Introduction**

*Why are education, training, and lifelong learning important for EAPN?*

The **European Anti-Poverty Network** has a long-standing interest around the issue of education and its many aspects of access, affordability, quality and equal opportunities, which are crucial in the empowerment of people and their integration in society. The links between education, training, lifelong learning and poverty and social exclusion are manifold. Low socio-economic background is often directly correlated to poor educational attainment and completion, while the low-skilled have a much greater statistical probability of experiencing hardship and deprivation.

In our view, the primary role of education is to empower and transform lives, allowing individuals to reach their full potential and to fulfill their aspirations. It should also provide people the right skills and qualifications for the labour market, thus enabling them to secure good quality, stable jobs which effectively shield them and their families from poverty and social exclusion. Last but not least, education should equip individuals with soft, horizontal, and critical thinking skills, so that they can take full ownership of their life plan, build a meaningful rapport with their community, and strengthen our democracies through participation and active citizenship.

This discussion paper is aimed at setting the scene for a comprehensive discussion in EAPN’s EU Inclusion Strategies Group (EU ISG) over the course of 2019. It summarises the main concerns expressed by EAPN members from 2011-2018 in the framework of the monitoring of the Education targets of the Europe 2020 strategy (see below), and has been complemented with the key messages and discussions at the 17th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (November 2019).

*The policy context of education, training, and lifelong learning at the EU level*

Education is a right, which is clearly expressed in the [**EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT), now an integrant part of the EU Treaty:

**Article 14**

*Right to education*

1.   Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training.

2.   This right includes the possibility to receive free compulsory education.

3.   The freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right.

Traditionally, at EU policy level, education is dealt with in two ways: under an Open Method of Coordination by DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, focusing more on lifelong learning, and by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, focusing more on skills and labour market demand.

In 2010, the European Union has included education as one of the 5 headline targets of its comprehensive strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth for the current decade, [**Europe 2020**](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/europe-2020-strategy_en), implemented through an annual cycle called the **European Semester**. As the target is two-fold, this makes some headway on integrating education goals:

**Education**

- rates of early school leavers below 10%

- at least 40% of people aged 30–34 having completed higher education

The delivery on the Europe 2020 Strategy is underpinned by the [**Guidelines for the Employment Policies of the Member States**](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32018D1215), which include a *Guideline 6*, dealing with education, training, and lifelong learning (selected content below):

**Guideline 6: Enhancing labour supply and improving access to employment, skills and competences**

In the context of technological, environmental and demographic change, Member States should promote productivity and employability, in cooperation with the social partners, through an appropriate supply of relevant knowledge, skills and competences throughout people's working lives, responding to current and future labour market needs. Member States should make the necessary investment in both initial and continuing education and training (lifelong learning). They should work together with the social partners, education and training providers, enterprises and other stakeholders to address structural weaknesses in education and training systems, to provide quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning. They should seek to ensure the transfer of training entitlements during professional transitions. This should enable everyone to anticipate and better adapt to labour market needs, and to successfully manage transitions, thus strengthening the overall resilience of the economy to shocks.

Member States should foster equal opportunities for all in education, including early childhood education. They should raise overall education levels, particularly for the least qualified and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. They should ensure quality learning outcomes, reinforce basic skills, reduce the number of young people leaving school early, and increase adult participation in continuing education and training. Member States should strengthen work-based learning in their vocational education and training systems (including through quality and effective apprenticeships), enhance the labour-market relevance of tertiary education, improve skills monitoring and forecasting, make skills more visible and comparable, and increase opportunities for recognising and validating skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training. They should upgrade and increase the supply and take-up of flexible continuing vocational education and training. Member States should also support lowly skilled adults to maintain or develop their long term employability by boosting access to and take up of quality learning opportunities, through the establishment of Upskilling Pathways, including a skills assessment, an offer of education and training matching labour market opportunities, and the validation and recognition of the skills acquired.

However, education is routinely seen primarily as a labour market tool in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy through the Semester, with only limited attention paid to inclusiveness and quality. For example, 14 Member States received Country Specific Recommendations from the European Commission in 2018, but in more than half the cases, the focus was on upskilling of workers, reforming the education system for better market relevance, and improving vocational training. Encouragingly, quality of education is mentioned in several countries, and there is some positive rhetoric about rendering education more inclusive for groups having a hard time accessing it or having poor educational outcomes, including Roma children, migrants, children in rural areas. Staggeringly, while the strong link between a disadvantaged socioeconomic background and poor educational outcomes is highlighted in the Preamble for 8 of the 14 Member States, this is never picked up in the actual Recommendations.

The [**European Pillar of Social Rights**](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en), adopted in 2017, took this integration one step further and proposing a more holistic approach, beyond the labour market, through its Principle 1 (rooted in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights), which states:

**1. Education, training and life-long learning**

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.

The performance of Member States in the implementation of this and other Pillar principles is monitored by the Social Scoreboard, a set of indicators linked to the Pillar’s principles. As for education, the Scoreboard provides for four indicators: early leavers from education and training, adult participation in learning, underachievement in education, and tertiary educational attainment), three of them with additional disaggregation by gender.

The United Nations’ [**Sustainable Development Goals**](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/), to which Member States of the European Union have signed up, also include Goal 4 on Quality Education (detailed description of targets in the link).

*Brief overview of EAPN’s work on education*

EAPN has worked on education, training, and lifelong learning since its inception, in the framework of the **Social Open Method of Coordination** and the **Lisbon Strategy** (up to 2010), and since then in the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the **European Semester**, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and now the Sustainable Development Goals (see above).

Ever since 2011, EAPN and its members have actively engaged with the ***National Reform Programmes*** (NRP) under **Europe 2020**, as well as having monitored, through yearly comprehensive reports, the social targets of the strategy: poverty-reduction, employment, and education. This means that each of these reports includes an ample chapter regarding the state of play of education, training, and lifelong learning policies in Member States, as well as efforts to reach the Europe 2020 educational objectives. This discussion paper summarises the main concerns and key messages emerging from these chapters. You can read the last NRP report, for 2018, [here](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/EAPN-NRP-Report-2018-FINAL_online-layout.pdf) (see Chapter 4, Education and Lifelong Learning, page 48).

EAPN has equally engaged every year with the ***Country-Specific Recommendations*** (CSRs), putting forward shadow proposals from the perspective of anti-poverty organisations on the ground, including on education, training, and lifelong learning, as well analysed the yearly Recommendations the European Commission put forward, including a focus on educational aspects. The latest EAPN CSR analysis, for 2018, can be read [here](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EAPN-2018-CSR-Response-Main-Messages-EAPN.pdf), while the education concerns are summarized in the above section.

Still in the framework of the European Semester, EAPN has provided detailed input into the ***Country Reports*** (including through its very successful Poverty Watch ongoing exercise), and has also produced yearly reports on their contents, including on education, training, and lifelong learning. You can read the latest assessment of the Country Reports 2018 [here](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/EAPN-2018-EAPN-Country-Reports-Assessment-and-proposals-CSRs.pdf). Last but not least, EAPN has highlighted education concerns in its yearly assessment of the ***Annual Growth Survey*** and the ***Joint Employment Report*** (read the latest one, for 2018, [here](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/EAPN-AGS-and-JER-Response-web-00.pdf)).

In the framework of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, our members have identified Principle 1 (Education, Training, and Life-Long Learning) as one of the 5 priority principles of particular relevance to EAPN’s anti-poverty work. For more information, see EAPN’s position paper on the Social Pillar, [Make Social Rights the beating heart of Europe!](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EAPN-2017-EAPN-Response-European-Pillar-Social-Rights-1314.pdf). EAPN welcomes that the principle speaks about education as a right, highlighting quality and inclusiveness, and not linking it exclusively to the labour market. Additionally, we feel that the principle could emphasize and better support the ‘lifelong’ aspect, through explicitly mentioning second chance education, as well as ensuring the necessary access to financial resources to pursue education at a later stage in life. The concept of ‘inclusiveness’ could also be better clarified, by ensuring equal access(i.e. including for disadvantaged groups, e.g. ethnic minorities - Roma children, 11 migrants etc.), as well as by actively combatting segregation and discrimination in educational settings.

The [17th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty](https://www.eapn.eu/this-years-meeting/) was entitled Let’s Make Education a Way Out of Poverty!, and it brought together over a hundred people experiencing poverty from 30 European countries on 7-8 November 2018. Using participative methodologies to discuss issues such as how to develop a broad and inclusive education policy, early-learning, early school-leaving, child poverty, lifelong learning beyond labour market needs, ensuring participation of students and parents experiencing poverty in education schemes, and many more. The full report of the Meeting will be available shortly, while this discussion paper includes the main concerns and proposals that emerged from the rich debates and exchanges.

**Key EAPN concerns regarding education, training, and lifelong learning and their links to poverty**

*The Europe 2020 target is on track, but the untold story behind the numbers reveals many regions and groups are left behind*

According to the latest figures[[1]](#footnote-1), the percentage of **early school leavers** in EU28 stands at 10.6%, only 0.6% shy of the headline target of 10%, ranging from 3.1% in Croatia to 18.3% in Spain. The percentage of **people who have completed tertiary education** in EU28 is 40.5%, exceeding the headline target of 40%, ranging from 57.6% in Lithuania to 24.9% in Romania.

However, statistics do not offer the complete picture of the situation of education on the ground. Starting points for Member States are very different, so is the level of national ambition concerning efforts in this direction. In countries that feel that they have reached the target, Governments seem to have stopped paying attention to the topic (PL), which could be worrying, as targets are only supposed to be guiding tools, while support should be ongoing. The Swedish case demonstrates that, even if countries have reached the target, the situation can actually be worsening and can require due monitoring. The proportion of people aged between 18 and 24 years old without at least two years of secondary education has in fact increased continuously in Sweden since 2014, reaching 7.6% in 2017. Moreover, some of our members (PL) lament the absence of any reference to school dropouts in their NRP for 2018, as the country has reached the target, having already started below 10%.

EAPN members have also steadfastly pointed out that, while the numbers may tell a success story, great disparities persist, both between regions (BE, DE, IE, IT, ES), as well as between groups (AT, BE, DE, PL, SE, UK). EAPN Spain specifically calls for a reduction in regional disparities, with a view to improving students’ performances and to support teachers. In Belgium a lot of young highly skilled people find their way to Brussels, but pupils born in the Brussels Region have the least chance of successfully completing tertiary education. Moreover, our German network stresses how regional exclusive jurisdiction over education creates a high level of heterogeneity in educational performance.

Efforts to support educational completion and attainment are often not enough to reach vulnerable, marginalised groups, and policy measures are piece meal and insufficient to make a difference in the lives of people who are suffering the most. Indicators continue to be very negative for specific groups, such as Travellers, migrants and those with special education needs or a disability (HU, IE), and Roma children (CZ, HU). In Belgium, pupils with a migrant background have much less favourable educational outcomes, while the attainment gap between people with disabilities and those without far exceeds the EU average. Some members argue that sub-targets for specific groups with low educational attainment should be introduced. Breaking down the target, and subsequent policy measures, to take into account both disadvantaged regions and disadvantaged groups, and ensure that measures don’t only favour those easy to reach would be desirable in order to foster the inclusion and access to education for all.

While the targets may be on track, are educational policies ensuring that nobody is left behind, particularly the most vulnerable? An improvement in completion and attainment rates does not necessarily mean that holding a degree would help people’s integration in the society and in the labour market.

*Missing investigation and understanding of the systemic roots of early school leaving and poor academic performance*

EAPN members express strong concern over the fact that many education policies deal with effects on the surface, without delving into a thorough analysis of the structural, root causes of both drop-up and poor educational attainment. Proposed policies often do not seem to take into account the complex reasons behind poor school performance, and only choose to focus on a narrow range of responses, rather than having a comprehensive approach. Several members report that the underlying poverty dimension is not taken into account when defining causes and proposing solutions, and no social impact assessment is carried out on suggested policies.

Most EAPN members point out the strong link between the social and economic situation of the children (and their families) and poor educational attendance and attainment. For example, in the UK, children from poorer families have maths results a grade lower than their better-off counterparts. Moreover, the increased number of private schools in some countries (SE, UK) also leads to more social segregation and inequality, because it further increases the gap in educational offer available to children from different social classes. Poverty and social exclusion lead to several unmet needs at different levels, which can severely interfere with one’s ability to benefit fully from an education.

Participants at the PeP Meeting shared a wide range of causes for early school leaving, many of which are not reflected in policy responses: children need to work to support families; children with learning difficulties struggle and face discrimination; teachers are demotivated, underpaid, underqualified; school takes up the whole day; pressure from coursework; lack of school counselling; perceived irrelevance of education for social mobility. “Income does not depend on education,” said a Bulgarian delegate on the perception that education is not seen as a way to increase social mobility. A Portuguese delegate said, “Yes, education could be a way out of poverty, but people don’t believe in it!”. Other issues raised included the idea that results-based funding means schools can’t offer a good education, leading to more drop-outs, and funding stays low (a vicious cycle).

What is missing is a holistic view of structural barriers to exclusion, and a will to initiate systemic changes that would lead to more social cohesion and equal opportunities in accessing and progressing in education. Our members have, for a long time, advocated for a strengthened link between education and poverty-reduction initiatives, supporting an educational environment that looks at the big picture and fosters high quality and inclusion for all. EAPN would like to see comprehensive needs and situation assessments, carried out involving the beneficiaries, and personalised pathways set in place.

Positive practices are reported from Sweden, the government has therefore decided to strengthen the state funding of pre-primary and lower secondary schools and to distribute it to the general public, based on the students' socio-economic background. The government has also suggested that it be stated in the school law that the principals of pre-school, primary and secondary schools actively promote a comprehensive social composition of the students at their school units.

*Education is compulsory, but it is often inaccessible to vulnerable groups*

Free, public education is a right, and it should be available to anybody, regardless of their level of resources. However, this is sadly not the case in many countries. While education is free for all, it isn’t accessible to all, and a number of barriers still prevent many children from fully accessing and benefitting from learning opportunities. Moreover, recent privatisation trends do not acknowledge education as a public good, which leaves behind pupils and students in a difficult financial situation.

Participants at the PeP Meeting highlighted lack of financial support for school materials, transportation, uniforms, meals and activities to cover, as well as the issue of nutrition and feeding families on low incomes, especially during the holidays when the ‘one hot meal a day’ is taken away. The effects of domestic violence on children’s ability to learn, which was raised in session one, was further discussed with examples from Hungary and elsewhere. Participants noted the impact of ill-health in general, and mental ill-health in particular, as one of the barriers to accessing formal and or informal education opportunities. In terms of lifelong learning, it was noted that juggling the responsibility of raising a family and working makes it practically impossible to find time for additional education, especially close to home. Limited financial support from national governments (social security) puts families at risk, which yielded calls for adequate minimum income, educational benefits and investment in long-term solution.

Not enough policies are in place aimed at supporting vulnerable groups, including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, to access quality lifelong learning. When policies do exist, they are designed mainly from a labour market perspective of improving productivity and reducing inactivity, rather than implementing a holistic, rights-based approach to education and training, aimed also at personal development and at fostering social participation and inclusion. No recognition is given to the need to provide alternative pathways for people often alienated from the formal education process: investing in non-formal as well as informal education and training methods and contexts and ensuring validation of experience/qualifications. EAPN would like to see the recognition that some groups face more difficulties than others, and there are structural obstacles that need to be studied and overturned in order to guarantee equal access to and progress in the educational system, as well as in broader lifelong learning support, especially for these excluded groups. Tailored and targeted approaches are needed for children and adults with special needs or in special circumstances, including an emphasis on informal methods.

*Insufficient focus on inclusive education and fighting segregation and discrimination in schools and educational settings*

School segregation continues to be a problem, with several groups of children continuing to face discrimination in schools, while others (such as Travellers) have seen a reduction in support. Members report lack of support for poorly performing schools, of adequate training for teachers, and of measures to reach disadvantaged groups, including the Roma (BG, CZ, HU, PT), or children with special needs (CY, HU, IE). Not enough attention is paid to fighting discrimination and ensuring equal access and treatment in education, in school and beyond, particularly for migrant children, while investing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and regions remains a challenge. In Austria, a controversial law establishing compulsory German classes for children with limited knowledge of the language has led to their segregation from their schoolmates. EAPN urgently calls on EU governments to reflect on the impact of segregation and unequal treatment of the Roma, which is one of the most socially excluded and discriminated against. A PeP Meeting participant from Poland said no education on diversity takes place because there is still largely a mono-culture in classrooms. Lack of legal status in Europe affects the educational entitlements migrants and asylum-seekers have in the receiving country, alongside insufficient psychological support, ineffective immigration systems, discrimination and red tape.

Another concern is the lack of recognition that tailored and targeted approaches are needed for children and adults with special needs or in special circumstances, including an emphasis on informal methods. Aspects of quality and inclusiveness often seem not to be prioritised in educational policy at national level. At the PeP Meeting, participants felt there was a lack of quality support for those with mental or physical disabilities, leading to negative perceptions and segregation within schools and in society. This affects transitions within mainstream schools and the labour market after schooling. Reasons for this disconnect include: poor communication between school psychologists and teachers, resulting in children being stigmatised and feeling excluded which can cause stress and anxiety. Poor diagnosis and evaluation mean different levels and types of intellectual disabilities are not identified. Inclusive schools also struggle to cope with different abilities, it was suggested, with high drop-out rates due to a sense of not belonging (separation within the system) and lack of progress.

Attempts to tackle some of these through the Czech Republic’s ‘inclusive education and special school’ programme (for people with disabilities, Roma, poor children, etc.) were a “disaster”.

To understand the reasons behind early-school leaving and poor educational performance, is crucial to look at the conditions of pupils and families, while also analyzing other factors such as discrimination and segregation, which greatly contribute to the persistence of a non-inclusive education environment. However, this concern does not seem to be at the forefront of many governments’ preoccupation when it comes to education. More support in classrooms is needed to help students individually, and for this to be implemented successfully they must be well trained and paid. Teachers therefore have enough tools or help to keep an eye on classrooms and their students (bullying goes unnoticed). The alternative, special needs classes or ‘segregation’, just further stigmatises disabilities and the students who have them, lowering their self-esteem. Parents also fear stigmatisation - one of the main barriers to active engagement by parents in poverty identified at the PeP Meeting is the fear of being unfairly judged and rejected or excluded by teachers or the school community, together with embarrassment and the desire to conceal their circumstances from others.

Discrimination, labelling, bullying and stigmatisation on many grounds starts in early school and, left unchecked, can carry on throughout school years. Differences appear in small ways and in outside activities too (e.g. not being able to afford gifts or birthday parties). In Romania, segregation is a problem (poor kids often sit at the back of the class and Roma children are still sent to separate schools); NGOs and community services fill the gap left by government, providing things like a hot meal at school. “School is normative, and difference (clothing, accent, etc.) are grounds to be bullied,” said one PeP Meeting delegate. Courses about diversity, being open to different things and not judging by appearance, are needed to keep children in school and prepare them to become wellrounded members of society with the tools to get out of the cycle of poverty. Calls were also made for a code of good conduct/practices to be better promoted and explained, to show commitment to inclusive and accessible schools.

Some encouraging good practices: increased initiatives related to supporting migrants and their children (HR, PT), projects to overcome gender stereotypes and to increase awareness on gender segregation in education (EE, IT), increased support for learners with special educational needs (DE, IE, BE). In Belgium, the French community adopted a Pact on Excellence, which emphasises 61 quality for all, as well as inclusiveness and diversity, and the German community supports equality and improving quality in education as main missions. In Ireland, the “Action Plan for Education 2016-2019” focusses on disadvantaged pupils. The Spanish NRP refers to scholarships and study grants aimed at eliminating socio-economic obstacles to education, and to the proposed reform of the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE). In the Czech Republic, projects Quality - Inclusion - Advice - Development are being implemented to improve the inclusiveness and quality education in areas with socially excluded localities and children and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

*Narrow policy focus on education as primarily labour market – oriented, while training doesn’t lead to quality jobs, but to underemployment*

In the current policy discourse, education is increasingly perceived primarily as a labour market tool, overlooking its dimension of personal development, aiming to contribute to community needs, to an individual’s personal aspiration and human achievement, and to better overall social inclusion. Many EAPN members are persuaded that their Governments still pursue a narrow interpretation of education and training**,** in linking it primarily to the needs of the labour market and of employers, and failing to consider education as an essential means to equip an individual with essential life and personal development skills. This is further evidenced by the most recent Country-Specific Recommendations. In 2014, a staggering 74% of EAPN members felt that well-being and personal development are not considered beyond labour market needs. While the trend slightly decreased since, it is still at worrying levels (55% in 2018). Many members (AT, BE, HR, DE, IT, PL, UK) lament the absence in their NRPs of a holistic vision, prioritizing a universal, quality and inclusive public education for all. EAPN promotes lifelong learning as a comprehensive, holistic vision of education, which should span throughout all the phases of the life-cycle for personal and professional development.

At the PeP Meeting, an Estonian delegate wondered if everyone was just “living and learning for the labour market”. An Irish participant felt that the system stifled creativity, talents, skills (both in pupils and teachers). Many children leave school lacking basic life-skills which should be addressed by community teachers. In Estonia, it was felt schools didn’t teach social skills enough, undermining civic and community spirit. It was noted that Europe’s education system is too rigid and often boring to most children and young people. Innovation is needed to develop better ways of making education more interesting and inclusive for everyone, as a public good. The impression was that the government puts pressure on teachers to direct students towards sciences in order to boost the statistics rather than treat them as individuals with specific needs and interests. The role of good teachers is to help students discover who they are and what they want to become, not to push them towards a ‘desirable’ career path.

It is important that professional education and training strategies meet the needs of disadvantaged jobseekers and employed people. However, strong concerns are expressed by some of our members (AT, BE, CY, IT, LV, UK) that training offered to jobseekers is sometimes not appropriate and appears more an end in itself, than a process to equip people with the right competences for progressing into quality jobs. Measures to provide both better access to and quality of training and upskilling for people in work are often deemed as inadequate or insufficient. Only few EAPN members (AT, IE, PT) indicate positive measures for the upskilling of the adult working population. However, concerns are still raised about how far these are targeted and adapted to the needs of disadvantaged men and women. In Latvia, an issue of overlearning combined with in-work poverty is signalled by our members, as re-qualification programmes tend to be formal and not needs-based, catering to the commercial needs of private education providers, with little long-term sustainability and added-value of the actual training offered.

When it comes to training provided to the unemployed, there is a lack of investment in people, a marked focus on achieving quantitative results, as well as poor quality of training, which does not guarantee a quality job at the end – participants at the PeP meeting reported. Job seekers are prodded with compulsion and ‘threats’ of sanctions, instead of opting for respecting people’s choices, and offering free vocational education to empower people. “The problem is you do all these studies and when you finish there’s no job,” said a Portuguese delegate. Unpaid (re)training in companies is one solution offered to job-seekers, but participants said these internships rarely or never lead to permanent job offers; and job-seekers often can’t refuse to do them because their unemployment benefits will be cut off. “If you have been unemployed for a long time, you are sent to workplace training, but these companies only see it as a free workforce,” said a Danish delegate. Wrong assumptions about unemployed people (that they are unskilled, monolingual and can’t use digital tools) are a barrier.

While education is often seen as a silver bullet solution for all social ails, our members in Cyprus points to the fact that 35% of tertiary education graduates are underemployed, performing duties which are below their level of qualification, while EAPN Spain equally points out that an overemphasis on upskilling the labour force won’t solve all problems, as a number of unemployed workers are actually overqualified. PeP Meeting participants said that over-emphasis on academic education can have the opposite effect because life skills are undervalued, and employers don’t want to pay for properly qualified workers. Young people stay in education for a long time, accumulating degrees, then get turned away from entry-level jobs as they are considered ‘overqualified’. An overproduction of graduates with heavy student loans leads to a permanent debt hole for many in underpaid jobs. Underemployment means people get paid less than they deserve and sometimes have to “dumb down” their CV to get a job, which affects their self-esteem. “It is like building Formula 1 cars for village roads”, said a Spanish delegate, an overemphasis on skills with few outlets to use them (“There are too many lawyers, but it’s a problem to find a plumber.”). Many migrants and others whose qualifications are not recognised have to redo their studies and/or take low-skilled, low-paid work (stories of graduates cleaning houses, doctors driving taxis, etc.), which is often on the black market.

*Limited support to lifelong learning and supporting adults through second chance opportunities, including validating informal and non-formal skills*

While governments seem to dedicate exceeding attention to the upskilling of the workforce and investing in human capital, access to education and training for those already holding a job is also not always easy. PeP Meeting participants noted that free adult training provided by governments typically takes place during the day, which made it hard for workers and active job-seekers. The cost of childcare and lack of a support network were also highlighted, as well as the disconnect in companies between the benefits of substantial training and its perceived ‘cost’. Older employees are considered not worth investing into, in terms of further on-the-job training. Workers wanting to up-skill struggle to find time or become demotivated, while “second chance” programmes were only available in very few communities and most of the schools are not interested in organising them. Governments need to provide incentives, in partnership with employers, to provide quality training, especially for those most in need, as well as extra support for low-skilled employees, which could involve state-run training facilities and partnerships with NGOs to provide trainings for vulnerable groups. The responsibility of training must therefore be shared between the employees, employers, and the government.

An aggravating factor is a perceived obsession of governments and the labour market on formal qualifications and certificates, acquired through very rigid and standardised education systems, which fail to take into account people’s individuality, their dreams, aspirations, and dignity. PeP Meeting participants said that a rigid approach to formal education was failing to stimulate pupils, leading to demotivation, drop-out, stigmatisation, and poor performance. The formal education does not pay enough attention to life skills, which makes non-formal education vital to give hope and light to children, helping them build relationships: “There is no certificate for this; life gives the certificate.” A Norwegian participant raised the issue of overly theoretical curricula which is hard for many children with ADHD; hands-on, fun, engaging materials are needed to balance the day. Better training for parents and teachers is needed in how to spot and nurture talents early on because the “tests are not fit for purpose”. However, parents in poverty struggle to find the financial means to support their children in pursuing extra-curricular activities. Several delegates called for a “balance between formal and informal learning opportunities” with more social/career coaching resources to assess this balance and match it to individual needs/interests. As long as labour market needs were the main reference point, personal talent got overlooked and discouraged. There needs to be a more open approach to valuing real abilities and skills rather than formal qualifications, and supporting the recognition of volunteering and community activities.

EAPN has been underlining the importance of non-formal and informal learning approaches, instead of formal ones, particularly for people who have had difficulties in the formal system. Informal approaches are more often focussed on individual needs not only to acquire relevant skills for employment, but supporting their empowerment, and inclusion in the community. However, these are often not recognised or valued in today’s rigid labour market. “I have a lot of skills but no little slip of paper, so basically I am screwed,” said a young Danish participant at the PeP meeting, who is homeless. The certification system needs to be made more effective, less bureaucratic and costly, and to ensure that people’s skills are validated to help them get a job or further training/education.” For example, homeless people could work in social centres because they understand the problems faced, but authorities demand formal qualification for such roles. NGOs working directly with people in vulnerable situations should work together with governments and employers to develop a common validation methodology, while simultaneously encouraging people-centred learning and a more open and receptive labour markets to ‘skills, not qualifications’. What is needed is a holistic and adequately resourced approach to social and economic needs (housing, services, adequate income), combined with formal/non-formal education, including volunteering, that leads to accreditation.

*Urgent need to tackle the digital divide and ensure digital inclusion in an era where education, training, and lifelong learning are increasingly online*

In the context of the broader debate of Digital Europe and changes to the world of work, but also to service provision and means of social interaction and participation, the impact of digitalisation is also very important in the context of education, training, and lifelong learning. Some EAPN members (AT, DE, IE, PT) mention a preoccupation on behalf of their governments with guaranteeing adequate digital education in schools, explicitly recognizes the lack of digital skills as a widespread problem in the population. However, our Irish members point out that, while there is an important focus on digital skills, addressing literacy and numeracy needs of those with low educational attainment is not prioritised. Learning has also increasingly become intertwined with the online, which both creates opportunities for better inclusion, as well as brings about new forms of segregation and isolation.

Participants at the PeP meeting expressed deep concerns over the digital divide. Access to technology (computers/internet) and learning resources for low-income families is needed. Digital exclusion was identified as a great barrier to education, as children nowadays are often expected to do homework using new technology that they don’t have at home. This hinders learning and stigmatises the children and their parents, making them feel embarrassed about being poor. Technology such as smart phones and tablets, or the mandatory use of it in coursework, is creating a ‘digital gap’ in education. Access to technology, in what concerns both digital skills and infrastructure such as devices, should be recognised as a basic right. This which means it can’t be left up to markets, the State needs to guarantee equal access. This should also include better network coverage in rural and remote areas is needed, support to cover electricity costs and Internet subscriptions, as well training and information about data privacy. Digital literacy is vital because people in poverty are easily duped, and their data sold and trafficked for profit. Supporting better digital access would empower both people and adults to reap the full benefits of education, training, and lifelong learning.

EAPN would like to see much greater efforts on digital inclusion, in schools and communities, especially for poorer and vulnerable people; in access to education and services, as well as employment insertion. People experiencing poverty and people with lower skills and qualifications need more and better training opportunities to come to terms with the digital age, to reap the full benefits that it can bring, and to ensure they are not left behind by technological change. Quality, inclusive and more nimble requalification schemes, combined with adequate income support and services, must be put in place to assist those who lose their jobs. Not-for-profit and social economy organisations are well-placed to provide specialist services to vulnerable groups and must have better opportunities to provide such services.

*Insufficient investment and resources for the education sector*

From 2011 to 2016, most EAPN members deplore significant cuts in funding for schools and educational establishments and programmes, as part of ongoing austerity measures at the time. Despite the fact that the European Commission had repeatedly urged Member States to invest in Education and Training, EAPN members report that budget cuts have not spared the education sector. This was particularly true for countries under Emergency Assistance Programme rules. Universal access to education al lifelong learning, as a guaranteed right, did not pursued in national budgets. These cuts have had a number of negative consequences, undermining much needed public initiatives aimed to support quality and inclusiveness of education, while also being especially detrimental to key groups already facing multiple difficulties (Roma, migrants, children with special needs), who would conversely need extra funding for additional tailored support measures. These reductions in financial support often happened on top of already inadequate budgeting for educational services. A specific issue raised by some of our members is that education is not free at the point of use, and more and more pupils and students coming from households living in poverty have a very hard time meeting educational costs, thus being forced to abandon or curtail their studies.

A slight change of rhetoric occurred starting with 2017, when some of our networks (BE, IT, PT, RO, ES, SE) signalled stepped up investment in education. For example, the French community in Belgium pledged higher budget for remediation mechanisms and to better account for the socio-economic context of a school, while the Brussels Capital Region invested in improving physical infrastructure and provides schools with additional resources, supplemented by European funds, to combat failure, drop-out, and violent behaviour. In Sweden, the Government invested in a total of SEK 11 billion in schools in 2017, supporting smaller classrooms, more staff in the early years of compulsory school, a reading-writing-arithmetic guarantee, reinforced special needs education, leadership in the classroom, teacher training and teacher pay.

However, it will take a long time, significant political will, and comprehensive financial investment to rollback the negative effects of the previous long years of cuts and austerity. Several countries still appear to be still be cutting educational services, rather than investing, for instance the Finnish Government also made several cuts in vocational training. At the PeP Meeting, participants from Serbia pointed to increased teacher strikes due to poor conditions and growing issues with low pay, crowding, literacy, diverse backgrounds/abilities, no additional social support or counselling, and more. Poor pay and crowded classes were still common in Estonian and Croatian schools too, leading to early school-leaving and poor job prospects. Romania struggle inside and outside class, with many children from poor backgrounds needing extra help.

*Missing comprehensive strategies for delivering quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning, for all groups and across the life cycle*

There is no comprehensive assessment, carried out together with the intended policy beneficiaries, people experiencing poverty and their organisations, into the needs of different groups at different stages of the life cycle and in relation to the educational system, so that effective, integrated policies can be developed to address them. What is needed is the establishment of an explicit strategy for an inclusive education system, based on a universal education service delivering equal opportunities to all groups, and closer working between tertiary education, schools and non-formal institutions to ensure an inclusive pathway to higher education and lifelong learning, as well as to decent jobs. This strategy should go beyond professional training and upskilling, tackling gaps for different ages and groups, and investing in informal and non-formal methods as well as formal. The absence of an overarching approach to breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage in education is highly likely to undermine the efficacy of policies to combat drop-out and poor educational attainment among children living in poverty.

Wrap-around, integrated support for families is needed, including comprehensive intervention to tackle the multidimensional aspects of poverty exclusion or discrimination. Insufficient attention is given to providing integrated approaches between the school, the young person, their family and the local community, linking prevention methods, including a focus on early learning, early-warning and individualized support mechanisms within the formal school system (no child left behind approaches) linked to new approaches to engage early school leavers again in education through alternative methods – non-formal and informal settings, as well as Second Chance schools.

A positive example in this context is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Strategy in Ireland, which has been important in targeting resources at schools in disadvantaged areas, with the aim of improving outcomes, including retention rates at second level in DEIS schools, from their current rate of 82.7% to the national average, currently 91.2%, by 2025. A comprehensive set of good practices is also highlighted in Romania, where, encouragingly, measures are linked to and seen in the context of the national, integrated anti-poverty strategy. In Germany, some good measures are planned by the new government, e.g. for low-income families the child supplement (“Kinderzuschlag”) should be increased and improved; the so called school starter package is to be increased and the cost that parents who get minimum income have to pay for each lunch at school should be abolished; the child benefit is to be increased, whereby it continues with the monthly regular amount people get as minimum income. In Sweden, for all families with children, child support and study grants are raised by SEK 200. In addition, the social welfare assistance for children and students in high school is raised with SEK 200 per month for the most vulnerable families with children.

*Poor governance in education policy, with people in poverty and their organisation left behind and excluded from active citizenship.*

Education should, first and foremost, provide people with empowerment, self-esteem, and solid pathways to accessing rights and to meaningfully engaging with society and the labour market. In this context, ownership of one’s educational choices and training plan, across the lifecycle, is a fundamental principle. EAPN advocates for a learner-centred approach, which puts people and their potential and aspirations at the heart of any learning activity. PeP Meeting participants highlighted that this needs to be a joint effort, supporting students (of all ages), their families, and education providers to constructively engage in finding solutions.

It was felt that the stress experienced by parents living in poverty can be overwhelming and prevent engagement, and greater understanding of the impact of poverty on parents by teachers and the need for teamwork was required. Neighbourhood organisations were more supportive than state services, and peer support was powerful. There is also a need to supply additional training for education providers, to ensure more focus on the learner, the family and the community, and to engage learners, including children, more in decision- making. Outreach support and services need to be set up to really make a difference on the ground, and ensure that the plans for quality and inclusive education and is developed in partnership with all the relevant actors. However, several EAPN members indicate the lack of involvement of key stakeholderssuch as social partners and civil society and the lack of cooperation between different levels of governments as factors undermining the design of effective training programmes to provide people with key professional competences.

Supporting broader engagement of people with community and political life does not seem to be currently prioritised by national education systems, which do not strive to prepare students for active citizenship and informed choices in democratic societies. Based on accounts from delegates at the PeP Meeting, civic education appears at best to be limited to descriptions of how institutions work, while children are not provided with critical thinking skills and exercises in challenging assumptions – for example, those based on race, gender, income, etc, or by teaching historical events honestly to promote inquisitive, critical thought, and counter the influence of populism and fake news. A delegate from Portugal pointed out that if schools want to impart knowledge and skills in civic matters, they have to be a democratic institution themselves, by listening to kids, asking for their feedback – but a participant from Greece pointed out that “In secondary schools, teachers often treat teenagers as half-terrorist and half-animals.”

People must feel fully welcome to participate and persuaded that every voice matters, and this needs to start at a young age. Schools have to let kids experience democracy, including by making the school process itself democratic, while social, political, cultural education (the essence of ‘citizenship’) should be part of the curriculum. Active citizenship comes from people feeling their voices are being heard, that they are welcome to participate in classrooms, public debates, elections, or society in general. For this reason, educational establishments need to be open to NGOs and other community actors. Our current democracies are weak, under threat, fragmented, and generally broken, and there is an overarching sense of cynicism and complacency concerning the current state of politics. People lack the political knowledge, democratic experience, and tools - a confidence gap that needs filling.

**Key messages**

**1. Don’t abandon policy efforts towards ensuring quality, inclusive, accessible education, training and lifelong learning, just because Europe 2020 targets are on track**

Policy initiatives should be aimed at the continuous improvement of outcomes for all, rather than being mere bureaucratic instruments aimed at the artificial achievement of numerical targets. The European Pillar of Social Rights should provide for a renewed energy and a promising guidance in actions dealing with education and social policies in general.

**2. Tackle the real roots of poor educational performance, including early school-leaving, by looking at education, training and lifelong learning in a holistic approach**

Look behind each child and adult to understand their socio-economic background and challenge a complex reality of poverty, hardship, discrimination and exclusion. Such an approach would address well-being in a wider sense, and make links to reducing poverty and ensuring social inclusion and equal opportunities, especially for key groups facing difficulties, and for children living in poverty.

**3. Remove financial and other obstacles faced by vulnerable groups and people in poverty in accessing education, training, and lifelong learning**

There are complex social and economic obstacles people face in accessing educational opportunities, governments must do more to establish integrated measures, invest in adequate income, outreach, and wrap-around support for pupils, students, and families at risk of poverty, exclusion and segregation

**4. Promote inclusive and universal public education, ending discrimination and segregation and ensuring nobody is left behind**

Back equal opportunities to education and life-long learning for all, by ensuring universal and inclusive public education services. Combat segregation and discrimination in the schooling system, as well as bullying, by adopting pro-active measures to ensure gender equality and support vulnerable groups (ethnic minorities, Roma, people with disabilities, migrants, people facing poverty etc) towards equal educational opportunities and outcomes.

**5. Education is more than responding to employers’ needs, and training provided to jobseekers must lead to a real path out of poverty**

Adopt a comprehensive vision of education and lifelong learning that goes beyond the needs of the labour market, and ensure access for both workers and jobseekers to relevant upskilling that takes into account both personal and market needs and which leads to sustainable, quality jobs, and not to underemployment.

**6. Support people’s right to access educational opportunities throughout the lifecycle, by providing them with the necessary support and second-chance opportunities**

Ensure universal access to adult education, including second chance schools and other catch-up mechanisms, particularly those facing multiple obstacles, and reinforce quality and inclusive lifelong learning, by supporting informal or non-formal learning approaches, aimed at personal and community development, and recognising their value.

**7. Tackle the digital divide in access to education and ensure that people in vulnerable situation can reap the full potential of the digital revolution**

Access to technology is a human right which governments need to guarantee, and a basic need, given the increased use of online media in education, training and lifelong learning provision. Improving both digital literacy, as well as access, is key.

**8. Reverse the cuts to education systems and restore adequate funding for education** Austerity and fiscal consolidation have significantly undermined the quality, availability, and affordability of education, particularly those programmes reaching disadvantaged groups. Adequate public investment is needed to rollback these damaging effects.

**9. Put forward comprehensive education, training, and lifelong learning strategies, rooted in a rights-based, anti-poverty approach**

Break the cycle of disadvantage by tacking poverty of children and their families, as a prerequisite for better educational outcomes, and integrate anti-poverty goals in educational policies and budgets.

**10. Support ownership and participation in educational systems which promote human dignity, active citizenship, and strong democracies**

Put the learner at the heart of the educational experience, and support partnership approaches between learners, particularly those in poverty, their families, their NGOs, education providers, and Governments, and support awareness and critical thinking in school curricula.

**Recommendations**

*(to be added at the end)*

***EU ISG discussion and timeline***

**March 2019, Riga**: Scoping of the paper: what kind of product do we want? (aims, target audience, length, language, methodology); first impression of the overall content of the paper – do the key concerns accurately capture realities, and are the key messages the right ones?

**June 2019, Brussels**: In-depth exchange about the key messages and the main content of the paper (reworked version from March, integrating input).

**September 2029, Hesinki:** Discussion of recommendations for national and EU level; final comments on the content of the paper.

1. [Eurostat](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database) 2018 provisional figures, retrieved on 1 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)