

## EUNEC statements on equity in education



EUNEC, the network of education councils in the European Union, brings together the expertise of advisory bodies and of the stakeholders and experts who are involved in the national / regional advisory processes. These advisory bodies give advice to the governments of the different European countries in the field of education and training.

During the ten years of its existence, EUNEC has published statements on several topics related to education and training. EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively towards the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant DGs. EUNEC also wants to promote actions by its members at national/regional level. These critical remarks and statements offer an input for national advisory opinions of education councils. They should provide a significant input for reflection and action by relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training such as providers of education, teacher trade unions, social partners, experts in the field of education and training.

### *Equity, a guiding principle*

In all EUNEC statements, equity has been an underlying concern and a guiding principle. Regardless of the topic we were discussing, always the same questions have been asked: What does this mean for disadvantaged groups? What does this mean for vulnerable young people? Does it offer new perspectives for adults who got stuck in their employment pathway, in their life?

Special attention was given to the theme of equity in the statements on guidance, on education and training in a period of economic crisis, and on 'Bildung'.

#### — **EUNEC statements on guidance through transition moments in the learning pathway.**

Although these statements, the result of the EUNEC conference in Budapest held in October 2009, are not specifically on the theme of equity, EUNEC focused on guidance for vulnerable learners.

If guidance wants to be effective, it cannot be centred only on the vulnerable learner as an individual. It has to take into account the whole context: his family and social, economic and cultural background.

Vulnerable learners, who are they?

- School repeaters
- Unqualified school leavers, drop outs

- Children with special needs
- Youngsters and adults suffering from critical conditions on the labour market, life crisis and reorientation, unemployment
- Youngsters and adult with insufficient level of literacy and numeracy

As for unqualified school leavers, it is very important to work on a positive approach building self confidence. Guidance should convince people : ‘Society needs you; you are valuable to society’. On the other hand, there are links with active citizenship: people have to be willing to take that responsibility.

Guidance should offer second chances and flexible learning pathways, appealing to the diverse competences and talents of people.

During the trajectory guidance approach, the ‘salmon principle’, where people start at a lower level and are able to make their way up thanks to efforts and education, is more motivating than the ‘cascade principle’ (people starting on a high level, and having to take a step back if they don’t succeed).

#### → **EUNEC statements on education and training in a period of economic crisis**

In these statements, which are the results of a seminar held in Limassol, Cyprus, in 2010, EUNEC states that reduction in the investment for education would be disastrous for social cohesion: the risks for those groups most at need (minority groups, lower skilled, those with special educational/social needs) are great. At the same time, people without qualifications risk to be more and more excluded from work and social provisions.

#### → **EUNEC statements on ‘Bildung from a lifelong learning perspective’**

During a seminar held in Budapest in Spring 2011, EUNEC discussed the concept of ‘Bildung’, trying to reach a common understanding of what this concept means and how it can be implemented in education and training. This discussion brought us back to the words of Comenius: ‘Omnes, omnia, omnitudo’<sup>1</sup>. From an equity perspective the ‘omnes’ aspect is important: ‘*Bildung*’ concerns all human beings. Everyone has a fundamental right on education: the choice of learning contents should allow everyone to enjoy education and to learn.

EUNEC also states that the concept of ‘Bildung’ links up with one of the four strategic objectives of the education and training 2020 strategic framework, that has been stressed on the informal meeting of European education ministers of 28-29 March, under the Hungarian presidency, which is ‘Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship’.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Who’s afraid of Bildung?’, Hans Van Crombrugge, senior lecturer family pedagogy, Higher Institute of Family Sciences of the University College, Brussels (presentation at the EUNEC seminar, Budapest, 9 may 2011)

*EUNEC conference on 'Equity within education systems', Portugal, October 2007.*

EUNEC organized a conference on the specific theme of 'Equity within education systems'. The event was organized in Lisbon, hosted by the Portuguese Education Councils (CNE) and linked to the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union in 2007. Representatives of education councils in 15 European countries agreed on the following statements:

### **Equity within Education systems**

Equity in education is an end in itself. It is important because education enhances life chances of individuals and well being of societies, equity in education supports social equity and unequal results in education have heavy costs. There is no contradiction between equity and efficiency in education. Within the equity debate in education, the social inclusion of migrants is a very important matter. Therefore equity should become a base line in every education policy.

Equity is not only a challenge for education. It needs collaboration with and support from other sectors in society, such as welfare, employment, and culture.

EUNEC considers the ten steps of the OECD study on equity within education<sup>2</sup> as a very useful evidence-based approach to strengthen the policies on equity in the Member States. At a national level this study is a real challenge to consider equity as an increasing priority within national education systems. It is clear that such an approach should be considered as part of a national and international strategy, taking into account the national contexts. It demands a coherent long-term strategy, corresponding action plans and a broad social consensus.

An implementation strategy at a national level calls for serious discussion with stakeholders to reach maximal consensus and ownership. This means: setting up common aims, goals and targets; time-schedules; responsibilities; co-ordination etc. It is clear that education councils can play a crucial role in this process.

The role of teachers in dealing with diversity is underestimated. This issue should get greater emphasis in initial and in-service training of teachers. Once again this demands a strong movement towards professionalization of teachers. Social and counseling skills of teachers have to be further developed. Therefore, there is need for support, time and resources.

If we want greater equity within education systems, the role of schools must be emphasized. It is important that schools can formulate their action plans based on their own needs, taking into account their own context (socio-economic, environmental and political). Therefore, they need relevant and readable evidence at school level and have a culture of evaluation and monitoring.

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<sup>2</sup> 'No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education', OECD, October 2007.