

EUNEC Statements

Participation and stakeholder involvement in education policy making

EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively towards the European Commission, the European Parliament, 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.

Participation and consultation of stakeholders, a key element in education policy making

Participation and consultation of citizens and stakeholders as a key element in policy decision making is generally being recognized as a main indicator of good governance. Decision making processes across several levels (the community level, the regional level, the national level, the European level) often include efficient and effective ways for involvement and participation of citizens.

Several European countries structure the participation of educational stakeholders using formal bodies, education councils. Education councils are in fact regional or national bodies that provide regional or national ministers, governments, parliaments, with policy advice on innovation in educational policies. Education councils, however, are diverse bodies, with their own characteristics. There is a growing interest to examine the benefits of a council, both by governments and stakeholder organisations, aiming to make consultation processes more transparent and efficient.

EUNEC decided to undertake a study on the concept of participation, expertise, legitimacy and involvement of stakeholders and experts in educational policy processes. EUNEC adopted the following recommendations, on a meso and micro level. The recommendations are based on the lessons drawn from the research, the presentations by European policy makers and national or regional representatives of education councils during a conference on stakeholder participation held in Brussels on 1 – 3 December 2010, and on the conclusions of the discussions in workshops during the same conference. Participants at the workshops came from countries that have an education council, that used to have one and that intend to create one.

Recommendations for policy makers

These meso recommendations pertain to institutional and political decisions and contexts. They thus appeal to those policy actors who are responsible for organising and employing advisory organisations, should they seek to raise the legitimacy of the input, throughput and output of their advisory councils, and ultimately also of their policy decisions.

These meso recommendations can be useful for countries that don't have yet an education council.

- Ensure **sufficient funding** to the advisory council as an organisation or to the members. Only this way, the council can become a stable organisation where expertise can be built up over time. This favours independence and continuity and helps foster a stable policy environment in which policy memory can grow. In times of economic crisis, this recommendation is even more relevant.
- Give some sort of **legal recognition** to the advisory council. Legally embed its role.
- Legally settle the council's **access points** at different stages of the policy advice, to ensure the connectedness of the council with the actual policy making. It is important that education councils are involved in the decision making process at different stages: to have influence in the early stage and also in the implementation stage. Moreover, allow education councils to make recommendations on the budget.
- Invest in the **knowledge base** councils may draw upon (benchmarking, monitoring, evaluation and research).
- Raise the commitment of the governments as a principal by **assigning leading civil servants** to the council's organisation. However, the autonomy of the council has to be guaranteed, and therefore the role of the civil servants has to be clearly defined (observers, information providers, partners in the debate).
- Allow for the **inclusion of different communities in** order to broaden the knowledge base of policy making, if not through membership, representation and co-optation, than through mechanisms of consultation of experts and civil society interests.
- Raise the **number of principals**, by for instance including the parliament as a client of the council's advice.
- Combine legal guarantees with sufficient discretion. With **discretion and flexibility**, a council can make most of possible policy windows and successfully deliver boundary work.

Recommendations for education councils

These micro recommendations are useful for the education councils themselves as organisations, to help them to improve the quality of processes and organisation, and outline possible routes and mechanisms for increasing their input as well as throughput and output legitimacy.

- Adopt strategies and tools for **combining civil society input and expertise**. Supplement inclusion through membership structure with consultation mechanisms such as expert pools, e-fora or focus groups. When information is imperfect, councils do best to consult their past knowledge base or engage in ad hoc consultation of academic experts.
EUNEC is convinced that councils still need to go outside to have access to the best available knowledge.
- **Adopt mechanisms to avoid domination** by certain groups – persons by virtue of their knowledge or position.
- Adopt **different advisory tracks**. These different tracks can have different rules on membership, mandate, decision making rules etc.
- Adopt conscious and **diversified dissemination strategies** in order to communicate with different principals and raise the utility of the products.
- **Customize information to the different principals** and audiences. Translate expert opinion or academic research into information accessible to societal representatives; vice-versa, translate the needs of various societal actors into relevant information for academic experts. Narrow the gap between the experts and the public. Turn academic research into practical points for policy intervention.
- Engender with members and principals **different understandings of advisory success** in order to prevent frustration and to raise commitment. Longer term impact is no lesser success than affection policy immediately. Education councils need feedback mechanisms after the advice is given, rather than a simple acceptance or rejection. Education councils should communicate and celebrate success, even if it is partial.
- Efficiently **plan and time advisory processes** and products in annual and multi-annual work programmes. This allows the council to align with the government's policy cycle.
- Develop strategies to **train staff and leaders as boundary workers**. Boundary work is not for the innocent! Boundary workers need communication skills, skills in policy analysis, journalistic skills. They have to be able to understand the perspectives, sensitivities and constraints of different principals in the policy environment, and to have receptive antennae for political and organisational behaviour.
- Work together with similar structures in other countries in order to create a 'European common sense'. Learn from each other. **International cooperation**, as it happens within EUNEC, improves the efficiency of processes and products.