

Statements

Education Councils and stakeholder participation in the policy making process

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.

Education councils as places for participation and consultation of stakeholders, a key element in education policy making

Participation and consultation of citizens and stakeholders is a key element in policy decision making. It is generally being recognized as a main indicator of good governance.

Education councils are regional or national bodies that provide regional or national ministers, governments, parliaments, with policy advice on innovation in educational policies. In fact, it is one of the most important formal bodies used by governments in their decision making processes as an efficient and effective way for involvement and participation of stakeholders. In the European field, EUNEC, the network of national and regional education councils is considered as a partner in the European policy making process for education and training.

What are Education Councils ? A scientific study gives the answer

Education councils 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.

Therefore, EUNEC decided to undertake a study on the concept of participation, expertise, legitimacy and involvement of stakeholders and experts in educational policy processes: "*Education councils in Europe - Balancing expertise, societal input and political control in the production of policy advice*" (Marleen Brans, Jan Van Damme, Public Management Institute – KUL).

EUNEC organized a conference on stakeholder participation in Brussels on 1 – 3 December 2010, based on the lessons drawn from the research, with the input of European policy makers and national or regional representatives of education councils. EUNEC adopted the following recommendations, on a meso and micro level. The recommendations are based 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 or 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 organizing and employing advisory organizations, 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 also for countries that don't have yet an education council.

- To be efficient and real partners in the policy making process, education councils need to be recognized and to be stable.
 1. Give some sort of **legal recognition** to the advisory council. Legally embed its role.
 2. 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 can be involved in the decision making process at different stages: to have influence in the early stage and also in the implementation stage.
 3. Ensure **sufficient funding** to the advisory council as an organization or to the members. Only this way, the council can become a stable organization 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.
 4. Invest in the **knowledge base** councils may draw upon (benchmarking, monitoring, evaluation and research).
 5. Combine legal guarantees with sufficient discretion¹. With **discretion and flexibility**, a council can make most of possible policy windows and successfully deliver boundary work².
 6. 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.

¹ Discretion is the flexibility a council has to organize its structure and work. The higher the level of externally imposed rules, the less discretion. Typically, if there is very detailed legislation stipulating how a council should work, there is less discretion.

² Boundary organizations (as we see education councils) can be situated between the worlds of science, policy making and society. They are 'matchmakers'.

- Education councils, as advisory bodies, need some formal contacts with principals³.
 7. Raise the commitment of the governments as a principal by **communication with leading civil servants**. However, the autonomy of the council and its legitimacy have to be guaranteed, and therefore the role of the civil servants has to be clearly defined.
 8. Raise the **number of principals**, by for instance including the parliament as a client of the council's advice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION COUNCILS

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

- Concerning the internal organisation
 1. 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.
 2. **Adopt mechanisms to avoid domination** by certain groups and/or persons by virtue of their knowledge or position.
 3. Adopt **different advisory tracks**. These different tracks can have different rules on membership, mandate, decision making rules etc.
 4. Develop strategies to **train staff and leaders as boundary workers**. 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 organizational behaviour.

- Concerning the dissemination of the outcomes
 5. Adopt conscious and **diversified dissemination strategies** in order to communicate with different principals and raise the utility of the products.
 6. **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

³ Principal-agent theory holds that organizational relations may be understood as a series of delegations of authority from principals to agents. If we see the council as the 'agent', we say that this agent can have up to three principals: member organizations (if members are representatives); government; parliament. They all provide the agent with a certain authority and with a certain task. The agent is also to a certain extent accountable to and dependent on the principals.

relevant information for academic experts. Narrow the gap between the experts and the public. Turn academic research into practical points for policy intervention.

7. 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 affecting 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.
- Concerning the agenda
8. 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.
- Concerning external cooperation
9. Work together with similar structures in other countries in order to create a 'European common sense'. Learn from each other. **International cooperation** improves the efficiency of processes and products.