

Equity, Equality and Inclusion in educational policies in Europe

Policy brief July 25



Equity, Equality and Inclusion in educational policies in Europe

POLICY BRIEF | JULY 2025

Publisher: Lifelong Learning Platform, Brussels, Belgium, 2025

Author: Erika María Rodríguez Somlyay

Contributors: Andrei Frank, Brikena Xhomaqi, Pauline Boivin, István Tóth, Magdalena Ślusarczyk, Aigul Alieva

Design, Typeset and Layout: María Arguedas

Citation: Rodríguez Somlyay, E.M., (2025) Equity, equality and inclusion in educational policies in Europe - Policy Brief, Lifelong Learning Platform, Brussels, Belgium.

doi:10.5281/zenodo.16531461

Image by Pixelbliss, Adobe Stock, stock.adobe.com



Equity, equality and inclusion in educational policies in Europe Policy Brief
© 2025 by Lifelong Learning Platform is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



**UK Research
and Innovation**

Co-funded by the European Union under grant agreement number 101132339 and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under grant agreement number 10108849.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary

This policy brief examines **equity, equality and inclusion** in education and training policies in Europe. It aims to provide an overview of the policy reforms implemented in various national contexts, highlighting best practices while identifying areas requiring further research and policy action. The brief begins by presenting the key findings from the research team's investigation, which identified over 400 reforms across 29 countries (EU Member States as well as England and Norway), between 1999 and 2024.

The analysis found that countries have implemented numerous reforms since 1999, although some reforms may have been introduced prior to the study time frame. Larger reforms often addressed all levels of education, while smaller ones focused on specific levels (ISCED), topics, or target groups. The findings are presented in stages, beginning with an overview of compulsory education reforms, followed by targeted interventions aimed at disadvantaged groups. The brief then explores clusters of reforms designed to improve universal access while also addressing the needs of specific groups. It also considers the development of more comprehensive reforms that span multiple ISCED levels, as well as the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluating these measures.

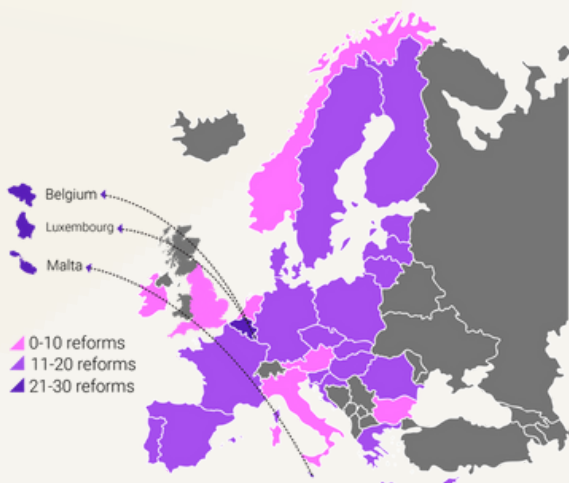


Read the summary in the national languages on STRIDE's website.

Policies on Equity, Equality and Inclusion in Europe

Equality means ensuring that everyone has the same rights and opportunities, while equity recognises that individuals may have different needs and circumstances, requiring tailored approaches to achieve equal outcomes. By combining **equality with equity**, education systems can strive to create **inclusive** environments that empower all students to succeed, to feel valued and respected, and to enjoy a sense of belonging.¹

Number of reforms per country



Over 400 reforms² were identified across 29 countries (EU countries, England and Norway) for the period of 1999-2024³. The research team went beyond formal access, examining systemic inequalities within the educational structures (i.e., socio-economic status, linguistic background, migrant status, and disability).

A diverse pool of sources⁴ was relied upon for the assessment of the reforms and discussions with stakeholder groups

allowed the team to validate the findings.⁵ The data was selected according to the following criteria: direct impact on educational equity, structural changes in education systems, interventions targeting specific groups, and availability of evaluation data. Challenges included the number of reforms identified (e.g., potentially missing reforms), issues with language (e.g., translated versions), and the varying nature of reforms across countries, as well as inconsistencies in the availability of impact evaluations. In some cases, **inclusive** and **democratic values** were explicitly mentioned in the reforms. Regardless of their actual impact, these values appeared to serve as an important subsidiary goal of the reforms. However, assessing the effect of such affirmations of values proved difficult. These findings suggest potential directions for future research.

1. UNESCO. 2020. Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all. Paris, UNESCO

2. The full list of reforms will be shown on the STRIDE interactive map, which should be published in July 2026.

3. Due to the specificities of the Belgian education system, the French, Dutch and German speaking regions were analysed separately.

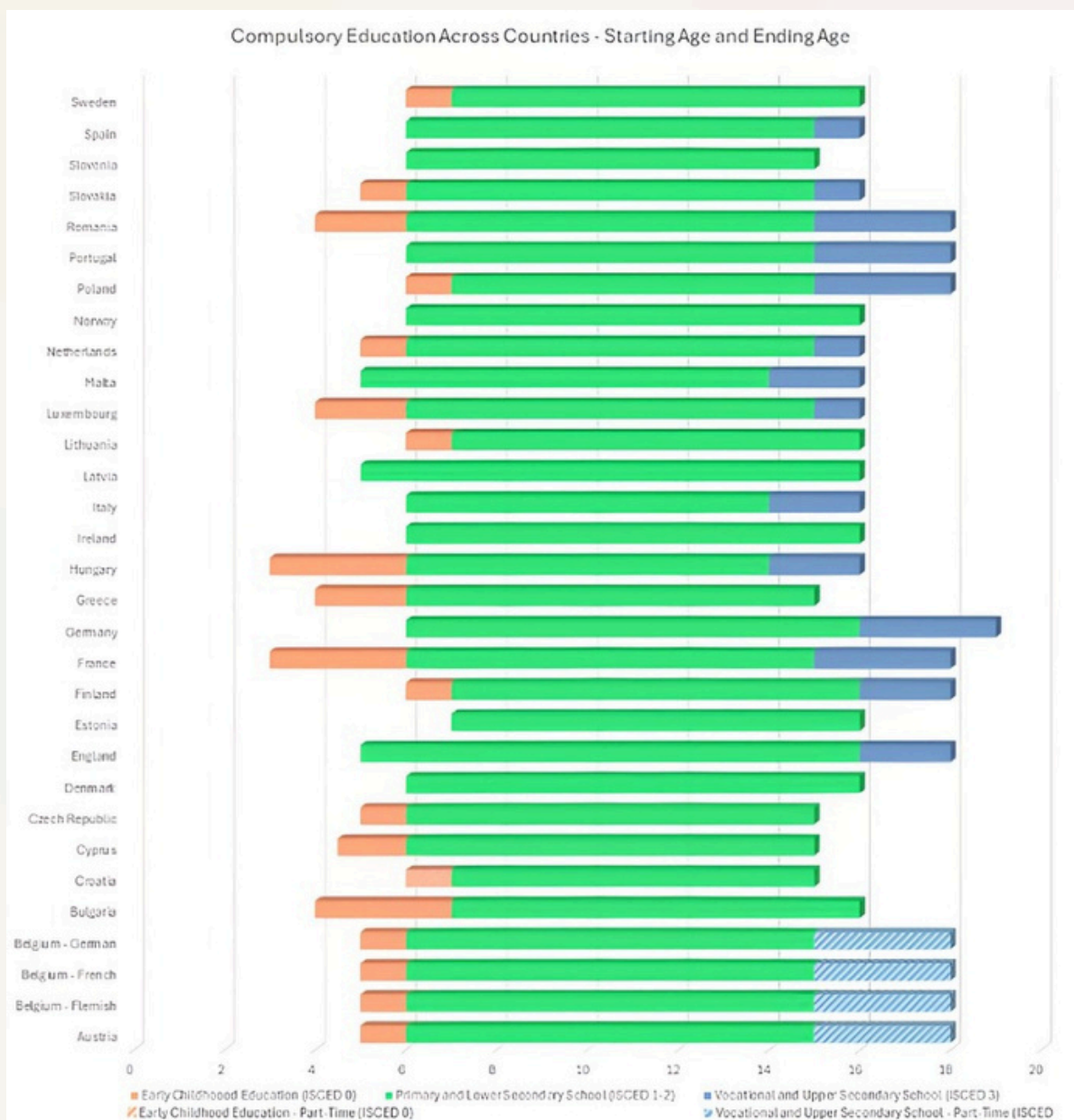
4. Eurydice and WikiYouth; OECD's publications; European Commission Reports; Official government websites; Strategic national education plans and reports; Peer-reviewed journal articles and Google Scholar and research databases.

5. The inputs of the National Stakeholder Groups (NSG) are taken into account in the development of different project outputs. More updates on their activities can be found on STRIDE's website.



Compulsory education: access for all

Over the 25 years of analysis, it was found that many countries chose to introduce a mandatory, either longer or shorter, period of attendance in **pre-primary education**, with some gradually lowering the starting age for compulsory participation (e.g. Hungary, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria). Findings also show that universal access to **primary education** is legally mandated. In **Upper secondary and vocational education and training (VET)**, the situation varies (see graph below) between full-time (most countries) and part-time requirements (Belgium, Austria). Although aiming to widen participation in learning in general, the results show that this overarching goal was often combined with goals addressing the needs of particular groups in disadvantaged situations.





Targeted reforms: going beyond widening access

At various levels, reforms were implemented that addressed significant **geographical disparities** with **location-based barriers** persisting, mainly in **rural areas**. Fewer reforms developed **regionally-focused measures** that complemented or operated in parallel with nation-wide initiatives. This area remains a topic for further exploration in terms of equity and equality, given the importance of historical, political, and socio-economic differences, including different legislative competences.

Targeted reforms addressing **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** took the form of interventions applying across the entire (compulsory) education system including **legislative changes, the removal of barriers** (physical as well as pedagogical) and the **provision of support within the learning process** (e.g. supporting teachers, individualised programmes or deploying assistive technologies). The 29 countries in focus show considerable differences in terms of **migrant inflows** and **ethnic diversity**, which shaped the reforms adopted. Reforms included support in the language of schooling, introducing support teachers and intercultural mediators, adapting teaching methods, with overarching goals such as widening participation, preventing segregation among learners, and early school leaving. Some measures were tailored to distinct groups, such as **Roma children** and **youth**, although the results showed low success rates, which require further analysis. Measures for this target group were more prevalent in Eastern European countries (i.e. Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary).

In recent years, reforms have also targeted dimensions of inequality related to **gender identity and sexual orientation**, with findings showing that although this matter presents a challenge so far, it has been addressed in only a limited number of reforms. Findings also showed that there have been measures aiming to **reduce discrimination in cultural and religious contexts** (i.e. Muslim or Jewish communities) as well as actions to minimise the potential for radicalisation.

Overall, the various findings regarding target groups revealed a wide range of interventions, many of which are tailored to different target groups based on their specific needs. The preliminary results already hint at a potential toolbox of measures that can help policymakers to develop effective reforms in the future.

Some examples for different targets:



- **Roma focused:** Romania - Bans on segregation encompassing ISCED 1–3 levels (2004 and 2007).
- **Disadvantaged learners focused:** Hungary - the On the Road Bursary Programme supported disadvantaged students in lower and upper secondary and VET (2005).
- **SEN learner focused:** Slovenia - Placement of Children with Special Needs Act covering multiple ISCED levels (2000).
- **Cultural and religious focused:** Greece - Education of Muslim Children programme (2010) and Germany - Recommendation on dealing with Anti-Semitism in schools (2021).



A toolbox of measures to address all learners' needs

Clusters of reforms were also identified by examining different areas of reform rather than target groups. These areas and the instruments used often served a dual purpose, being deployed for both supporting universal access and tailoring them for targeted measures (as seen in the previous section).



Adequate financial support and infrastructure at the core of inclusion

In the ECEC sector, findings showed that **financial support** was the primary form of **incentive-based approach**, with a distinction between **reforms that apply to all children and those that are income-based**. Financial support was also prevalent in other ISCED levels, and in **many cases, the funding stemmed from government subsidies and EU funds**. Reforms around **infrastructure** focused on both universal access and targeted measures, as well as both physical and non-physical infrastructure. In primary and lower secondary levels, results showed **continuous adaptation of buildings and equipment** (e.g., reducing access barriers), and focusing on infrastructures as the **background for implementing new initiatives** (e.g., digital education for all, assistive technologies for SEN learners).



Early school leaving: prevention for all vs targeted measures

Early school leaving is a challenge that prompted EU institutions to establish joint targets to be achieved, supported by EU cooperation. Findings show more reforms focused on prevention across the board and simultaneously targeted measures for disadvantaged learners. Reforms have focused on two main areas: **reducing the risk of premature school dropout** (e.g., Hungary, Norway, Sweden) and **encouraging and guiding young people** (e.g., Denmark, Greece) in choosing further educational pathways as a prevention against **becoming NEETs (Young Person Not in Education, Employment, or Training)**. The most popular measures included the recruitment of qualified teachers and supporting staff, providing extra time at school, extending compulsory education, and linking the payment of benefits to attendance.



From changes in curriculum to strengthening teachers and supportive staff

In the ECEC sector, findings indicate that universal curriculum reforms primarily focus on adapting content and methods to meet the developmental needs of children and support their transition to primary school. Targeted reforms aimed at, for example, an **adequate level of the country or region's language of instruction** (i.e., migrant background, Roma). In upper secondary and VET, reforms were more widespread, including the introduction of structured guidance and counselling mechanisms, as well as **changes in curricula** mentioned in the previous section. While in Higher Education, reforms aimed at promoting equality for **people with disabilities** through changes in admission (e.g., reduced financial burden) as well as educational methods.

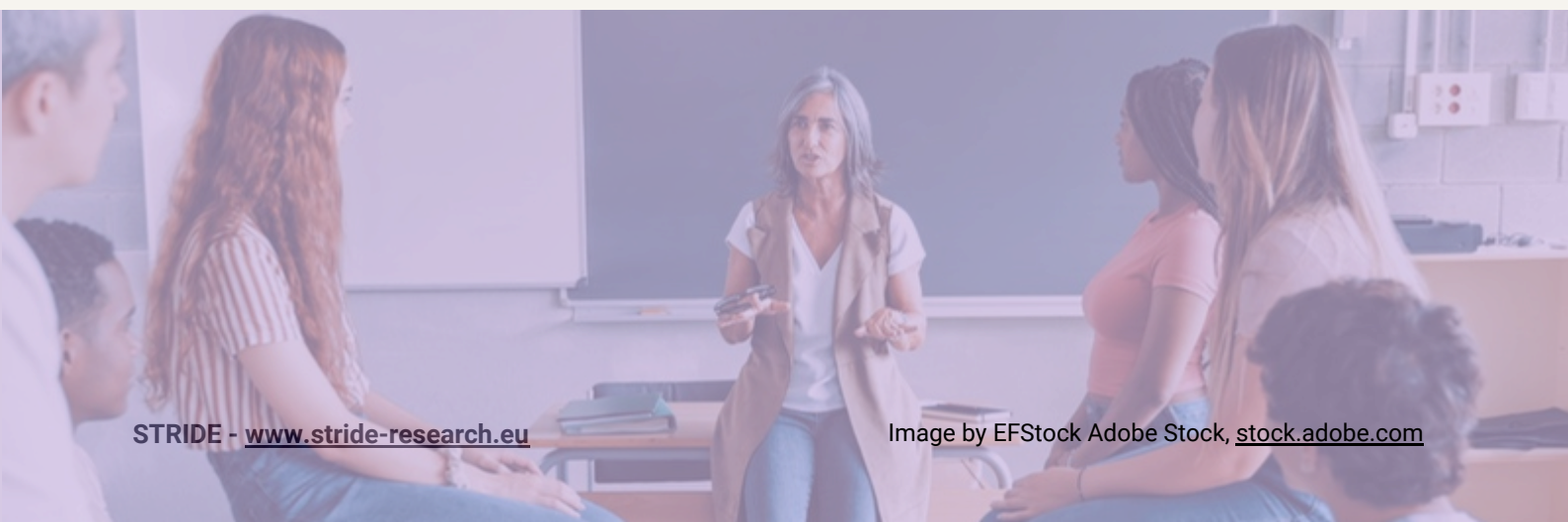
A trend has been identified in several reforms aimed at making education and training systems more flexible, allowing learners to individualise their learning paths and navigate transitions more effectively. For example, in the ECEC sector, achieving flexibility was represented by introducing various types of pre-school settings from which parents could choose. For upper secondary and VET, the results show that **changes in curricula** were made to enhance the sector's flexibility in matching the evolving needs of learners and society, and to facilitate both **horizontal transitions** (between general and vocational schools and between different university programmes) and **vertical transitions** (secondary to post-secondary non-tertiary education and tertiary education). In Higher Education, achieving flexibility was linked to actions targeting various adult groups related to **lifelong learning**.

A crucial area of reform refers to the teaching profession and support staff, ranging from increasing overall numbers of qualified professionals to developing specific competences through lifelong learning programmes. Often, recruitment was done in combination with other measures and goals (i.e., as part of early leaving prevention). For target groups such as learners with migrant backgrounds or Roma, as well as SEN learners, findings show that reforms included competence development (i.e., the language of schooling), the introduction of support teachers, and intercultural assistants. The findings from such measures provide key insights into potential solutions for the crisis faced by teachers and support staff.

Some examples at different levels:



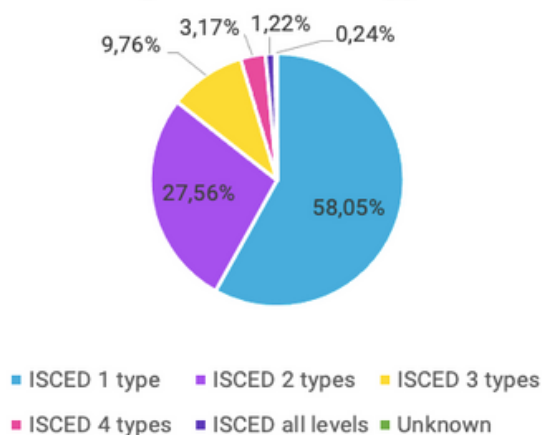
- **ECEC:** Funds allocated directly to parents or through reduced preschool fees - Hungary, Poland, Italy, Slovenia, and Ireland. Pedagogical curriculum based on the composition of the particular group of children enrolled – Denmark.
- **Primary and lower secondary:** Improving on hidden costs (e.g., free textbooks), Poland, free transport - Lithuania. Subsidies for school meals – Denmark. Conditionality of family allowance - Hungary. Extra funding for some schools / or changes in allocation strategy - Belgium (Flanders). Digital and technological competences and/or integration in school curriculum - Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Cyprus, Germany. Transversal skills (democracy, sustainability, life skills) - Latvia, Norway. Student-centred and competence approaches – Norway, Germany and individualised learning paths – Norway.
- **Upper secondary and VET:** Financial incentives/support aimed at helping students to complete secondary education, (financing e.g. regarding travel costs, textbooks, equipment etc.) - Italy, England, Latvia, Spain. Improve transition among sectors of education – Portugal.
- **Higher Education:** Financial and social support mechanism (Lithuania, Croatia and Portugal).





Holistic approaches: covering multiple/all levels

From targeted to holistic approaches



Various findings suggest that over the years, there has been a **shift in the approach to educational reform, moving from smaller-scale, narrowly focused reforms to more comprehensive, holistic measures** (e.g., the entire period of compulsory schooling) in some countries. This shift follows the trend that moves **beyond addressing only formal access to eliminate all barriers rooted in the learner's background and needs.**

This expansion of the policies also encompasses **ensuring students' mental health and well-being**, with results suggesting that the mental health and well-being of students became a priority in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the proliferation of digital tools as a mode of teaching delivery. At the EU level, the Digital Education Action Plan was developed, considering this aspect. **Some reforms emphasised the role of extracurricular activities (i.e. non-formal learning).** These activities can represent an essential aspect of inclusion/exclusion, as access to extracurricular activities often reflects the economic disparities among students' families. This also hints at the need to expand education policy analysis beyond formal education and training.

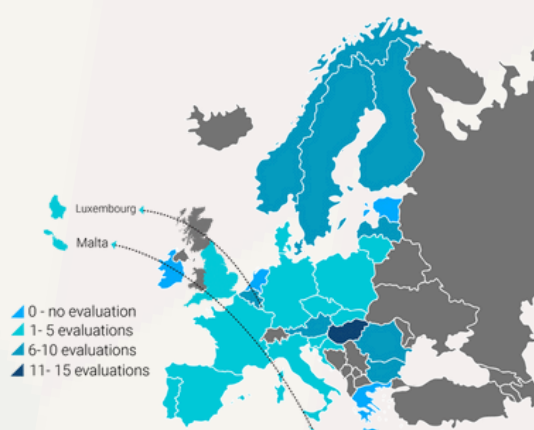
10



The challenge of monitoring and evaluation

It was found that although some reforms have been systematically evaluated, in most cases (over 60%), evaluation data is limited or unavailable, with a few reforms still ongoing. The countries with the most identified evaluations in the period in focus were Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Austria. However, since the review of the other reforms is unknown, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of specific initiatives and ensure comparability across countries.

Identified evaluation of reforms per country



This limitation affected the ability to draw definitive conclusions regarding the long-term impact of most of the reforms analysed. The EU institutions have made attempts to support Member States in this endeavour and have set up a Learning Lab to improve monitoring and evaluation practices in education and training (mainly focused on quantitative methods).



Conclusions

This policy brief is based on preliminary results and, although showcasing an extensive collection, should not be read as an exhaustive compilation. The full research report is foreseen to be completed for January 2026. This policy brief will be updated accordingly once available. Reviewing such a large amount of data can prove challenging. Often the reforms intertwine, e.g. in terms of target groups, the mix of measures combining universal dimension and targeted interventions. Furthermore, a majority of the investigated reforms have not been evaluated, or reform evaluation reports could not be found by the research team and this constitutes large data gaps. In the 2026 update of this policy brief, recommendations targeting different levels of political competence and institutions (national governments, EU institutions) will be provided.



Project Name: Strategies for Achieving Equity and Inclusion in Education, Training and Learning in Democratic Europe (STRIDE)

Coordinator: OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway - lhuan@oslomet.no

Consortium:

- Oslo Metropolitan University, NOVA, Oslo, Norway
- Jagiellonian University (JU), Poland
- National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), Greece
- VIA University College, Denmark
- TÁRKI Social Research Institute (TÁRKI), Hungary
- Roehampton University (RU), United Kingdom
- Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP), Belgium

Funding scheme:

Programme: Horizon Europe (HORIZON)

Call: Inclusiveness in times of change (HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01)

Duration: 1 February 2024 - 31 January 2027 (36 months)

EU contribution: 2 637 503.00 €

Website: <https://stride-research.eu/>

STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING EQUITY AND
INCLUSION IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND
LEARNING IN DEMOCRATIC EUROPE (STRIDE)

Partners	Person with responsibility of management	Contact email
P1 - Oslo Metropolitan University	Lihong Huang	lhuan@oslomet.no
P2 - National and Kapodistrian University of Athens	Dimitris Parsanoglou	dimparsa@soc.uoa.gr
P3 – VIA University College	Lillian Buus	libu@via.dk
P4 - Lifelong Learning Platform	Veronica Arduino	veronica.arduino@lllplatform.eu
P5 - TÁRKI Social Research Institute	István György Tóth	toth@tarki.hu
P6 – Jagiellonian University	Magdalena Ślusarczyk	magdalena.slusarczyk@uj.edu.pl
P7 – Roehampton University	Bryony Hoskins	bryony.hoskins@roehampton.ac.uk



Strategies for Achieving Equity and
Inclusion in Education, Training and
Learning in Democratic Europe (STRIDE)

