STRIDE
EDUCATIONAL POLICY FOR EQUITY & INCLUSION

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

25 years of education policy changes for Equity and Inclusion in Europe

Policy analysis report
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Policy analysis report

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Executive summary

- The report presents an analysis of how European countries have adopted different types of educational reforms, ranging from universal reforms targeting the wider student population to targeted interventions supporting specific groups of disadvantaged learners and reducing inequalities, while also identifying areas that remain unaddressed in current reform agendas.
- Ethnic diversity in Europe and varying levels of migration is addressed in a number of education policies and interventions. Shared features across several countries in Europe identified in this study pertain to national policy efforts and specific interventions that target language acquisition, preparatory classes, intercultural mediation, and tailored educational support to promote inclusion and academic success.
- Many countries emphasise early and structured language programmes, supplementary instruction, and linguistic assessments to ensure integration and equitable access to education: e.g. Germany's' *Sprach-Kitas programme* that seeks to enhance ongoing exposure to German in everyday activities in kindergartens; Finland's *National Core Curriculum Instruction Preparing for Basic Education* allows for instruction in native languages; and Denmark's universal language assessment regime at the beginning of primary school. Early childhood education is a key focus, with policies expanding access, lowering entry ages, providing financial support, and enhancing curriculum quality, for instance Romania's Law 56/2019 made the last year of Early Childhood Education compulsory and free, while enhancing access to childhood care in rural areas.
- A number of measures focus on ensuring children start school in good physical and mental condition, including meals, uniforms, extracurricular access, and family engagement; for instance, England's *Pupil Premium* reform.
- Many EU countries including, but not limited to, Finland, Norway and Hungary address challenges faced by Roma populations by implementing measures that aim to reduce segregation, enhance early childhood and compulsory education participation, improve language and cultural support, and involve families and communities. Programmes range from financial bursaries, mentoring, preparatory classes, inclusive curricula, to tertiary education initiatives, e.g. Hungary's *On the Road* provides both accommodation, stipends, extracurricular activities, and mentoring for Roma students.
- Students in the upper secondary level are increasingly offered tailored learning paths, elective modules, mentors, and differentiated study programs to accommodate diverse

needs and aspirations. This is oftentimes coupled with a modernisation of vocational education to align with labour market demands, including flexible pathways between academic and vocational tracks. Portugal's reform of VET upper secondary syllabus is an example of the attempt to align with labour market demands specifically through increasing work-based learning opportunities.

- Reforms at the level of tertiary education across Europe target improved access for students with disabilities, special educational needs (SEN), and disadvantaged groups, for instance Slovenia's *Placement of Children with Special Needs* that was aimed at all levels of education above primary school.
- Some countries have introduced region-specific programs to reduce disparities, addressing early school leaving, ECEC access, infrastructure, and administrative capacity. For instance, Italy's *National Operational Programme 2014–2020* has aimed to lower regional disparities especially targeting early school leaving. Many European countries have dedicated effort to address early school leaving with strategies that include tailored preparatory programmes, early warning systems, individualised mentoring, inclusive curricula, and cross-sector collaboration between schools, social services, and employment agencies, e.g. Slovenia's *CroCoos – Prevent Dropout* that have institutionalised an early warning system or Denmark's *Preparatory Basic Education* that targets students in risk of permanent exclusion from education or the labour market. Although the LGBTQIA+ population[1] receive sustained attention at a wider EU level, overall, findings from this study show that specific reforms targeting LGBTQIA+ minorities are scarce. Ireland was notably the first country to promulgate an action plan in mitigating the experiences of this group. This report showcases that many reforms appear to be unevaluated. This underscores the potential in harnessing the benefits of systematic and publicly available evaluation practices of national reform initiatives, which will allow for longitudinal comparative research to better understand potential benefits of policy efforts and interventions across countries in Europe. Cross-country analysis and comparison of experiences and data can be used for developing both shared regional as well as country specific efforts to advance equity and inclusion to benefit sustainable lifelong learning in Democratic Europe.

[1] Umbrella term used to denote individuals from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual/Aromantic Community, with the + (plus) signifying other diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and romantic orientations, acting as an inclusive umbrella for all gender and sexual minorities.

1. Introduction

Education can play a key role in building societies based on equality, social justice, and inclusion, as highlighted by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu emphasised that education systems have the potential to reproduce or mitigate social inequalities depending on their structure and accessibility (Bourdieu 1977). Inequalities in the societal context of education systems affect access to quality learning and students' life chances. Societal inequalities are categorised by factors such as the socioeconomic status of families, cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977), health capital (Cockerham 2013), ethnicity, race (FRA, 2023), gender, sexuality, place of residence, and migration status. In response to these challenges, governments are implementing educational reforms to address barriers to equal access to inclusive education. Based on the literature review this study identifies key policy actions: financial support for schools and pupils with disadvantaged background; promoting early education; changing the structure of educational systems; support for students with disabilities and learning conditions; support for students from migrant communities. Responsiveness to migration and ethnic diversity, for instance, often requires that existing inequalities due to language barriers, systemic biases, or limited access to resources are recognised (Valenzuela 1999). Recognising and explicitly addressing the educational needs of historically disadvantaged social groups is necessary for successful education efforts that seek to engage all students (Stromquist, 2013, 2015).

This report presents findings from a comparative international research study in which we have analysed educational reforms in Europe, over the last 25 years, that address the problem of inequality. The current research on Strategies for achieving Equity and Inclusion in Education, Training and Learning in Democratic Europe (STRIDE) was carried out as a study of policy and education reforms in Europe (27 EU countries plus Norway and England[2]) for advancing inclusion and equity. The research study contributes with analyses of secondary data collected from various databases and online repositories (see chapter 2 for a detailed description of research materials). This

[2] Focusing on England is a deliberate choice to maintain analytical consistency. Education is devolved in the UK. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland implemented their own variations, each with different funding structures and legislative frameworks.

report summarises findings from the STRIDE research carried out with support of EU (Horizon Europe) and UKRI funding. Specifically, the report provides an overview of significant national and regional education reforms aimed at rectifying inequalities in education and learning outcomes and to promote equity and inclusion in Europe.

Equality is understood in different ways depending on the social, political, and cultural context. Usually, equity and equality are discussed together. In the context of education, it is important to emphasise that equality means providing the same resources and opportunities and supporting the general needs necessary for success of the student population, regardless of their social, cultural, economic and ethnic background (UNESCO, 2020). To remain committed to equality is therefore also to remain within a formal concept of equality that does not take into account how systemic barriers can influence how educational support systems benefit diverse students differently. Achieving true equality necessitates measures that extend beyond providing identical resources as it also requires addressing systemic and intersectional disparities to allow all students to achieve comparable outcomes. While this interpretation of equality reflects certain perspectives in research and activist literature, it does not always correspond to the terminology used in the reforms analysed in this report. In fact, the term *equality* is employed for different purposes across the twenty-nine countries on which research was carried out in this study—sometimes in a formal sense of providing identical resources, and at other times in a broader sense of addressing systemic intersectional disparities.

Equity, in contrast, emphasises fairness by providing differentiated support to meet the unique needs of individual students from diverse backgrounds This tailored approach acknowledges that some students face additional barriers due to factors such as socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, gender, or geographic location. Equity thus aims to *level the playing field* by addressing these structural disadvantages (OECD, 2018). Recent studies, such as Reardon's (2019) research on income-based achievement gaps, emphasise that equity-focused interventions, such as targeted funding and early childhood education, are critical for reducing disparities in educational outcomes.

The World Bank (2021) highlights that while equality ensures uniform inputs, equity prioritises outcomes by recognising and addressing the root causes of inequality. This distinction has become central in recent global education reforms, which aim to close achievement gaps through policies that are sensitive to the diverse needs of learners. Sociologists such as Bourdieu, Boudon, and Bernstein have provided critical insights

into how education systems perpetuate or redress social inequalities. Bourdieu (1977) introduced the concept of cultural capital, arguing that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds do better in school because their language and behaviour are valued by the education system. Students' habitus plays an important role in reproducing the social system and is shaped by structural conditions that influence educational trajectories (Reay, 2004; Ball, 2003). The perspective thus outlined shows that educational inequalities are linked to social inequalities and should be considered in a broader context of symbolic power and social reproduction. Boudon (1974) emphasised the role of primary and secondary effects in educational inequality. Primary effects arise from differences in students' skills, while secondary effects relate to the choices students make. Both primary and secondary effects are modelled by social background (Jackson 2003). In practice, this means that social origin is treated as a key explanatory factor for both types of effects. Family social status influences not only students' academic performance but also their educational decisions. The theory has been revisited in later research on rational action theory and educational decision-making (Goldthorpe, 1996). Similarly, in Bernstein's theory, the linguistic codes used by students that are the result of socialisation within specific social contexts, influence educational success. Bernstein (2000) distinguishes between restricted and elaborated codes, which schools privilege unequally, reinforcing historical advantages associated with social categories (such as socioeconomic status groups). These theoretical perspectives explain how social categories such as social class contribute to educational inequality. Other social categories for which research shows links to historical and persistent disadvantages in education across different country contexts include gender, age, race, ethnicity, migration status and first language (Alcántara et al., 2023; FRA, 2023; Hinton-Smith & Padilla-Carmona, 2021; Stromquist, 2013, 2015; Wiksten, 2023).

Educational policies aimed at achieving equity and addressing existing inequalities must move beyond the concept of formal equality, which often treats all students the same without considering the structural differences that may exist among them. Instead of focusing solely on formal equality, which guarantees identical legal or institutional access, policies should embrace equity-oriented approaches. Formal equality simply ensures that everyone has the same legal or institutional access to education, but it fails to account for the disparities in resources, opportunities, and support that students from different backgrounds may face (for example: economic status, health conditions, migrant background, living place). To create true equity in education, policies must actively target and dismantle the systemic barriers that

contribute to social stratification, such as economic inequality, discrimination, or unequal access to quality resources and teaching. Scholars argue for multidimensional justice frameworks—redistribution, recognition, and representation—as essential for reducing educational disparities in globalised contexts (Francia & Åstrand, 2024). Furthermore, ecological approaches highlight the need to consider interconnected social, economic, and cultural conditions shaping educational outcomes (Bishop & Noguera, 2019).

The report is structured in six main chapters, starting with this introduction. Then Chapter 2 sets out the foundation by outlining the methodology employed in the study. It explains the research design, data sources, and analytical strategies used to identify patterns and trends in educational reforms and policy measures. This methodological framework ensures transparency and rigor in the interpretation of findings.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of key features of the 29 countries that we have reviewed (27 EU countries, plus Norway and England). It begins with a general description of structural elements such as compulsory education and tuition fees. The chapter then moves to an analysis of reforms, including their frequency, scope, and typology, as well as the identified evaluations of their effectiveness found by the research team. This section concludes with a summary of the most significant observations.

Chapter 4 focuses on policies designed to promote equity, equality, and inclusion within education in Europe. It examines measures implemented across different educational levels—from early childhood to tertiary education—and considers how these policies address the needs of diverse target groups. Special attention is given to socio-economically disadvantaged students, marginalised regions, ethnic minorities, learners with special educational needs, and issues related to gender and sexual diversity. This chapter highlights both structural and programmatic approaches aimed at reducing disparities and fostering inclusive learning environments.

Chapter 5 offers a critical discussion on the increasing emphasis placed on inequality, equity, and social inclusion in educational policy. It reflects the progress achieved, evaluates the measures applied, and identifies gaps and areas that require further intervention. This discussion underscores the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation as key tools for advancing policy goals and ensuring that educational systems contribute to greater social cohesion.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents conclusions and recommendations derived from the analysis. It synthesises the key findings and proposes actionable steps for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders to strengthen equity and inclusion in education. These recommendations aim to guide future reforms and support the development of more inclusive and resilient educational systems.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in the report. It presents the scope of the analysis, the criteria for selecting countries and policies, and the procedures used to collect and interpret data. The study examines educational reforms and policy initiatives implemented in 29 European countries between 1999 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen to capture both long-term systemic changes and more recent developments in education policy. By covering a 25-year period, the analysis identifies trends in policy design, shifts in priorities, and the evolving challenges faced by education systems. The following sections detail the research design, data sources, and analytical framework applied in the study.

The main objective of the comparative methodological approach used was to ensure a comprehensive examination of policies that directly or indirectly influence educational inequalities. To achieve this, we have identified and analysed legislative measures, national and regional programmes, and institutional strategies that aim to improve access to education, support vulnerable student groups, and enhance overall educational quality. Our analysis encompasses reforms at different educational levels, following the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)[3]:

ISCED 0 – Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

ISCED 1 & 2 – Primary and Lower Secondary Education

ISCED 3 – Upper Secondary Education (General and Vocational)

ISCED 4+ – Higher Education

[3] **ISCED** is the reference international classification for organising education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields. ISCED 2011 (levels of education) has been implemented in all EU data collections since 2014. ISCED-F 2013 (fields of education and training) has been implemented since 2016.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED)

A crucial aspect of this comparative international research study was the identification of key policy trends across Europe, highlighting the most common and innovative approaches to reducing educational inequalities. Many countries have introduced targeted interventions for disadvantaged groups, such as Roma students, migrant children, and students with special educational needs. Others have implemented structural changes, such as extending compulsory education, increasing investment in early childhood education, or reforming vocational training to enhance social mobility. This methodological framework was designed to provide a clear and reliable foundation for assessing the effectiveness of different educational policies. While some reforms have been systematically evaluated, in many cases, assessment data is limited or unavailable. Nevertheless, the analysis presented in this report provides a comparative overview of the measures taken in different national contexts, identifying both best practices and areas where further research and policy action are needed.

2.2. Data sources and selection of policies and reforms

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of educational reforms aimed at reducing inequalities, this study relies on a diverse set of data sources. These sources were carefully selected to ensure accuracy, reliability, and a broad representation of national and international perspectives on education policies. The main categories of data sources included:

- Eurydice and Youth Wiki[4] – European networks providing detailed descriptions and comparative analyses of education systems and reforms in European countries.

[4] Youth Wiki is an online encyclopedia providing insights into youth policies across 34 European countries. It fosters evidence-based cooperation and peer-learning in the youth sector, supporting the European Commission and national decision-making. Information is sourced and updated by National Correspondents designated by each country's responsible authority, usually the ministry overseeing youth policies. (https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki)
Eurydice is a network of 43 European National Units providing data and analyses on European education systems. It publishes descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies on key topics, and data and visuals on a range of education issues. Eurydice supports policy-making in education. National Units are appointed by the responsible public authority of each country, usually the ministry in charge of education policies. (https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu//eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/).

They served as a key reference for understanding national education structures and policies;
- OECD's publications[5] – reports were utilised to gather insights into policy changes, their objectives, and, where available, their impact;
- European Commission Reports – these publications provided updates on policy trends, educational outcomes, and equity-related challenges across EU member states;
- official government websites – national ministries of education and other regulatory bodies provided legislative documents, policy frameworks, and progress reports on educational reforms to ensure country-specific perspectives;
- strategic education plans and reports – long-term national strategies were used to contextualise policy decisions;
- peer-reviewed journal articles – research published in educational policy and social science journals provided empirical evaluations of reforms and their effectiveness;
- Google Scholar and research databases – additional literature was identified using keyword searches related to education reforms, inequalities, and inclusion.

By integrating data from these diverse sources, this approach allowed for an assessment of both policy intentions and their practical implementation, highlighting best practices as well as areas where further action is needed to address educational inequalities.

The selection of educational policies for this study was guided by specific criteria to ensure relevance to the topic of educational inequalities. Policies were included if they met one or more of the following conditions:

- direct impact on educational equity – policies explicitly designed to reduce inequalities, such as targeted programmes for disadvantaged students, special needs education reforms or measures addressing regional disparities;
- structural changes in education systems – reforms that affect the overall accessibility and quality of education, such as extending compulsory schooling or increasing funding for early childhood education;

[5] The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is an international organisation serving as a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy, working with over 100 countries across the world. (https://www.oecd.org/en/about.html)

- interventions targeting specific groups – policies aimed at supporting vulnerable student populations, including Roma students, migrant children, students from low-income families, and children with disabilities;
- additional criterion: availability of evaluation data – preference was given to policies for which some form of impact assessment or evaluation was available, though the lack of systematic evaluations remains a challenge in some cases.

2.2.1. Scope of analysis

In the STRIDE research study, we have examined educational reforms aimed at reducing inequalities across 29 European countries, covering a broad spectrum of reforms from a 25-year period (policies started between 1999 and 2024). The analysis focused on identifying key measures introduced at different levels of education, assessing their objectives, implementation strategies, and, where possible, their impact on reducing disparities in educational access and outcomes. While the number and nature of analysed reforms vary by country, efforts were made to ensure representation of policies across all ISCED levels. Additionally, the research considered policy evaluation and monitoring.

2.3. Limitations

While the research on which we report aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of educational reforms addressing inequalities across most of European countries, several limitations must be acknowledged. The main challenge was language, as data collection was carried out by researchers from six European countries (Denmark, Greece, England, Hungary, Norway, Poland) thus our expertise in the number of languages in Europe was limited (Danish, Greek, German, English, Hungarian, Norwegian, Polish). This limitation was mitigated using international databases and articles in English. However, based on experience with those countries with which the researchers had a thoroughgoing familiarity, it has not always been possible to gather all relevant information through the chosen means. In some cases, language barriers may have limited the completeness and accuracy of the identification of national reforms, as relevant information may not have been fully accessible through English-language sources. Databases might both be incomplete and out of date with the latest

reforms and the quality of description of the reforms throughout the various databases and entries to different databases might vary significantly as there is no uniform requirement of entries. The availability and quality of data on educational reforms vary significantly across countries. While some nations maintain detailed databases and regularly publish policy reports, others provide limited public access to such information.

Another challenge concerns the description of the reforms in the databases. The aim of the STRIDE project is to analyse the most important educational reforms in Europe over the last 25 years that address inequality. As such, we have only analysed reforms that clearly address this issue in the description of the reform in the database. However, we cannot be sure that all of the reforms in the databases have adequate descriptions in relation to our aim. It is therefore possible that some relevant reforms have not been identified because the databases may describe them in general terms, making it difficult to identify how, and if, the reform address inequality.

An additional limitation of the analyses is that some reforms might have objectives other than directly addressing inequality, yet tackling this issue might still be a secondary, albeit less prominent, goal of the reform. However, this does not preclude that a reform not primarily aimed at addressing inequality can have significant impact on inequalities in education and learning outcomes and promote or hinder equity and inclusion. This is notably the case with universal policies, such as a national education policy for providing quality school lunches to all children in compulsory education (Alderman, 2024). In these instances, relevant terms might be missing from the consulted databases, making it difficult to identify these reforms. However, by using expert judgment and contextual analysis, it is possible to recognise reforms whose mechanisms or expected outcomes are likely to affect educational inequalities, even if this is not explicitly mentioned.

Another challenge concerns the definition of reform. In this study, we adopt the classifications used by Eurydice and Youth Wiki; if an action is designated as a reform in these sources, we retain that designation without further contestation. It should be noted, however, that certain policy measures aimed at reducing educational inequality – such as government surveys or smaller-scale initiatives – may not be categorised as reforms in these databases or in a broader policy context, even though they may exert a substantial influence on educational equity.

Significantly, only educational reforms have been analysed in this report. Some actions related to equalising educational opportunities are embedded in initiatives related to

health (health policies, for example, those concerning people with disabilities), policies for national and ethnic minorities, or those related to social welfare. Education systems in Europe differ widely in terms of structure, governance, and policy priorities. These differences complicate direct comparisons between reforms, as policies may be implemented and interpreted differently depending on national and regional contexts. Education policies are often subject to political changes, leading to reforms being introduced, modified, or even reversed within a short period. Yet some of the most important measures towards mitigating educational and social inequality are not part of educational legislation but are rather instituted with, for instance, housing or other social policies. Some of these policies might implicitly or explicitly introduce measures that are meant to be effectuated within the educational systems, but due to constraints in time and resources, these other reforms were not included in this analysis.

Finally, we note that there is an inconsistent availability of impact evaluations for many of the reforms analysed. While some countries conduct regular assessments of their education policies, others lack systematic evaluation frameworks, making it difficult to measure the effectiveness of specific initiatives. This limitation affects the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the long-term impact of certain reforms on educational inequalities.

3. Key Features Overview

This section provides an overview of key structural features and recent reform activity across the educational systems of 29 countries. It outlines patterns in compulsory education, public schooling and tuition fees, private school attendance, and the degree of centralisation and decentralisation in school decision-making. Additionally, the section examines reform trends, their distribution across ISCED levels, types of reforms, and the extent to which reforms have been evaluated. By providing a comparative overview, this section highlights differences and commonalities in European education systems and sets the stage for further analysis of how structural characteristics and reform strategies may influence educational equity, inclusion, and quality outcomes.

3.1. General Overview of Educational Systems

3.1.1. Compulsory Education

National educational systems of 27 EU countries, Norway, and England are described in the following. The three communities of Belgium are treated individually, as each has its own legislative and executive organs. Belgium comprises: (1) the French Community, (2) the German Community, and (3) the Flemish Community.

Compulsory education or training in Europe generally refers to education that takes place in formal institutions and is regulated by law in the individual countries as compulsory. In some countries, compulsory education is not necessarily provided by education institutions, it can also be provided at home. This is, for instance, the case in Denmark or Poland where legal guardians can apply for instruction at home. Such private tuition is regulated by law. Local municipalities serve as the supervisory authority to ensure that the quality of private tuition provided in the home is comparable to the requirements that apply to public schools.

Compulsory education is usually regulated as full-time education, although some countries combine compulsory full-time education with compulsory part-time education (see Chart 1). Such instances of compulsory part-time education are located either at the beginning or at the end of the full-time compulsory education, i.e. either in pre-

school (ISCED 0) or in vocational and upper secondary education (ISCED 3). However, only Croatia employs a dual system at the level of pre-schools, while only Austria and the three communities of Belgium operate with a dual system of compulsory education in vocational and upper secondary education. Such a dual system of part-time compulsory education is not found in primary or lower secondary schools.

Among the countries reviewed, the minimum duration of compulsory education is 9 years while the longest duration of full-time education is found in France (15 years). The average across all the countries is 11.37 years of compulsory education. Only three countries – Croatia, Estonia, and Slovenia – have a duration of 9 years of compulsory education, although Croatia due to their dual system only have 8 years of full-time compulsory education. Nineteen countries have a duration of compulsory education between 10-12 years, and nine countries have set the duration between 13 and 15 years. Austria and the three communities of Belgium each have 13 years of compulsory education, although only 10 years of these are comprised of full-time education due to their dual system of compulsory education.

Most countries provide 9 years of compulsory full-time primary and lower secondary education. Croatia, Hungary, and Italy have set this duration at 8 years of compulsory education at the level of primary and lower secondary education, making these the three countries with the shortest duration in primary and lower secondary school. Denmark, Germany, and Norway require 10 years of compulsory education at these levels.

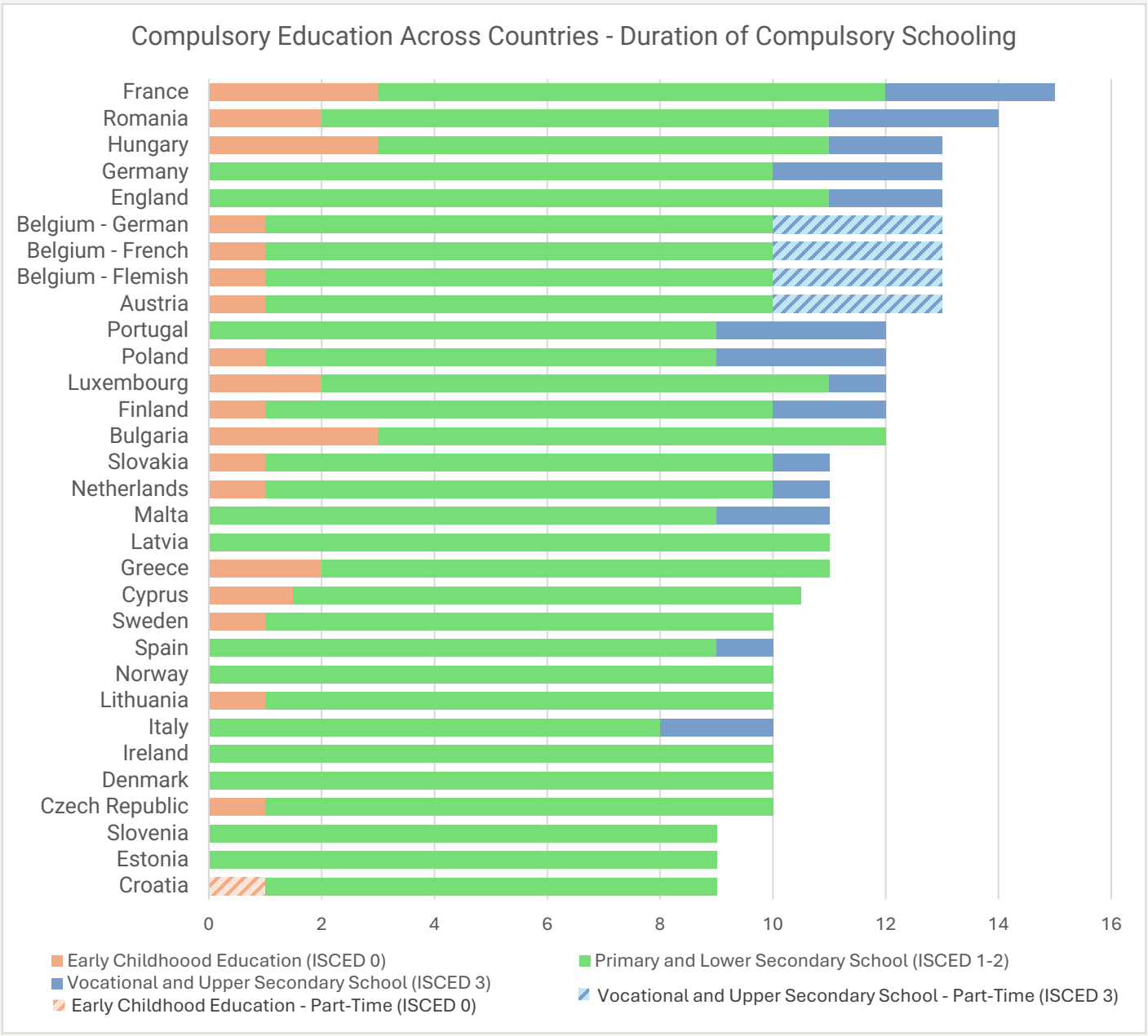

Chart 1: Total Years of Compulsory Education from Longest to Shortest Duration. Source: Eurydice 2025. Chart constructed by Simon Nørgaard Iversen.

Compulsory education begins in pre-school in nineteen countries, with most setting a duration of 1 year of compulsory pre-school education. In Greece, Luxembourg, and Romania, the duration of compulsory pre-school education is 2 years, whereas Bulgaria, France, and Hungary require 3 years. At the opposite end of the spectrum, slightly more than one-third of the countries allow compulsory education to end with the completion of secondary education. Thus, just under two-thirds – eighteen countries – have implemented compulsory education that extends into vocational and upper secondary

education. Half of these countries have set the duration of compulsory education in vocational and upper secondary schools at 3 years. Five countries prioritise 2 years, while four countries require 1 year of compulsory education at this level.

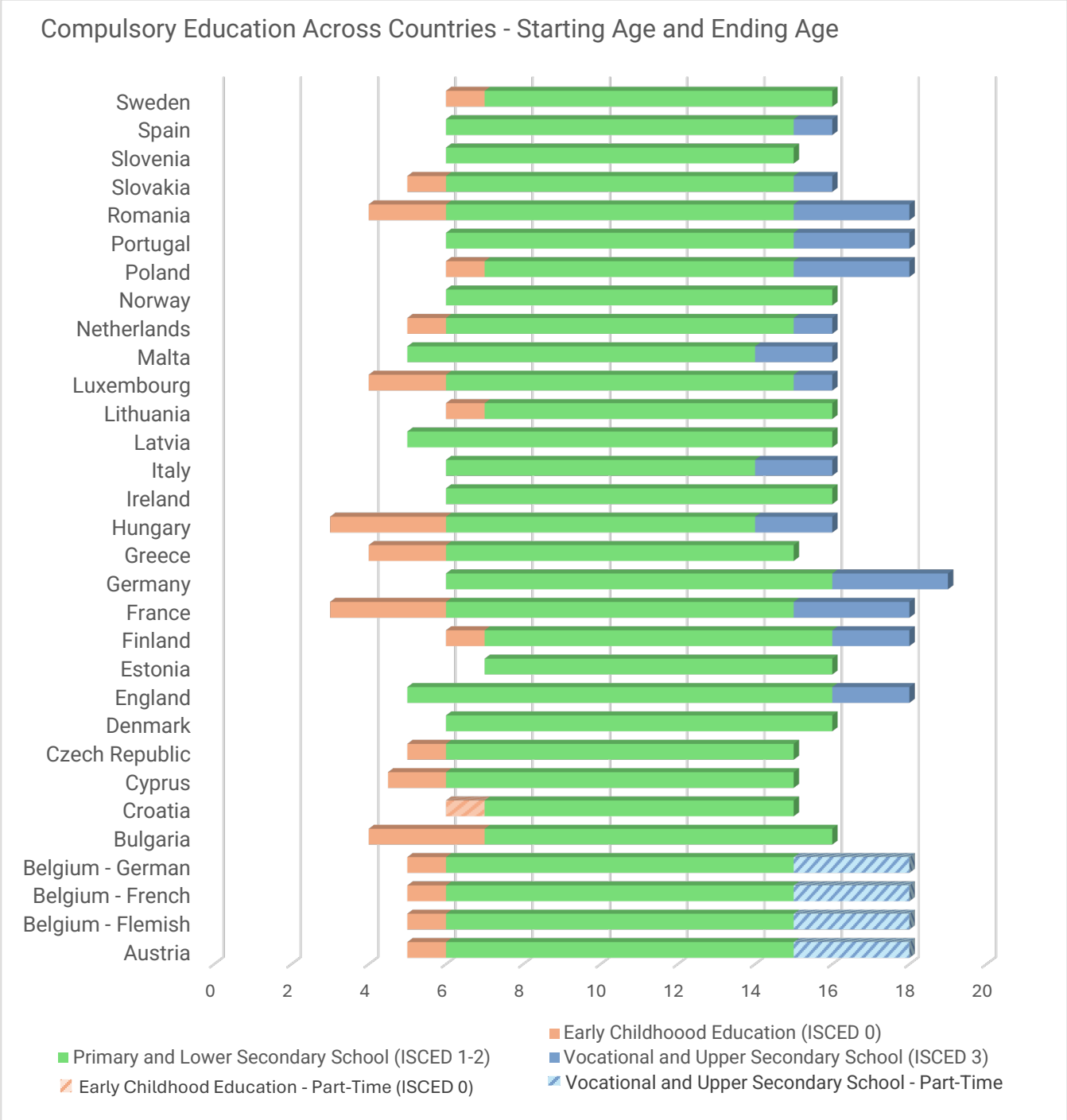

Chart 2: Compulsory Education Starting and Ending Age. Source: Eurydice 2025. Chart constructed by Simon Nørgaard Iversen.

On average, compulsory education starts in the year when the child turns 5 years old, with only a few countries beginning compulsory education earlier: Cyprus at 4.5 years; Bulgaria, Greece, Luxembourg, and Romania at 4 years; and Hungary and France in the year the child turns 3 years old.

The starting age for enrolment in primary school is, in most countries, the year the child turns 6 years old (see Chart 2). Only Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden begin later, with enrolment in primary school in these countries occurring in the year the child turns 7. However, in most of these countries, compulsory education begins while the child is still in pre-school at age 6. In Bulgaria, compulsory education starts with 3 years of pre-school and thus begins in the year the child turns 4 years old. Estonia is the only country in which compulsory education begins in the year the child turns 7.

Compulsory education ends at age 16 in fifteen countries. The school-leaving age for compulsory education is on average 16.58 years, with Germany recording the highest at 19 years. Compulsory education ends at 18 years in Austria, all communities of Belgium, England, Finland, France, Romania, Poland, and Portugal, while in five countries – Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Slovenia – it ends at age 15.

Potential for further comparative analysis:

- Can starting and ending ages be linked with data that substantiate achievement of broader equity or inclusion goals?
- To what extent do differences in primary and lower secondary duration correlate with student outcomes in literacy, numeracy, or other equity metrics?

3.1.2. Public Schooling and Tuition Fees

All European countries in question provide primary and lower secondary education free of charge (see Table 1). Almost all countries, with the exception of Slovenia, provide upper secondary education free of charge, while slightly more than half of all countries do so for education at ISCED level 4 or above. Thirteen countries either fully or partially charge for education at level 4 or above.

There are many different types of institutionalisation of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in relation to tuition fees. According to Eurydice, ECEC can be free of charge with or without a place guarantee, or it can be subsidised with a place guarantee, or provided as paid provision without a place guarantee. Only one country, Latvia, guarantees ECEC free of charge throughout all years of pre-school.

	Public Schools Free of Charge						
	ISCED 0			ISCED 1	ISCED 2	ISCED 3	ISCED 4+
	Age under 2	Age 3	Last ECEC year				
Austria	€ !	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Belgium - Flemish	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Belgium - French	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Belgium - German	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Bulgaria	✓ !	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Croatia	€ !	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Cyprus	€ !	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Czech Republic	€ !	~	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Denmark	~	~	~	✓	✓	✓	✓
England	NA	NA	NA	✓	✓	✓	€
Estonia	~	~	~	✓	✓	✓	✓
Finland	~	~	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
France	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Germany	~	~	~	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greece	€ !	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hungary	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ireland	€ !	✓ !	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	€
Italy	€ !	✓ !	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	€
Latvia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lithuania	✓ !	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Luxembourg	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Malta	€ !	✓ !	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	€
Netherlands	€ !	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Norway	~	~	~	✓	✓	✓	✓
Poland	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Portugal	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Romania	✓ !	✓ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Slovakia	€ !	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Slovenia	~	~	~	✓	✓	€	✓
Spain	€ !	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	€
Sweden	~	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

ECEC (ISCED 0)	
	Free of Charge - Place Guaranteed ✓
	Subsidised - Place Guaranteed ~
	Free of Charge - No Place Guarantee ✓ !
	Paid Provision - No Place Guarantee € !

Free	✓
Charged or Partial	€

Table 1: Tuition Fees. NOTE: Information on ECEC fees in England is not included on Eurydice and is here rendered NA (Not Available). Source: Eurydice 2024. Table constructed by STRIDE consortium members, see methodology section.

Bulgaria, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Romania provide pre-school free of charge under the age of 2 but do not guarantee a place. This continues at age 3 in Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Romania, while Luxembourg and Portugal offer a guaranteed free place at age 3. Seven countries offer subsidised enrolment with a place guarantee, and five of these – Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Norway, and Slovenia – do so for all years of enrolment in pre-school. Finland maintains this until the final year of ECEC, at which point it offers a place guarantee free of charge, while Sweden implements this policy from age 3. In twenty-five countries, ECEC provision requires parents to pay fees, and there is no place guarantee under the age of 2. Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands, and Slovakia maintain this at age 3, after which they offer pre-school free of charge and with a place guarantee in the final year of ECEC. Ireland, Italy, and Malta all offer enrolment free of charge but without a place guarantee from the age of 3 onwards, while the Czech Republic provides a subsidised place guarantee at age 3 and then offers free enrolment with a place guarantee in the final year of pre-school. All three communities in Belgium, France, Hungary, Poland, and Spain offer a guaranteed free place from the age of 3 onwards.

In summary, most countries offer free enrolment from age 3, although not all countries guarantee a place. Almost all countries provide the final year of ECEC free of charge and with a guaranteed place. Thus, tuition fees for pre-school enrolment are in most cases discontinued at various points during pre-school as enrolment becomes free of charge, which could suggest that the gradual phasing out of tuition fees across pre-school years reflects a common European strategy of maximising enrolment at crucial moments in early children's early education.

Potential for further comparative analysis:

- How does tuition policies and place guarantee in ECEC translate into social equity outcomes?
- Do differences in private tuition fees translate into differences in socio-economic stratification?

3.2. Overview of Reforms

3.2.1. Total Number of Reforms

A total of 431 reforms has been identified in this survey. An analysis of the number of reforms identified per year reveals a steady increase in reform implementation across European countries. The period between 1999 and 2007 appears relatively stable, with a

total of 6–13 reforms implemented per year. From 2008 onwards, there is an upward trend in the number of identified reforms. Between 2008 and 2012, between 19 and 21 reforms were identified annually across the European countries. In 2013, this number fell to 13 reforms, only to increase again to 32 and 31 reforms in the following two years. From 2016 to 2021, the number of new reforms remains relatively stable, fluctuating between 10 and 23 reforms per year. In 2022 and 2023, the number of reforms again increases before stabilising at around 20 identified reforms in 2024.

When reform implementation is described in five-year averages, the upward tendency becomes more apparent. An average of 6.8 reforms were implemented between 1999 and 2003, a figure that almost doubled to 11.8 between 2004 and 2008. A further significant increase occurred between 2009 and 2013, with 18.2 reforms implemented annually, rising again to 23.4 per year between 2014 and 2018. Between 2019 and 2023, a slight increase resulted in an average of 26 new reforms per year.

Over time, more reforms have been identified, although no firm conclusions can be drawn solely on this basis. While this may reflect a general tendency among European countries to develop and implement more reforms, the trend may also reflect differences in reform registration practices, suggesting that countries may be becoming more consistent in how they register reforms.

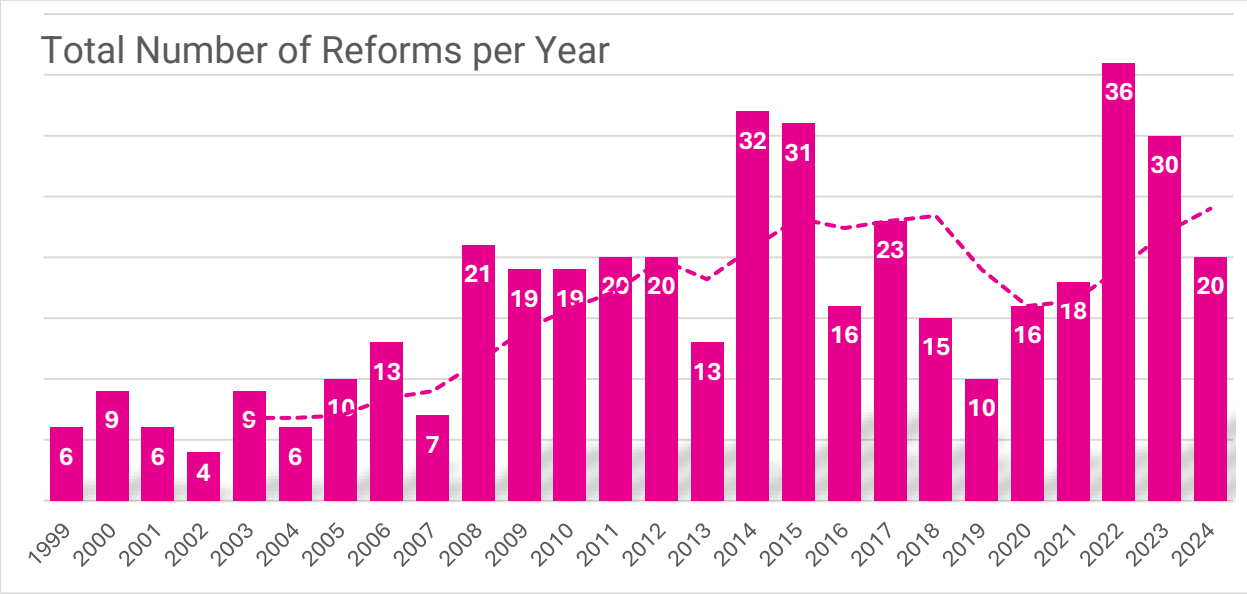

Chart 3: Total Number of Reforms per Year. Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members: See methodology section, retrieved 2024-2025.

Potential for further comparative analysis:

- How does the upward trend in reform numbers reflect EU policy pressures or other international benchmarking regimes relating to increased attention to inequality and inclusion?
- How do fluctuations in reform numbers reflect other contingent external push and pull factors, and what is the latency from event to reform implementation?

3.2.2. Number of Reforms per Country

European countries have implemented an average of 13.47 reforms in total between 1999 and 2024. Most countries are close to this average, although a few – particularly Luxembourg and Malta – have implemented significantly more than average, while others, such as the Netherlands and Italy, have implemented significantly fewer. Within Belgium, the Flemish Community has implemented more reforms than the European average, whereas both the French and German Communities have implemented significantly fewer. Only one reform in Belgium has been identified as applying across all three communities, making it the only nationwide reform. If Belgium is considered as a single unit, however, it has implemented a total of 29 reforms, ranking it above both Luxembourg and Malta and raising the European average to 14.86 reforms.

Overall, this dataset suggests a broad and consistent concern among European countries for developing and implementing educational reforms aimed at addressing inequality, equity, and inclusion, with only a few outliers deviating significantly above or below the European average. However, differing registration practices across countries may explain some of the variation in identified reforms. It cannot be guaranteed that all countries follow equally streamlined processes for registering national reforms in international databases.

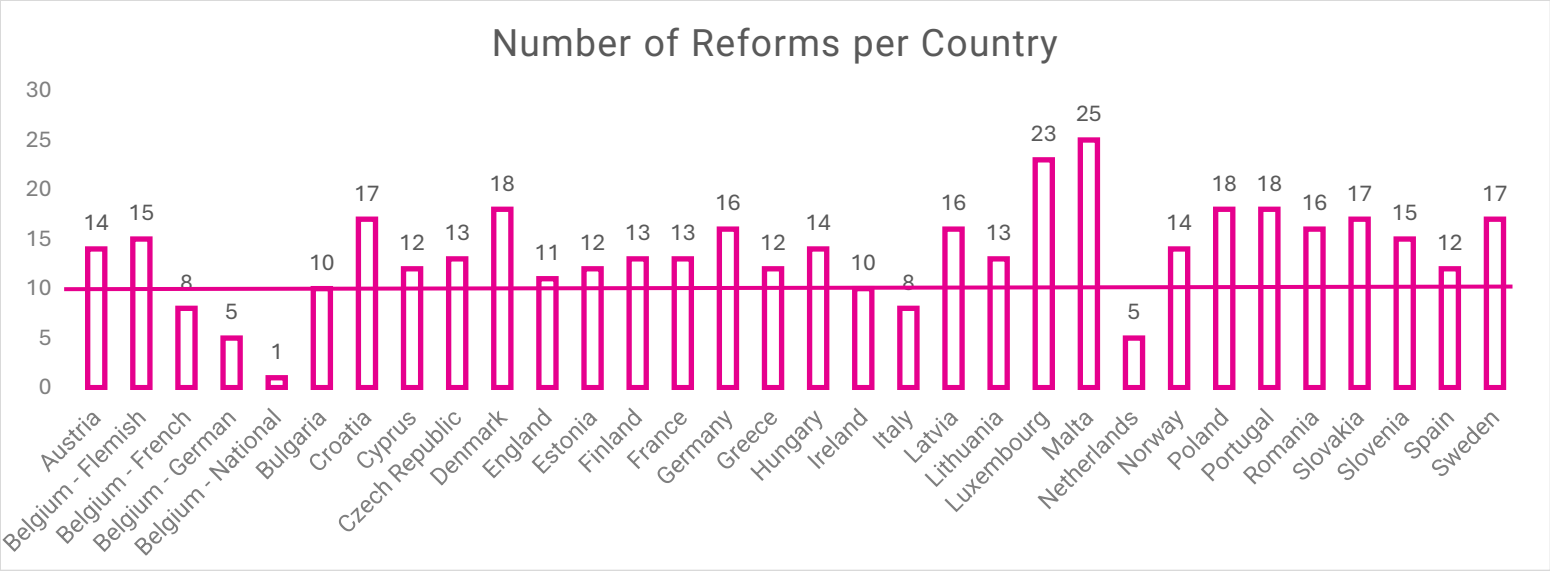

Chart 4: Total Number of Reforms per country? Source: See Methodology Section, retrieved 2024-2025. Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members, see methodology section.

<u>Potential for further comparative analysis:</u>

- In what way does the total reforms per country reflect governance structures, policy capacity, or reform culture rather than just policy need?

3.2.3. Total Number of Reforms at Different ISCED Levels

With regard to targeted ISCED levels, almost all reforms are directed exclusively at specific levels: ISCED 0 = 66 reforms; ISCED 1–2 = 102; ISCED 3 = 116; and ISCED 4 = 62. This indicates that European countries generally target reform efforts at distinct parts of the education sector, corresponding to the tiers defined by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). While relatively few reforms target multiple ISCED levels, a total of 84 reforms are designed to affect more than one level.

Notably, reforms targeted at ISCED levels 1–3 are substantially higher than other cross-ISCED reform constellations, suggesting that European countries have been particularly focused on the period from primary through lower secondary education (ISCED 1–2) to upper secondary education (ISCED 3).

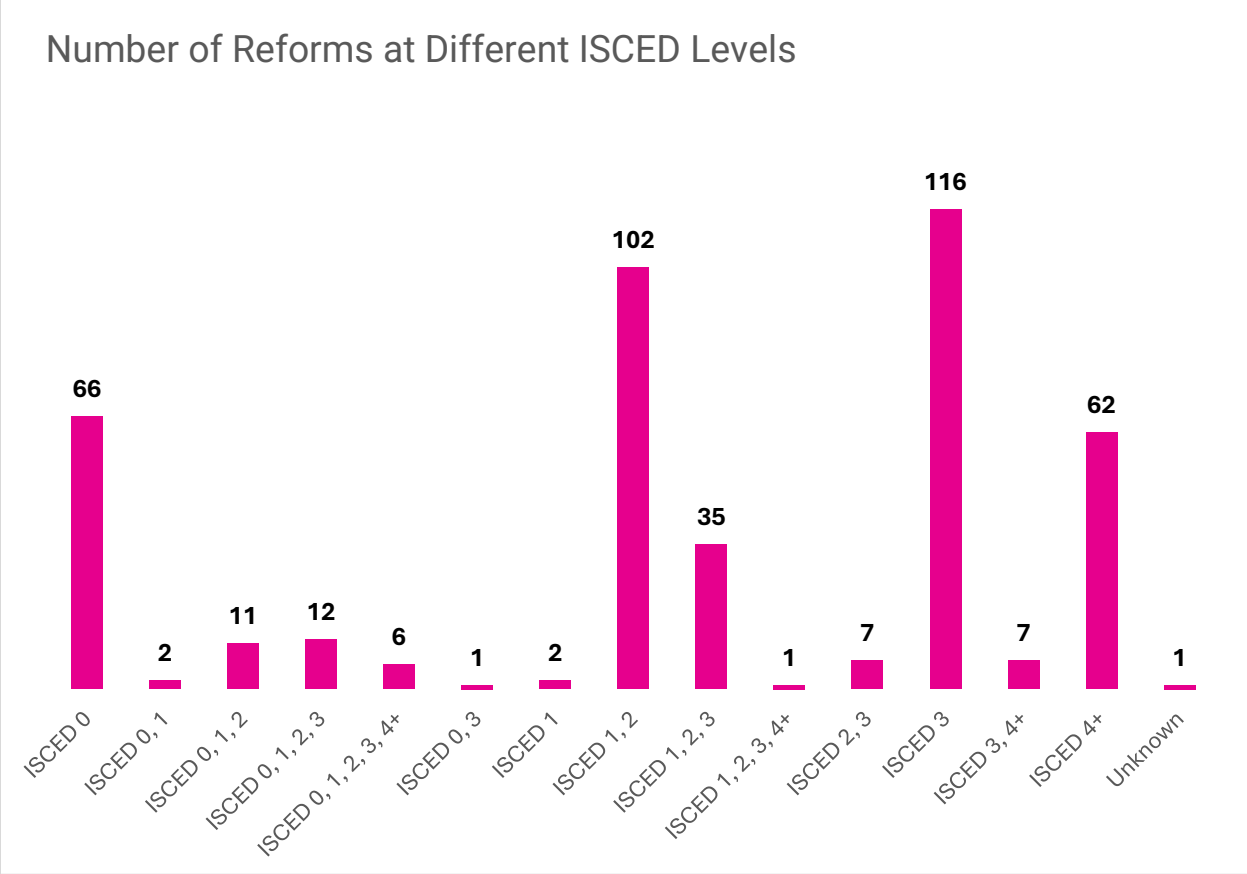

Chart 5: Number of Reforms at Different ISCED Levels. Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members: See methodology section, retrieved 2024-2025.

Potential for further comparative analysis:

- Relatively few cross-ISCED reforms suggest that holistic system-wide approaches are less common, but how do multi-level reforms differ from single-level reforms in terms of long-term equity outcomes?

3.2.4. Types of Reforms

A total of five different types of reforms has been identified; a sixth category (unspecified) consists of reforms that have not been adequately described in the databases, making it difficult to clearly categorise them using either an a priori or a posteriori framework.

A total of 117 reforms are focused on curriculum changes, while 219 reforms aim at implementing general changes to the educational system or increasing access. 41 reforms target evaluation systems, including final examination regimes or admission procedures based on prior assessment. 56 reforms are directed toward special education, 44 focus on teacher education or employment, and 59 reforms are unspecified. The prevalence of general access reforms (219) suggests that countries prioritise structural access over other levers to increase participation, equity and inclusion in education.

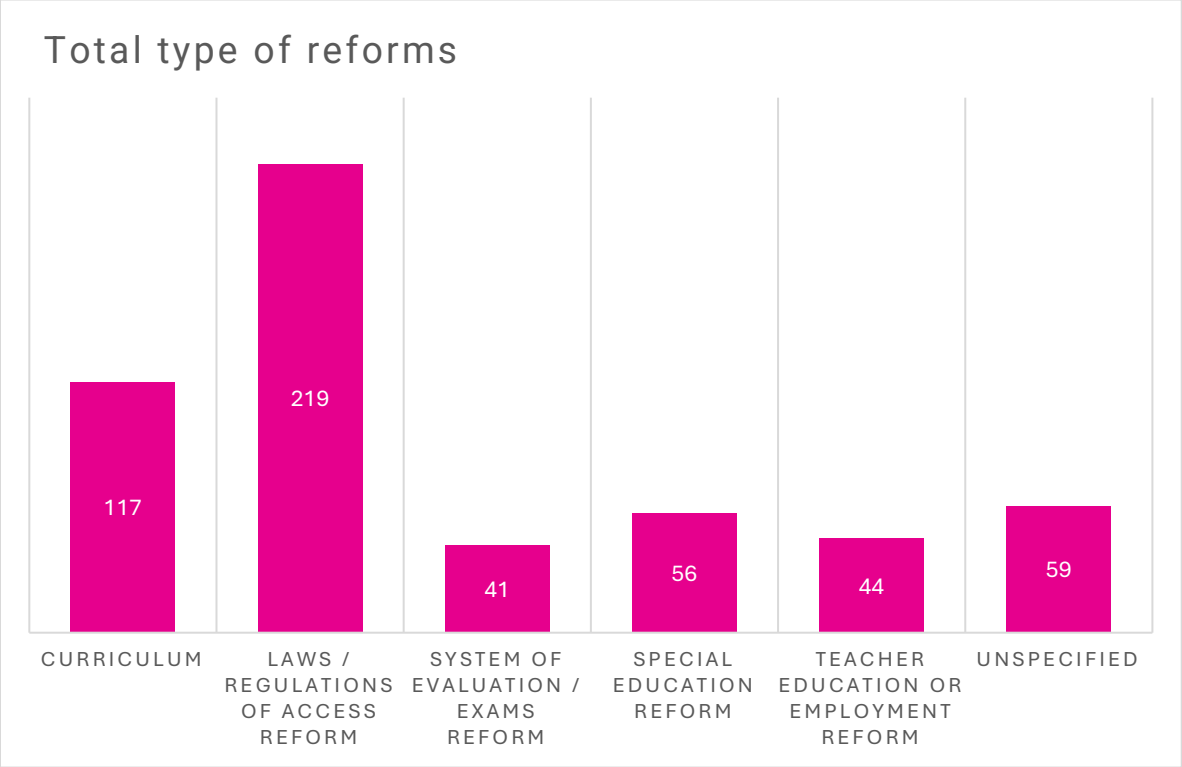

Chart 6: Total Type of Reforms. Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members: See methodology section, retrieved 2024-2025.

The total of 538 reform types in chart 6 exceeds the 431 individual reforms, meaning that some reforms can be classified under more than one category. This suggests that some countries adopt reform strategies with broad or multi-faceted objectives, requiring multiple mechanisms to achieve reform goals. Alternatively, this could indicate that some countries employ a wide-ranging approach to achieve narrowly defined reform aims. Furthermore, the multi-faceted reforms indicate strategic attempts to address multiple barriers to inclusion simultaneously.

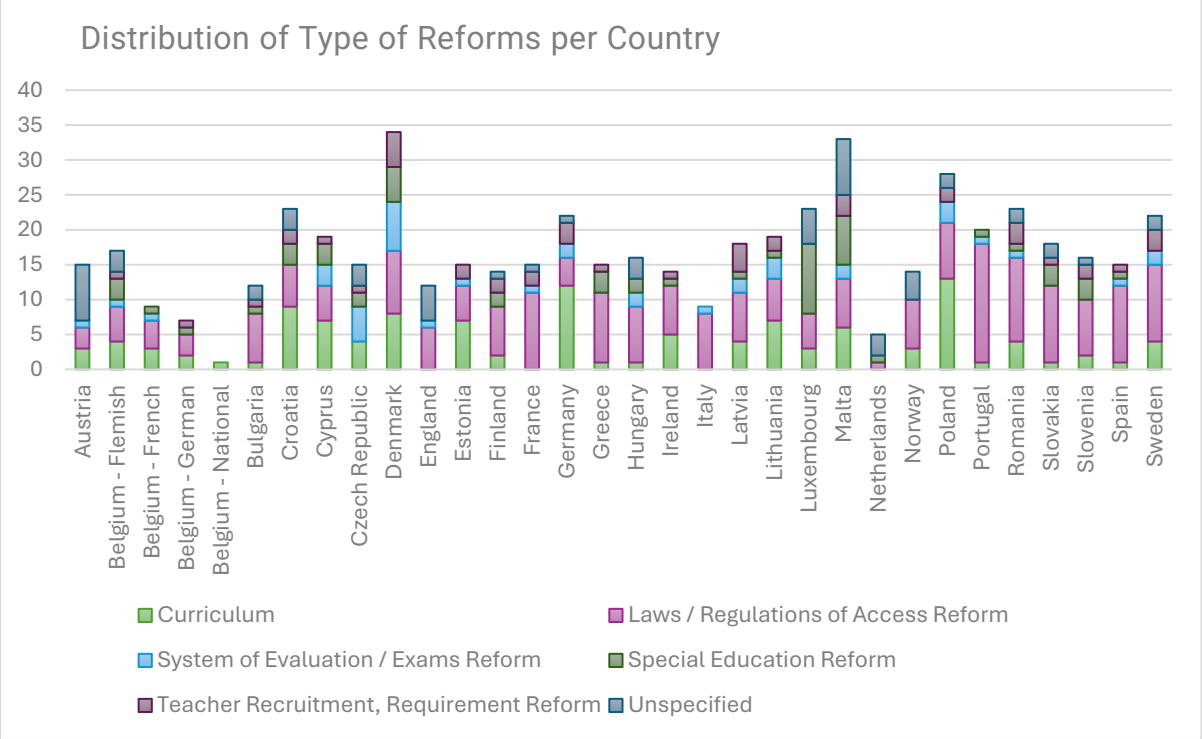

Chart 7: Distribution of Reform Types per Country. Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members: See methodology section, retrieved 2024-2025.

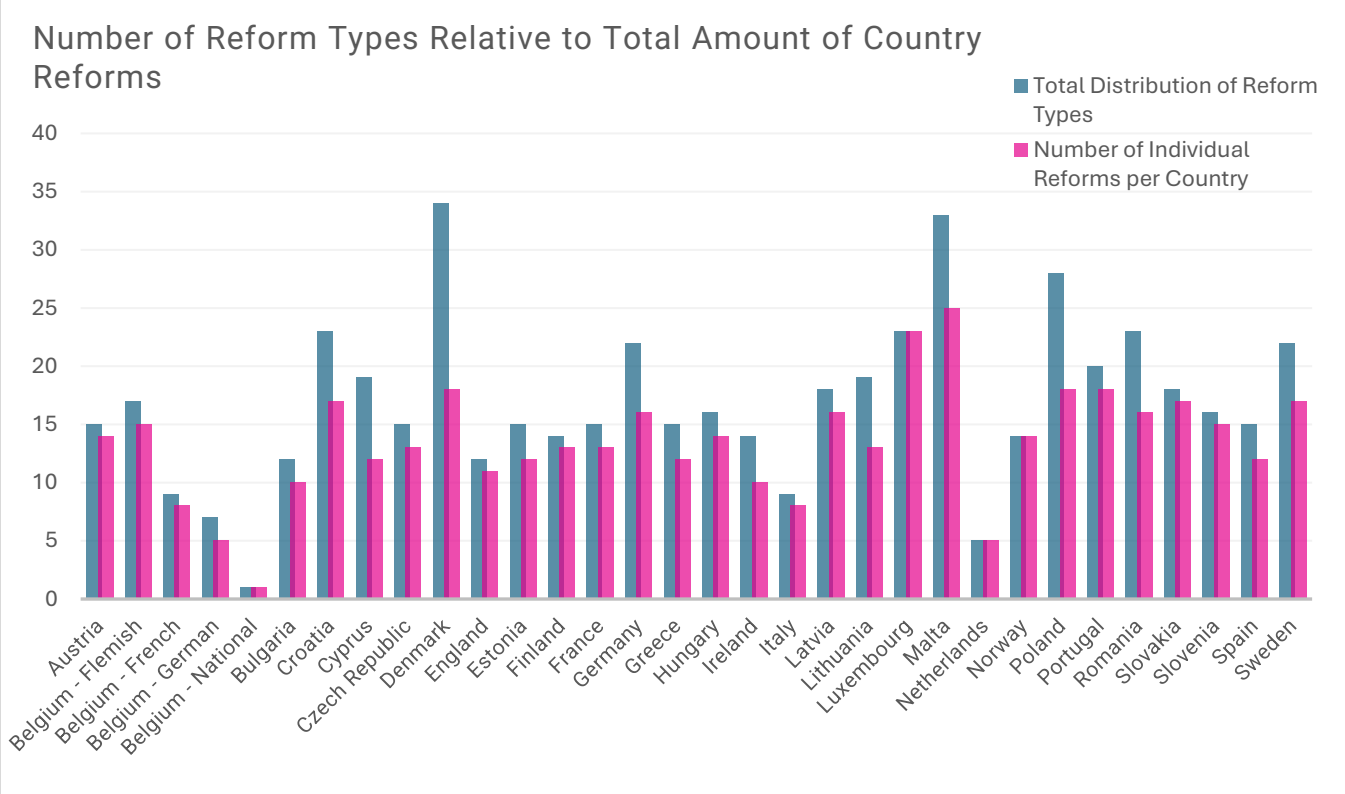

Chart 8: Distribution of Reform Type Relative to Total Number of Country Reforms. Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members: See methodology section, retrieved 2024-2025.

Not all countries adopt this strategy equally, as Chart 8 above indicates. Although many countries have reforms that fit more than one category, most reforms can be classified with a single type. However, a few countries exhibit a notable diversification of reform types relative to the total number of reforms. In particular, Denmark has implemented 18 individual reforms, which together span multiple categories, indicating a broad scope either in aims or measures. To a lesser but still significant extent, Croatia, Germany, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, and Sweden similarly demonstrate high levels of reform diversification. In contrast, reforms in the Netherlands and Norway have been categorised under only one reform type at a time.

<u>Potential for further comparative analysis:</u>

- How do countries that implement multi-category reforms compare with countries that adopt a single-category strategy in relation to improvements in equity outcomes?

3.2.5. Evaluations

Of the 431 identified reforms, only 129 have been clearly identified as having undergone evaluation. Of these, 20 evaluations highlight contradictory results, either because individual or multiple evaluations have reported differing outcomes, or because separate evaluations have reached contrasting conclusions regarding different aspects of a reform. Thirty-one evaluations clearly identify persistent issues in relation to a reform's stated aim(s), indicating that these reforms have been largely unsuccessful. Thirty-three evaluations do not explicitly indicate whether the reform has met its aims or not. Forty-five evaluations draw positive conclusions, citing success in addressing inequality, equity, and inclusion in education. While these evaluations may not have covered all aspects of the reform, they emphasise positive effects in the parts they examined.

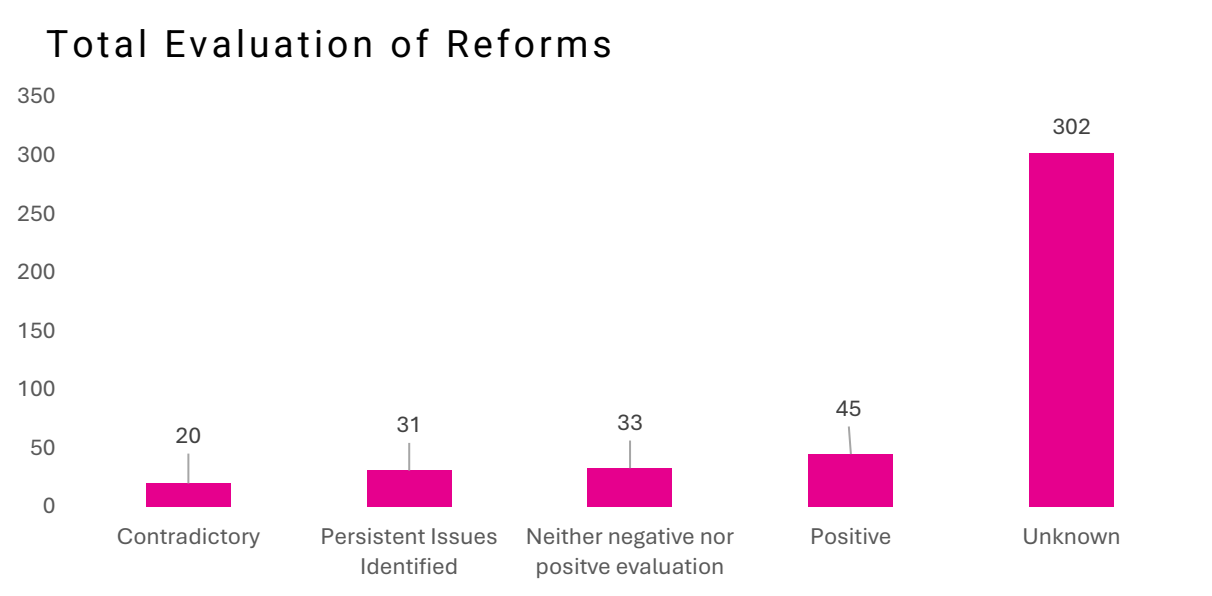

Chart 9: Total Evaluation of Reforms. Source: Chart constructed by STRIDE consortium members: See methodology section, retrieved 2024-2025.

It has not been possible to identify evaluation results for a total of 302 reforms, which have therefore been categorised as "unknown" in terms of evaluation status. There are several possible explanations: some reforms may not have been evaluated at all or may have been too recent for evaluation. Some may have been evaluated, but their results were not identified in the available databases. In other cases, internal evaluations may not be publicly accessible, or evaluations may have formed part of smaller research projects not included in the datasets. Nevertheless, this relatively large group of reforms could suggest a potential gap in monitoring and accountability that might limit

understanding of reform effectiveness, which could highlight the need for systematic monitoring that could be linked to broader EU policy recommendations.

Potential for further comparative analysis:

- What are the differences in evaluation practices in different countries?
- Are reforms targeting certain ISCED levels or types more likely to have been evaluated?

3.3. Summary

Across Europe, compulsory education generally spans 9–15 years, starting between ages 3 and 7 and often extending into vocational or upper secondary education. Most countries provide free primary and lower secondary education, and a growing number offer free pre-school with a guaranteed place, reflecting a common policy emphasis on early access and equity. Private schooling exists at all levels, though participation rates vary, indicating potential socio-economic stratification. Governance structures differ, with some countries centralising curriculum and administration while others employ decentralised or hybrid systems, suggesting different approaches and traditions for balancing national standards and local autonomy. Governance structures in individual countries are not static but change over time. Concrete examples of this are e.g. reforms that aim to decentralise education practices by strengthening teacher autonomy. Other examples are reforms that seek to centralise education practices through the adoption of universal policies such as pertain e.g. to national examinations.

Educational reform activity has increased over time, with a focus on access, curriculum changes, and inclusion, often targeting primary to upper secondary levels. Some national reforms that have been carried out are multi-faceted, while ad hoc reforms applied with a comparatively narrower focus that respond to specific concerns are common. Evaluations of reforms remain limited, with many reforms lacking systematic assessment, indicating a potential gap in monitoring and accountability.

Overall, European education systems exhibit both diversity and convergence: diversity in governance, duration, and funding arrangements, but convergence in prioritising equitable access and early childhood education. These patterns could suggest that structural characteristics, governance approaches, and reform strategies are interconnected, offering opportunities for further research on how differences in policy design and implementation impact educational outcomes and equity across Europe.

4. Policies for equity, equality and inclusion

This chapter presents findings from our review of education reforms across 29 countries in Europe between 1999 and 2024. These are reforms that explicitly or implicitly address inequalities within national education systems. To enable a coherent and analytically meaningful overview, the chapter is divided into two complementary sections. The first section (4.1) organises reforms according to internationally recognised education levels, ISCED levels (UIS, 2012). This is helpful for illustrating system-wide or stage-specific policy developments that affect entire cohorts of learners, independent of social background. This structure allows us to trace how equity considerations are embedded within general governance, curriculum, assessment, and support frameworks at different points along the educational pathway.

The second section (4.2.) focuses specifically on reforms targeting defined, selected groups of historically disadvantaged learners. These groups are defined by social categories that include students with disabilities, linguistic minorities, migrant-background students, and socio-economically marginalised populations. By separating these targeted measures from broader system-level reforms, the chapter makes it possible to examine both universal approaches to equity, and those designed to address challenges that afflict disadvantaged social categories of learners disproportionately. Together, the two sections provide a comprehensive foundation for analysing how European education systems have sought to reduce inequality over the past quarter century, both through structural reforms and through interventions tailored to specific learner groups.

All reforms mentioned here are referred to with the titles which have been used in the database where they were identified. Thus, some reforms are designated with what is perhaps ‘popular’ titles for the reform, while other reforms are designated with a formal statute number. Where possible, in addition to the start date, we also indicated the planned date for considering the reform as completed—particularly in cases of project-based, regional, or target-group-oriented reforms. Furthermore, wherever relevant information was available, we provided insights on the evaluation of the intervention.

While many reforms in higher education during the period under review focused on areas such as quality assurance or internationalisation, a significant subset carried an

important expressive dimension. These reforms were not only designed to achieve practical objectives but also to articulate a fundamental commitment to equality, equity, and inclusion as essential principles of the educational system. By embedding these values into legal frameworks, strategic documents, and policy guidelines, countries signalled their intention to make egalitarian ideals a normative foundation of education.

Examples of this approach can be found across Europe. In **Malta**, a series of policies and frameworks—from the *National Curriculum Framework* (2012) and *Teachers' Code of Ethics* (2012) to the *Education Act* (2021) and the *National Strategic Action Plan for Further and Higher Education 2022–2030*—explicitly reference equality and inclusion as guiding principles.[6] Similarly, Luxembourg's legislative and strategic initiatives, including the *Youth Law* (*Loi du 4 juillet 2008 sur la jeunesse)* (2008; revised 2016), the *Law on Compulsory Education (Loi du 6 février 2009 relative à l'obligation scolaire)* (2009), and the *National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee 2021-2030 (La garantie pour l'enfance: Plan d'action Luxembourg 2021-2030)* (2022), underscore the democratic and egalitarian aims of its education system. Poland introduced reforms to equalise educational opportunities through structural changes and examination systems, Portugal's Child Guarantee Action Plan 2022–2030 (*Plano de Ação Nacional da Garantia para a Infância)* prioritises combating poverty and promoting equal opportunities for children and young people. Finland also reflects this expressive commitment in its *Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Varhaiskasvatuslaki)* (2018), framing quality and equality as core values.

Although the tangible impact of these explicit affirmations is difficult to measure, their presence within educational reforms performs an important civic and institutional function. By emphasising equality, equity and related values, such measures legitimise reform initiatives and reaffirm the normative direction of educational systems within democratic societies. In this sense, the expressive dimension of policy is not merely declarative but constitutes an integral part of shaping inclusive and equitable education.

[6] All reform names are provided in both English and the relevant native language wherever possible. In some cases, it has only been possible to locate the English translations of the reforms, which reflects that the entry point for identifying the reforms are various English databases.

4.1. Levels

4.1.1. Kindergarten / pre-school

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is increasingly acknowledged as one of the foremost global challenges of the contemporary era. Its significance is explicitly emphasised within the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in Target 4.2, which asserts that "by 2030, all nations will provide access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that all girls and boys are well prepared when they enter primary education" (United Nations, 2015, p. 19). Consequently, at the preschool level, the key challenge for almost all countries is ensuring access to early childhood education and offering it to as many children as possible. Research confirms the importance of early education in reducing educational inequalities (cf. Neuman, Powers 2021; Crouch et al., 2020; Gove et al., 2018; Naudeau et al., 2011), and this is also the consensus among the different European countries. Differences arise in the proposed solutions, which can be broadly divided into those introducing mandatory participation at some point, various incentive-based approaches towards the families or measures that reduce access barriers by working on better supply of ECEC settings or making the system more flexible (e.g. by introducing various acceptable types of preschool settings). Below, we outline the solutions that have been implemented across countries and times.

4.1.1.1. Mandatory participation reforms / initiatives

Preschool can be regarded as a mandatory, non-mandatory, or — most commonly — a partly mandatory level of education, meaning that the first years are a matter of parental choice, but subsequent years should include all children. Lowering the threshold for mandatory participation (and thus extending the period of compulsory education) is one of the proposed solutions to reduce educational inequalities. However, this approach entails certain risks. First, it may encounter social resistance; while in many countries there is a high level of acceptance for early childhood education, this support is not universal (e.g. Heckmann, Masterov 2007; Cascio 2025; IPSOS: *Understanding public attitudes* ... 2023; Early Education Coalition 2023). Second, ensuring the quality of implementation presents a critical challenge, particularly in regions where younger children have historically faced barriers to access due to infrastructural shortcomings.

Nevertheless, over the 25-year period under analysis, 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. During the analysed period, we noted the following changes in the age of starting mandatory preschool education:

Hungary stands out among Central and Eastern European countries for having introduced one of the lowest compulsory starting ages for pre-primary education. As of 1 September 2015, following the amendment of the *Act on National Public Education*, attendance in kindergarten became mandatory from the age of three. This measure was aligned with the objectives of the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (HNSIS, 2014), which identified increasing preschool attendance among multiply disadvantaged children as a priority. The extended time spent in pre-primary education was expected to foster cognitive and social development, improve future educational attainment, and contribute to a reduction in early school leaving (Hódi and Tóth, 2016). It is worth mentioning, however, that despite improvements in enrolment, Hungary's mandatory preschool policy faced challenges, including a significant shortage of qualified kindergarten teachers, particularly in disadvantaged areas (Lannert 2015; Roma Civil Monitor 2019; Kende 2021). This shortage was due to low salaries, which were only 60% of those of other tertiary-educated workers (OECD 2023, p. 175). Additionally, projects aimed at compensating for disadvantages were ineffective in terms of child outcomes, reaching only 3% of the target group of teachers (Roma Civil Monitor 2019; Nagy et al. 2020). Furthermore, not all children are developmentally ready for preschool at the mandatory age the developmental readiness for preschool varies widely; some children meet social, emotional, and physical milestones later than others (Cleveland Clinic 2025; Carlson 2025; American Academy of Pediatrics 2019).

Both Greece and Cyprus have recently introduced reforms aimed at broadening access to early education by lowering the required age for preschool attendance. In **Greece**, a reform implemented in 2018 (FEK 4521/2018) reduced the age for mandatory preschool education from 5 to 4 years, with the explicit goal of reducing the number of children, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who were excluded from the educational system. Teachers across the country had long advocated for this change, emphasising the importance of starting formal education at the age of 4 to ensure greater inclusivity. Similarly, in 2024, **Cyprus** implemented a new regulation lowering the starting age for preschool attendance to 4.5 years. This reform aims to improve access to early childhood education, allowing all children to benefit from structured learning environments at an earlier age. It also seeks to facilitate the

inclusion of children with special educational needs, ensuring that they receive early exposure to educational settings, which enables timely support, adaptation, and preparation for primary education.

Since 1 September 2021, an amendment to the *Education Act* in **Slovakia** has introduced compulsory pre-primary education for children aged 5 (as of 31 August), alongside a legal entitlement for these children to be admitted to pre-primary education. The reform intended to lower the age of compulsory kindergarten progressively, with the goal of making preschool education available to all children starting from age 3. Beginning in the 2024/2025 school year, a legal entitlement to admission to kindergarten for children aged 4 was introduced. Furthermore, starting from the 2025/2026 school year, the entitlement will be extended to children aged 3. This progressive extension of eligibility is part of Slovakia's broader efforts to expand kindergarten capacities, which are also being supported through the country's Recovery and Resilience Plan. In **Romania**, pre-school, although part of the education system, was not compulsory until recently. According to Law 56/2019, in September 2020, the final year of ECEC became mandatory. Starting in September 2023, the compulsory education age was lowered to 4 years, and from September 2030, it will be further reduced to 3 years.

Some countries, such as **Bulgaria** and **Croatia**, defined compulsory early childhood education as a preparatory year before starting primary school. In Bulgaria, prior to 2010, only one year of pre-primary education was compulsory as preparation for primary school. However, an amendment to the *Public Education Act* (PEA) in September 2010 made pre-school education compulsory from the age of 5. Similarly, in Croatia, primary education included a compulsory preparatory year for children before they officially started school. This preparatory stage, which aimed to ease children's transition into the education system, was set to be expanded in 2024, with an increase in the number of hours dedicated to this year.

Some countries focus less on enforcing compulsory education at a specific age and more on promoting pre-primary education for the entire preschool age group. For example, the **Estonian** government provides places in kindergarten and primary school for all children between 18 months and 7 years of age. This approach not only addresses childcare needs but also seeks to ensure that all children have access to standardised, high-quality education, supported by qualified teachers. The inclusion of language classes, particularly for national minorities such as the Russian-speaking population, aims at equal starting points for all children. Similarly, **Spain** has introduced regional programs at the early childhood education and care level to promote inclusive education and ensure equal opportunities for all children from the earliest stages.

These initiatives prioritise high-quality care, early development, and preparation for compulsory schooling, while aiming to address the diverse needs of children, regardless of their background or abilities. In **Portugal**, universal free preschool education for 3-5-year-olds was rolled out by 2019. While participation is voluntary for 3-year-olds, preschool education became mandatory for 4 and 5-year-olds, with the coverage extended to all 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds by 2018. This shift reflects a broader commitment to ensuring early childhood education for all children, emphasising inclusivity rather than rigid age requirements.

In **Sweden**, the *Preschool for All* reform, implemented in 2022, was aimed at increasing participation in early childhood education (ISCED 0). The reform required municipalities to implement an obligatory outreach programme designed to contact legal guardians of children who were not currently attending preschool and to inform them of the purpose of preschool. The outreach begins before the child turns three and continues annually until the age of six if the child is not enrolled in preschool. The reform furthermore made it mandatory for municipalities to provide and reserve places in preschool for children who had only recently arrived in Sweden. These offers should start before the child turns three and continue annually until age five if the child is not enrolled. Offers should similarly be extended to children in need of further language development, regardless of their years of residence in Sweden.

In **Finland**, the *Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki)* was amended in 2015 to the effect that every child must participate in one year of preschool education before starting compulsory primary education at age seven. This legislative change was part of a broader effort to ensure that all children receive equal opportunities for early education, which is seen as crucial for their development and readiness for school.

In **Malta**, improving access to preschool education is also recognised as an important objective which is reflected in the *National Children's Policy* (2017) and *Early Childhood Education and Care (0-7 years): National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo* (2021). These reforms, however, are more a matter of abstract mission statements than concrete measures.

In 2018 in **Denmark** the *Day Care Act* (*Dagtilbudsloven*) was amended to make it compulsory for 1-year-old children from so-called "vulnerable residential areas" (i.e., areas with a high concentration of ethnic minorities, or ghettoes) to be enrolled in a day care institution for at least 25 hours/week (§44). The aim is to "enhance the children's competencies in the Danish language, their general readiness to learn, and to introduce them to Danish norms, values, and traditions" (§44b.3).

The **Czech Republic** requires municipalities to ensure a place in nursery school for children with a permanent residence in the municipality and who reaches at least 3 years before the beginning of the school year (by 31 August). For those children who reach 5 years of age, pre-primary education has been made compulsory (from the beginning of the school year following the child's 5th birthday until the commencement of compulsory school attendance). Education in the last year of a public or state nursery school is provided free of charge, as of the *Basic Education Act of 2015*.

In **Poland**, the last year of pre-school (kindergarten), which corresponds to the age of 5–6 years, is compulsory. Additionally, amendments to the *School Education Act* in 2013 aimed to provide that from September 2015, every four-year-old would have a right to participate in pre-primary education, and from September 2017, every three-year-old would have a place in a pre-primary education institution.

Many countries have lowered the starting age for compulsory or guaranteed access to preschool as a strategy to reduce educational inequalities. While this expansion aims to improve inclusion and school readiness, it also brings challenges such as staffing shortages, infrastructural gaps, and concerns about children's developmental readiness. Reforms vary widely: some states (e.g., Hungary, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, Romania) have lowered the mandatory starting age, while others (e.g., Estonia, Spain, Portugal) focus on universal access rather than strict compulsion. Additional initiatives – such as Sweden's outreach programmes or Denmark's targeted compulsory attendance for children in vulnerable areas – reflect efforts to ensure participation among groups least likely to enrol voluntarily.

4.1.1.2. Incentives - encouragement and support towards families

The first form of incentive is financial support, either in the form of funds allocated directly to parents or through reduced preschool fees. Financial support mechanisms for preschools often involve government subsidies, EU funds, or targeted programs. Here, a crucial distinction arises between those instances where the cost reduction (partial or full) applies universally to all children and those in which it is determined by income-based criteria.
Both **Italy** and **Hungary** have used financial incentives and structural reforms to improve early childhood education accessibility, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. While Italy has focused on integrating services and providing direct

financial support through vouchers, Hungary has used conditional allowances to boost attendance rates and address disparities in educational access.

In **Italy**, the government introduced significant reforms as part of the Good School package (La Buona Scuola) in 2017, which aimed to create more integrated service structures for children aged 0-6. A key component of these reforms was the implementation of *Early Childhood Education Hubs* (*Poli per l'Infanzia)*, or comprehensive hubs that offer integrated ECEC services. These hubs were designed to streamline service delivery while improving both the quality and accessibility of education. A tangible step toward achieving this goal was the provision of EUR 1,000 childcare vouchers for children born from 2016 onward and under the age of three. It aligns with the broader objectives of Law 107/2015 *(Good school / La Buona Scuola*), which aims to improve educational outcomes.

In **Hungary**, the government introduced a policy in 2009 designed to increase the kindergarten attendance rate among disadvantaged 3- to 4-year-olds as part of a modification to the law on children's protection when kindergarten became mandatory for children aged five. The policy specifically targeted children from families where kindergarten enrolment was historically lower than average, particularly in regions with higher rates of maternal educational disadvantage. This initiative provided a cash or in-kind allowance to families, which was paid twice a year, conditional upon the child being enrolled in kindergarten and maintaining regular attendance for at least two months (regular attendance defined as at least 6 hours per day and max. 25% of days missed without justification). The allowance was designed to encourage enrolment, especially among families who might have otherwise opted out due to financial constraints. Furthermore, the policy had a long-term educational goal: to educate families on the importance of early education and its potential to significantly improve school readiness, as evidenced by improved competence scores in later grades. The reform was terminated in 2015 as it lost its function after attendance became mandatory.

Slovenia and **Poland** have introduced important reforms to improve access to early childhood education by modifying fee structures, targeting families with multiple children, and ensuring that preschool services are more financially accessible.

In **Slovenia**, the *Kindergarten Act (Zakon o vrtci*h) and its subsequent amendments (2008, 2010, 2012, 2017, and 2021) and the *Exercise of Rights to Public Funds Act* (2012, *Zakon o uveljavljanju pravic iz javnih sredstev*) introduced a system of fee reductions for parents with two or more children enrolled in preschool education. Under this framework, parents were required to pay only 30% of the fee for a second child and no

fee for younger siblings. The amount of the fee was determined according to a grid with nine levels of income, ensuring that families with the lowest incomes pay no fees, while those with the highest income (up to 99% of the net average salary) pay 77% of the fee. Municipalities were also empowered to further reduce fees based on local policies. Notably, in 2012, the policy of offering free kindergarten for second and subsequent children was abolished as part of government austerity measures. Subsequent amendments to the *Kindergarten Act* expanded the flexibility and accessibility of preschool services.

The 2010 amendment allowed municipalities to offer ECEC services in buildings not specifically designed for this purpose, broadening the reach of services. The 2017 amendment further introduced flexibility into the public network of kindergartens, permitting the establishment of kindergarten units or sections in enterprises. This amendment also introduced new, state-funded short programs for children not yet enrolled in preschool but preparing to enter primary school. The most recent amendment in 2021 brought significant changes, exempting parents from paying kindergarten fees for the younger child in families with multiple children enrolled in preschool. Furthermore, parents are exempt from fees for the third and any additional children, regardless of whether they attend the same kindergarten as their siblings.

In **Poland**, a significant reform to the *School Education Act* (*Ustawa o systemie oświaty*, 2013) introduced a limit on the fee paid by parents for pre-primary education beyond the five free, compulsory hours. This amendment capped the fee at just 1 PLN per additional hour attended. This measure was aimed at reducing the financial burden on families and ensuring that children could attend preschool education without excessive costs. The introduction of this fee limit was part of broader efforts to make early education more accessible to all families, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds.

In **Ireland**, the ECCE programme (*Early Childhood Care and Education programme*) was introduced in 2010. The programme was a universal, state-funded initiative that provides free pre-school education to children before they start primary school. The ECCE programme has been implemented to increase coverage, especially in support of low-income families by providing subsidies for childcare and after-school programme. The programme was expanded in 2016 to provide access to childcare for all children between the age of 3 and 5,5 years. The programme aimed to promote equal access, support children's early learning and development and improve school readiness. Enrolment of children in pre-school education has increased as a result of the initiative;

from 2014 to 2015 registrations increased with 13% (Pobal 2016, 13). With the expansion of the programme in 2016 registration increased with 65%, which however were due to changes that allowed provisions beyond the first year (Pobal 2017, 20).

The measure of making pre-school financially affordable, which was introduced in **Norway** with the *Kindergarten Act* (2004, see the next section for further detail regarding access), was further enhanced by the *Free Core Time (Gratis kjernetid)* reform. It was initially introduced as a pilot project in Oslo in 1998 aimed at kindergartens and was slowly expanded to other municipalities in the following years. It became a policy with national coverage in 2015 based on the government white paper *The Kindergarten of the Future (Framtidens barnehage*), published in 2013. The 2015 reform aimed to regulate the maximum fee for kindergarten enrolment, stating that no family should pay more than 6% of its annual income. The reform also stated that all 4- and 5-year-olds from low-income families should have the right to so-called 'free core time', i.e. 20 hours per week of free kindergarten. Free core time was extended to 3-year-olds in 2016 and came to include 2-year-olds in 2019. Thus, the introduction of free core time aimed to increase kindergarten enrolment by mitigating socioeconomic disparities in early childhood education. The reform provided better access to kindergartens for children from non-Norwegian-speaking families, with the intention of allowing these children to benefit from better early language development. Research has found that kindergartens experienced higher enrolment of immigrant and low-income children after the reform took effect (Østbakken 2019). The increase in enrolment has, however, had no measurable effect on the mother's labour-market attachment.

Sweden has similarly focused on decreasing the cost of pre-school services for parents. The *Maximum Fee* was introduced in 2002 with national coverage. The reform reduced the fees for enrolment in early childhood education and sought to strengthen the private economies of families with young children and to increase labour supply by reducing parents' dependence on full-time childrearing at home. The fee-financing structure introduced with the reform is dependent on family income and varies up to a threshold, after which the fee is fixed. The fee is regulated as a percentage of annual family income, with the highest fee applied to the first child attending preschool (3% of annual income), and the second and third child paying progressively less (2% and 1%). Nordblom et al. (2007) found that the reform had a positive impact on the financial situation of most families, with a slightly higher positive impact for high-income families, who tend to utilise pre-school for longer hours.

In 2023, the **Finnish** government implemented a reduction of tuition fees based on income and the size of the family as an element of the *Right to Learn Programme* (2020-2020) with the intention to boost the purchasing power of families with children, and support low- and medium-income families in order to stimulate a higher participation rate in early childhood education and care.

Portugal established the gradual extension of free places for all children attending crèches managed by private not-for-profit institutions with cooperation agreements with the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, as well as in childminders. This was implemented in phases, starting with children entering the first year of crèche in 2022, extending to those in the second year in 2023, and to those in the third year in 2024 [*Gradual Extension of Free Crèches: Law No 2/20222022), Creche Feliz Programme (2022)]*. With the Universal Free Preschool reform initiative, Portugal has been rolling out universal free pre-primary education for 3–5-year-olds, aiming for full implementation by 2019. In 2018, 3-year-olds could participate voluntarily, and coverage was already extended to all 4- and 5-year-olds 9.

In 2014, the Parliament of the German Community in **Belgium** adopted a decree on childhood care, providing a framework for ECEC support measures. This decree aimed to regulate basic provisions in childhood care, including aspects related to cost reduction for families (OECD 2017).

In **Austria**, in order to remove economic barriers to attending kindergarten at preschool age and to give all children the opportunity to participate in this support measure, an agreement was reached between the federal and state governments in 2010 that half-day kindergarten attendance (20 hours per week without lunch) is obligatory and free of charge for parents in the last year before starting school (agreement pursuant to Art. § 15a of the *Federal Constitutional Law*). In return, the federal government contributes 80 million euros per kindergarten year to the additional costs incurred by states and municipalities.

Across Europe, countries have expanded financial incentives to improve access to early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged families. Measures range from universal or income-based fee reductions to childcare vouchers, cash allowances, and caps on parental payments. Several states – including Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, Belgium (German Community), and Austria – have introduced reforms that lower costs or make preschool partially or fully free. These initiatives generally aim to increase enrolment, reduce socioeconomic disparities, and strengthen children's early learning outcomes.

4.1.1.3. Increasing access

The first strategy for expanding access to early childhood education consists in addressing structural inequalities by establishing criteria that prioritise individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including single parents, children from marginalised environments or large families, as well as individuals from different ethnic or national origin. This approach seeks to ensure that socio-economic status does not impede participation in ECEC services. The second approach involves expanding infrastructure and guaranteeing a place in early childhood education for all interested families, complemented by the provision of alternative solutions in cases where sufficient places are not yet available.

The most important act regulating education at the ISCED 0-level in **Denmark** is the *Day Care Act (Dagtilbudsloven*). Its bearing on equality is clearly stated in the first paragraph according to which one of the aims of the act is to "prevent negative social inheritance and exclusion by ensuring that the educational services are an integral part of both the municipality's overall general services for children and young people, and of the preventive and supportive efforts for children and young people in need of special efforts, including children and young people with mental and physical impairments" (§1). To promote this goal all kindergartens are required to design a pedagogical curriculum based on the composition of the group of children enrolled (§8).

In **Greece**, efforts to enhance access to early childhood education have been closely tied to broader social equity objectives. In 2020, as part of a comprehensive reform aimed at facilitating the reconciliation of professional and family life (FEK 3538/2020), the provision of pre-school education was expanded as a manifestation of the state's commitment to the protection of childhood. A distinctive feature of the Greek approach was the introduction of targeted support, eligibility criteria designed to promote equal opportunities, thereby using access to early education as an instrument of social policy. The reform specifically targeted parents or guardians who were not covered by existing financial support programs, thereby seeking to fill critical gaps in the system of social assistance. While this targeted approach aimed to support working families, single parents, and households in economic hardship, evidence shows that some marginalised groups—such as migrant families, Roma communities, and children with disabilities—continued to face barriers to access.

In **Poland** *Act of 13 June 2013* amending the *Education System Act* introduced significant changes in this area because it obliged municipalities to provide places in kindergartens for children from the age of three. A maximum fee for extra hours in

public kindergarten (PLN 1 per hour over five free hours per day) was introduced and from 2017 onwards, children from the age of three were guaranteed the right to a nursery school place.

In **England**, the *Sure Start* reform was launched in 1998. Although the reform technically falls outside the temporal delimitations of this survey, it has been included here because it constitutes a significant reform initiative in England that is still in effect today. The ultimate policy goal of Sure Start was to improve the life chances of pre-school children growing up in deprived neighbourhoods through local initiatives, outreach programmes, and children's centres aimed at preschool children and developed on the basis of locally defined needs. The policy aimed to mitigate the higher risk faced by these children of failing to benefit from school, experiencing confrontations with peers, parents and teachers, and facing reduced life chances: early school leaving, unemployment, and limited longevity. There was an ambition to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and exclusion. In its original formulation, *Sure Start Local Programmes* (SSLPs) were geographically based in areas of deprivation but universally accessible within those areas so that they would not stigmatise lower socio-economic groups by targeting them alone. There was considerable local autonomy over the services offered. In 2005–06, significant changes were made as SSLPs were rebranded as *Sure Start Children's Centres* (SSCCs) and brought under the control of local authorities and were required to follow a model of service delivery, although still with local variation. The reform was evaluated in the National Evaluation of Sure Start Impact Study (2007–2009). This evaluation found the reform to have had a positive impact on children's health and on children's outcomes in relation to cognitive abilities at age three. This finding is supported by data from Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) and administrative data.

Regional disparities and access have also been important in **Norway**, where the *Kindergarten Act (Barnehageloven)* from 2004 aimed to make pre-school services available to all children, irrespective of various disadvantages, such as limitations due to geographical access. With the reform, Norway saw an increase in the number of kindergartens throughout the country, which enhanced the institutional availability of pre-school services for children in rural and peripheral localities. The reform was based on the Kindergarten Settlement of 2002 and aimed to improve the quality of early childhood education, increase the number of kindergartens nationwide, and secure better access to kindergartens for all parts of the Norwegian population. An important aspect of the reform was that it established the right of all children to attend kindergarten. Demand for kindergarten access was to be met, the reform stipulated,

regardless of local capacity, and municipalities were therefore obligated to ensure a place for all children. The right of all children to attend kindergarten, instituted with the reform, also meant an increased focus on securing access irrespective of immigrant background, economic status, family situation, special needs, or other marginalised positions. The law required municipalities to make kindergarten affordable for all families by establishing maximum monthly fees to improve access and meet the demand of low-income families.

The Education Act (Skollagen) in **Sweden**, introduced in 2011, was an educational reform with national coverage, targeting all levels of education in Sweden (ISCED 0–4+). The reform requires municipalities to provide publicly subsidised preschool activities and childcare to all children starting from age 1. The Education Act further stipulates that all children from the age of three and upwards are entitled to free preschool for at least 15 hours per week. The reform further formalised preschools as a formal part of the educational system and sought alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The **Irish** *National Action Plan for Childminding* is a recent reform, implemented in 2021. It was developed on the basis of inputs from childminders, parents, and other stakeholders, and aims to make the system more flexible and accessible. The action plan emphasised the importance of childminding as a nurturing, relationship-based form of care in a home-like setting. The plan recognised the value of the learning, continuity, and flexibility that childminding provides, and calls for a supportive quality assurance system to protect and enhance this respected model of childcare. The main aim of the plan is to improve access to high-quality and affordable early learning and school-age childcare through childminding. To achieve this, it outlines a gradual and supportive approach to regulation, enabling more childminders to access government subsidies, thereby helping to reduce costs for parents. It also provides pathways for childminders to meet regulatory and quality standards while accessing various supports. The action plan further seeks to enhance the quality of childminding services, improve child outcomes, and offer greater recognition and professional support for childminders. For example, specific goals include expanding eligibility for childcare subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme to more parents using childminders.

European countries use two main strategies to expand access to early childhood education: prioritising disadvantaged families through targeted criteria and guaranteeing universal access by expanding infrastructure or offering alternative solutions when places are lacking. Denmark, Greece, and Slovenia exemplify targeted approaches that link early education access to broader social equity goals. Other

countries – such as Poland, Norway, Sweden, and England – have introduced reforms obligating municipalities to provide a preschool place for all children, often combined with fee caps or quality requirements. Additional initiatives, like Ireland's childminding reform, broaden access by integrating flexible childcare models into national subsidy and quality frameworks.

4.1.1.4. Curriculum reforms in pre-schools

At this stage of education, curriculum reforms primarily focus on adapting content and methods to the developmental needs of children and supporting their transition to primary school. However, we have also identified policy initiatives that address issues of equity within curricula (gender equality, multicultural awareness). These efforts include measures aimed at facilitating the acquisition of an adequate level of the language of instruction, particularly for children from minority or migrant backgrounds, as elaborated more broadly in section 4.2 (Target groups).

In **Norway**, the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* (*Rammeplan for barnehagens innhold og oppgaver*) is a nationwide curriculum reform, influenced by the government white paper *Preschool of the Future Framtidens barnehage* (2013). It sought to regulate the *Kindergarten Act* of 2004. The aims of the reform (targeting ISCED 0) were partly to facilitate the alignment of the curriculum of Norwegian kindergartens with the Knowledge Promotion (KP06) curriculum reform (2006) implemented in schools (ISCED 1–3). Furthermore, the aims were to bridge the transition from kindergarten to school and secure universal access to high-quality kindergartens for all children, with services adapted to individual and special needs. The reform demanded that all kindergartens provide a systematic, progression-based pedagogy and emphasized the ambition that all children acquire the competence to speak Norwegian prior to their enrolment in school, regardless of their background. Children with Norwegian as a second language should be provided with the necessary support for Norwegian language development, thus contributing to their integration. Sami children were given the right to receive kindergarten content based on Sami language and culture, a measure strengthened in collaboration with the Sami Parliament. Research shows that privately owned kindergartens had different approaches to the framework, that staff at kindergartens understood progression in different ways, and that kindergartens lacked knowledge of Sami language and culture (Homme et al., 2023).

In **Sweden**, the *Quality in Preschool reform* was a curriculum reform with national coverage, implemented in 2005. The purpose was to enhance the quality of early childhood education, which had otherwise suffered from the Swedish economic crisis in the 1990s. The quality of preschools was intended to be improved through a better staff-to-child ratio (1:5) and the allocation of children into smaller group sizes. Underpinning this effort, preschool was also integrated into the wider educational system through the *Educational Act*. The reform also targeted the preschool curriculum by promoting gender equality, multicultural awareness, and mother-tongue instruction for children with migrant parents. Importantly, children's perspectives were included in shaping the reform.

In **Denmark,** the *Day Care Act* (*Dagtilbudsloven*) was supplemented in 2018 by an *Executive Order on Pedagogical Objectives and Content in Six Curriculum Themes* (*Bekendtgørelse om pædagogiske mål og indhold i seks læreplanstemaer*) (which explicitly address equality among children of different cultural communities. Thus among other things, the order requires that "[t]he pedagogical learning environment should support communities in which differences are seen as a resource that helps to provide democratic formation" (§5); and that "[t]he pedagogical learning environment should support all children in engaging in equal communities of different types in which they experience their own cultural background, norms, traditions and values, and those of others" (§13).

Curriculum reforms at the preschool level in the Scandinavian countries focus on aligning content and pedagogy with children's developmental needs and supporting the transition to primary school. Many reforms also address equity, including gender equality, multicultural awareness, and language support for minority or migrant children. Examples include *Norway's Framework Plan*, which emphasises language acquisition and Sami cultural inclusion; Sweden's *Quality in Preschool reform*, which improved staff ratios, group sizes, and multicultural curricula; and Denmark's 2018 *Executive Order*, which promotes equality and intercultural engagement in learning environments.

4.1.2. Primary and lower secondary level

Compulsory primary education is a standard across all European countries, typically beginning between the ages of 5 and 7 and continuing for a duration of 4 to 8 years, depending on the national system. While universal access to primary education is formally guaranteed, the degree of accessibility can differ significantly based on geographic and socio-economic factors. For instance, children residing in rural areas

often encounter additional challenges, such as longer travel times and increased transportation costs, which may impede their effective access to schooling.

In discussions on educational equity, it is essential to acknowledge the systemic inequalities embedded within the educational structures themselves. These disparities frequently mirror and perpetuate broader social inequalities and are closely linked to variables such as family socio-economic status, linguistic background, migrant status, neurodiversity, and disability (Ladson-Billings 2006; Reay et al. 2010).

Reforms were designed in several ways: by identifying areas that needed improvement (eg. transport, financial or psycho-pedagogical support), by defining specific target groups (which are only briefly mentioned here, as reforms concerning them are discussed in section 4.2), and by selecting regions based on certain criteria—for example, prioritising rural areas. In addition, some measures had a preventive character, aiming to address potential inequalities before they emerged. Another key issue at this level of education concerns curricula, and more broadly, the entire concept of what should be taught and how, which also encompasses methodological considerations—aimed at aligning education with contemporary societies, the exercise of civic roles, labour market demands, and the needs of young people. However, it is important to note that these reforms represent an ongoing process of transformation in the educational system (improving the infrastructure, curricula or teachers' competences). Changes in curricula, teaching methods, and the broader awareness and attitudes of educational stakeholders are still being implemented. As a result, in many cases there is currently a lack of conclusive data on the impact of these initiatives, particularly in terms of whether and how they contribute to reducing educational inequalities. At the end of this section, we also indicate examples of a holistic approach, in which educational policy is directed toward taking into account multiple factors and the interconnections between them.

4.1.2.1. Primary and Lower Secondary Institutional Funding or General Strengthening

The starting point is the explicit or hidden costs associated with compulsory education at the primary and lower secondary levels. While all countries formally declare education at these stages to be free of charge, there are notable variations—for instance, in terms of who bears the cost of textbooks. Consequently, during the period under review, several educational reforms can be identified that aim to reduce or eliminate such costs. Next, even though in the 21st century all children are legally

guaranteed—and indeed required—to participate in education at the primary level and typically beyond, significant regional disparities and location-based barriers still persist. These challenges are most observed in rural areas, particularly in villages and small towns situated at a considerable distance from major urban centres. In contrast, smaller localities located within the commuter belts of large cities—often referred to as suburban rings—tend to be in a comparatively favourable position. In our analysis, we identified reforms that specifically addressed the underdevelopment or structural disadvantage of regions or areas.

In **Poland**, the government introduced free textbooks in the 2014/2015 academic year. Since 2017, all primary school students have been entitled to receive free textbooks (*Amendments to the Act on the Education System and Certain Other Acts, 30 May 2014*). Although compulsory education in Poland extends to the secondary level (the current Polish education system does not differentiate between lower and upper secondary education), the associated costs at this stage is supposed to be covered by families. However, since 2018, the Polish government has introduced a financial support measure known as the *Good Start* (*Dobry Start*) allowance. This is a one-time benefit of 300 PLN provided annually for school supplies to each student beginning a new school year—from the first grade of primary school until the age of 20 (or 24 in the case of children with a certified disability).

While textbooks can be considered a hidden but direct cost, educational systems are also subject to hidden indirect costs, which for instance can be those costs that relates to disparities in geographical access to education. Tackling the rural-urban divide, **Lithuania** introduced a reform in 2008 aimed at providing free transportation for students – particularly those from rural areas – to guarantee equal access to education due to limitations based on geography.

Also concerned with regional or geographically determined disparity, **Portugal** introduced the *Third Generation of the Education Territories of Priority Intervention Programme (Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária, TEIP)* in 2021 (and is scheduled to run until 2027) which targeted geographical areas with socially disadvantaged background population and early school leaving rates higher than the national average. It aims to promote student success by improving quality of learning; tackling disciplinary issues, early school leaving and absenteeism; improving transitions to the labour market; promoting co-ordination among schools, civil society and training institutions; and providing more adaptability to students' needs. *TEIP* covers ca. 16% of Portuguese schools.

Similarly, in **Greece**, 2010, the *Law 3879/2010 (Article 26) of Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP)* was introduced, encompassing primary and secondary schools located in areas with low overall educational indices, high school dropout rates, limited access to higher education, and low socio-economic indicators. These indicators included a low composite index of well-being and development as well as a high poverty risk index. The primary goal of ZEP was to ensure equal access to education for all students through supportive measures aimed at improving academic performance. These measures include reception classes, remedial teaching sessions, summer courses, and classes teaching the mother tongue of students' countries of origin. While the law was initially introduced in 2010, its implementation was specified and activated later. For the academic year 2023/24, the initiative focused on reducing early school leaving among students from vulnerable social groups and those with cultural or religious particularities. Additionally, it aimed to improve learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy, and supplementary subjects to help students adapt to their study programs and remain in the education system until graduation. Moreover, the act also targeted the education and smooth integration of refugee children into the Greek educational system.

While these examples from Portugal and Greece do contain a geographical component, their aim is less focused on mitigating disparities arising from matters of regional access, as is the case in Lithuania, and more focused on employing a geographical demarcation within the educational system that relates geography to other indicators.

Among the implemented measures, we can also identify changes aimed at preventing students from dropping out of the education system. It could be recruitment of qualified teachers, supporting professionals, extra time for pupils at risk of not meeting academic goals, extension of compulsory education, linking the payment of social benefits to school attendance, developing programmes related to attendance, behaviour, personal development or parental engagement or support service reforms.

The *Collaboration for the Best School (Samverkan för bästa skola)* was a program initiated in **Sweden** by the National Agency for Education, aimed at improving school performance and equity in primary and lower secondary schools. It targets schools with low academic achievement or high dropout rates, particularly those facing challenges in improvement. By the end of 2019, the program had reached nearly 300 schools. The program also included efforts to enhance education for newly arrived students and those with a mother tongue other than Swedish. This initiative offers both general and targeted support for principals, teachers, and other personnel in introductory programs, with the goal of reducing achievement gaps between these students and others. In addition, the reform includes measures for education during school holidays, requiring

providers to offer additional education for pupils in grades 8 and 9 who are at risk of not meeting academic goals or qualifying for upper secondary school programs.

2003 in **Romania** *Act No. 268* extended compulsory education from eight to 10 years and decreased the age of school entry from 7 to 6 years. Similarly, a significant policy change also in **Estonia** will take effect in 2025, when the duration of compulsory education will be extended from 17 to 18 years of age. This decision reflects the government's commitment to improving learners' knowledge and qualifications, ensuring that young people are better prepared for both higher education and the labour market.

Other solution was implemented 2010 in **Hungary,** in 2010. *Act LXXXIV of 1998 on the Support of Families* was modified and the conditionality of family allowance upon school attendance was introduced. According to the regulation, when the number of missed classes (unjustified, unauthorised) of a student reached 10 or, in the case of kindergarten-aged children, the number of missed days reached 5, the principal had to warn the parents of the possible consequences. When the number of missed classes reached 50, or, in the case of kindergarten-aged children, the number of missed days reached 20, the principal notified the administration responsible for the payment of the allowance (earlier local municipalities, since 2020, county-level government offices), which then had to stop the payment. According to the latter, in parallel with the cut of the family allowance, the Guardianship Authority had to also act and take the affected child into protection. Taking into protection was the first phase of the children's welfare procedure. It came with the implementation of an individual plan of education and care designed for the family and more intense support for the family by social workers, in order to avoid the removal of the child from the family. While the legislation itself did not contain any concrete aim, during the parliamentary debate of the policy, the objectives were set out. The first objective was the reduction of early school leaving and illiteracy and improvement of the chances of young people in the labour market. During the debate, some MPs pointed out that it would be important to provide additional support, not only punitive measures. It was also emphasised that the policy is supposed to increase the 'sense of responsibility' among parents (Hermann 2018; Parliamentary Diary 2010).

In **England**, the 2010 *Pupil Premium* commenced in primary and lower secondary schools in 2011. The *Pupil Premium* is an education policy reform aimed at tackling the attainment gap that disproportionately affects children from low-income families. It provides funding to schools for disadvantaged students from when they enter primary education at age five until they have completed Year 11. It takes the form of additional

funding allocated to schools based on the number of children entitled to and registered for free school meals (in the UK, free school meals are provided to students in poverty and to children whose parents receive state benefits) and children who have been looked after by the state continuously for over six months. The expectation is that this additional funding will be used to support eligible pupils and close the attainment gap between them and their peers. Schools, however, can choose how to spend the money, including spending it directly on teaching activities or developing programmes related to attendance, behaviour, personal development, or parental engagement. Academic analysis of quantitative data shows positive effects, at least in terms of more equitable distribution of students in poverty across schools. Research using the National Pupil Database, which is a panel study, has also indicated a likely increase in grades attained and a closing of the gap, likely due to the additional funding provided. Nevertheless, researchers have found it difficult to isolate the effect of the *Pupil Premium*, considering the changing measures used to determine eligibility, the fact that it was introduced simultaneously across England (with no control group), and the changing economic climate and increasing levels of poverty among students. In addition, as each school chooses how to implement the *Pupil Premium*, the results may reflect head teacher choices rather than the effect of the additional funding (Gorard et al., 2021; Carpenter et al., 2013; Gorard, 2022).

Ireland introduced the *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* in 2023. The reform, aimed at primary and lower secondary schools (ISCED 1 & 2), seeks to create an educational environment where the rights of children and young people are fully respected and realised. It offers a comprehensive strategy to support the well-being and development of individuals from birth to 24 years old, thus spanning all levels of education in Ireland. The framework's primary vision is to ensure that children and young people in Ireland are given equal opportunities to achieve their full potential, while also safeguarding their physical and mental well-being. The policy emphasises the importance of hearing the voices of children and young people in decision-making processes that affect their lives. It aims to create an enabling environment through participation, evidence-based practices, and the allocation of resources that prioritise the needs of younger populations. To achieve these goals, the framework stresses the importance of integrating child and youth impact assessments into policy development, ensuring that all actions are aligned with the rights and needs of children. It also highlights the need for financial resources to be allocated in a way that prioritises children and young people. Furthermore, the framework calls for the continuous review of relevant legislation, capacity building within the workforce, and

raising public awareness about children's rights. It acknowledges the importance of supporting parents and offering youth services that cater to the diverse needs of young people. The policy also underscores the value of collaboration and encourages coordinated efforts among various organisations and sectors to ensure that all initiatives aimed at supporting children and young people are effective and aligned.

In **Sweden**, in 2015, the Swedish School Commission was established to follow up on recommendations made by the OECD regarding conditions that enhance quality and equity in primary and lower secondary schools. The OECD recommendations singled out problems with the recruitment of qualified teachers and funding that did not compensate for disparities between students and schools. Furthermore, the OECD identified deficient performance data and a lack of effective quality measurements as a problem for enhancing the quality of education in Sweden. Developing a cohesive, long-term strategy for the Swedish school system was a priority for the School Commission. This included proposals for a more unified school structure and measures to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students.

In the **Flemish community of Belgium**, the *Parliamentary Act on the Financing of Primary and Secondary Education* (ISCED 1–3) was introduced in 2008 with the aim of promoting equity and inclusivity in schools by establishing a uniform funding structure that allocated resources more equitably on the basis of socio-economic indicators. The increase in funding allowed for supplementary teaching hours and enhancements in accommodating special needs education. In 2015, the effort was continued with a number of reforms addressing the efficiency of resource allocation in the Flemish Community by targeting urban schools and schools with a disproportionate number of disadvantaged students. A similar effort was introduced in the French Community of Belgium in 2009, called the Differentiated Management System. This reform provided additional resources for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to increase equity in schools. In the French Community of Belgium, a similar measure was introduced in 2017 with the implementation of an instrument for differentiated support, consisting of a socio-economic index for resource allocation.

In **Norway**, the *Homework Assistance Programme* (*Leksehjelpsordningen*) was a government initiative implemented in 2010 with national coverage. The initiative targeted the youngest pupils (years 1–4) by offering better opportunities for learning as part of after-school programmes (ISCED 1). This was part of an effort to neutralise inequality related to differences in children's social backgrounds and the negative impact of parents' education. The measure provided voluntary homework assistance aimed at all pupils but based on the concern that children do not receive equal support

from home in preparing homework. The initiative was made obligatory for all municipalities, although municipalities were given flexibility in the organisation of the programme. The initiative was expanded to include all pupils in all years of compulsory schooling (years 1–10) in 2014 (ISCED 1 & 2). Backe-Hansen et al. (2013)11 conclude in their research that children with immigrant backgrounds used the programme to a higher degree than other children, and that there was a slight increase in learning outcomes in schools. However, their evaluation also showed a high degree of variation in local implementation of the programme and that school leaders were doubtful of the benefit for children in their first year of school.

A similar reform in **France** addressing socioeconomic inequality is the *School of Confidence* (*l'École de la confianc*e) from 2017. Among other elements, the reform initiates a homework programme intended to decrease inequalities by offering each student free access to support if needed.

In 2017, **Austria** initiated an expansion of all-day school forms, aiming to increase the out-of-hours provision rate from about 22% in 2016 to 40% by 2025 in order to increase equity in educational opportunities. Furthermore in 2018/19, the *New Secondary Schools* (*Neue Mittelschule*) was fully implemented. All elementary school students can attend a middle school after successfully completing elementary school. Students who have successfully completed Mittelschule receive an end-of-year report and certificate, which entitles them to be admitted to upper secondary general and vocational education and training. Middle school has the task of enabling students, depending on their interests, inclinations, talents and abilities, to transfer to secondary and higher schools and to prepare them for polytechnic school or professional life. The aim is to provide each student with the best possible individual support thus compensating the relatively disadvantaged students compared to the better endowed.

Reforms at the primary and lower secondary levels focus on reducing hidden costs, addressing regional disparities, and preventing early school leaving. Measures include free textbooks, transportation for rural students, targeted support in disadvantaged areas (e.g., Portugal's *TEIP*, Greece's *ZEP*), linking social benefits to attendance (Hungary), and funding schemes like England's *Pupil Premium*. Additional initiatives aim to improve learning outcomes and equity through after-school programs, all-day schools, differentiated funding, and support for immigrant or socio-economically disadvantaged students, as seen in Norway, France, Austria, and Belgium.

4.1.2.2. Curriculum Reforms in primary and lower secondary

Curriculum reforms may appear to be a less obvious means of reducing inequalities; nevertheless, they also occupy an important place. Among their underlying principles are efforts to equip all students with the knowledge, skills, and competences essential to meet the demands of the modern labour market, or more broadly, of the contemporary world. Another important aspect of changes in this area is the shift away from a universalist approach towards one that takes into account the diversity of students — including differences related to social background, ethnicity, or disability.

According to the *Education Development Guidelines 2021-2027 "Future Skills for Future Society"*, the goal of the primary education in **Latvia** was to move away from content-heavy instruction toward the development of transversal skills such as creativity, critical thinking, cooperation, and responsibility. Learning content was reorganised into broader thematic areas with a strong focus on interdisciplinary learning, such as foreign languages, financial literacy, civic education. Teacher support was a crucial part of the reform, with ongoing training, access to digital resources, and professional learning communities. Monitoring and evaluation of teachers' performances were embedded in the implementation process.

Similarly, **Lithuania** introduced reforms for primary and all secondary education as part of the broader general education content modernisation (*The Ministry's State Education Strategy 2013-2022*). The reforms aimed to improve student learning outcomes and to align the curriculum with current social, cultural, and technological needs. New technologies and developing digital skills in education are an essential element of a rapidly developing world. However, it is equally important to ensure that teachers are well-prepared to integrate these tools effectively, which is why pedagogical training programs have been introduced for educators.

Curriculum reforms are also a central focus of **Estonia**'s strategy, with a clear orientation toward developing competences that are relevant for the contemporary labour market. Innovation in teaching and learning is encouraged through the testing and implementation of electronic exams, which not only modernise the assessment process but also promote digital literacy among students. Language skills – particularly in Estonian and foreign languages – as well as digital competences, are viewed as key priorities across all levels of education. In higher education institutions, there is a strong focus on modernisation and digitalisation, with the aim of equipping students with skills

and innovative competencies that are highly valued in today's rapidly evolving world. All of these efforts are framed by the *Education Strategy 2021-2035*, a forward-looking policy document that places the learner at the centre of the education process. The strategy promotes student-centred education, which emphasises individualised learning paths and competence development.

In **Cyprus**' *National Plan for Education* (2021) there is a strong focus on equipping students with digital competences and foreign language skills. Similarly, in **Germany** the *Digital Pact for Schools* (*DigitalPakt Schule 2019–2024)* was introduced in 2019 as joint initiative between the Federal Government and the Länder to establish a sustainable and future-oriented *digital education* infrastructure in Germany. Within this framework, the Federation is primarily responsible for promoting digital technologies, whereas the Länder are tasked with content development. The initiative is supported by a total investment of €5 billion from the Federation, supplemented by an additional €500 million from the Länder, aimed at enhancing digital infrastructure in schools. In addition to infrastructure development, the Länder are entrusted with responsibilities including teacher training, curriculum modernisation, and the advancement of pedagogical methods. A further €250 million has been allocated to *cross-Länder projects* (*Länderübergreifende Vorhaben – LüV*), which focus on improving interoperability among educational platforms, developing digital learning resources, fostering inter-teacher collaboration, and facilitating personalised learning for students. Since February 2023, the *DigitalPakt Schule* has been subject to a comprehensive scientific evaluation conducted by an independent third-party organisation. The primary objective of the evaluation is to assess the impact of the initiative on the digital infrastructure of schools and the integration of digital media into educational practices. Preliminary results of the evaluation have revealed substantial administrative and financial challenges. The *Federal Court of Auditors* (*Bundesrechnungshof)* has pointed to major shortcomings in the implementation process, particularly concerning the supplementary administrative agreement, citing unclear definitions of funding criteria and persistent difficulties in resource allocation. Furthermore, the evaluation underscores the pressing need for enhanced oversight, advocating for more rigorous regulatory frameworks and improved coordination between federal and state authorities.

In **Norway**, the *Knowledge Promotion KP06* (*Kunnskapsløftet LK06*) is a major nationwide curriculum reform implemented in primary and lower secondary education, as well as in upper secondary education (ISCED 1–3). The curriculum reform shifted Norwegian curricular approaches from detailed subject descriptions to competence-based learning goals. The reform stressed that the Norwegian school system should be inclusive of all

children and that all children should be given the same learning opportunities by providing students with differentiated education and apprenticeships. The reform emphasised the importance of differentiated education in meeting the developmental and educational needs of various students, such as boys, minority students, minority-language students, Sami people, and students with disabilities. The role of schools as an important locus for the transmission of values and culture was emphasised in response to the increasing diversity of parents and children. The reform focused on basic skill development in primary education and increased the use of national tests and career guidance in upper secondary education, thus complementing the National Quality Assessment System and facilitating the transition from lower to upper secondary education. However, research conducted by Bakken and Elstad (2012) suggests that there have been few changes for pupils with an immigrant background, that socio-economic background has become more important for pupils' results, and that differences in grades between boys and girls have increased. Nordahl & Hausstätter (2009) conclude that there has been an increase in special education provision, despite political objectives of reducing the need for special education. Research has also shown that schools experienced problems due to a lack of teaching materials in the Sami language, difficulty in recruiting teachers with Sami competence, and that even in areas with extensive knowledge of Sami, Norwegian exercise continues to have a significant influence on schools (Solstad, Nygaard & Solstad, 2012).

The curriculum of the reform was renewed in 2015, with reference to the importance of education as a vital arena for mitigating social inequality and improving social mobility. The target group of the renewed curriculum adjustments was identified broadly, with reference to the increasing diversity in Norwegian society over the previous 20 years. As such, the renewed curriculum was intended to bolster an open and inclusive attitude towards children from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The reform was replaced by the *Knowledge Promotion KP20 (Kunnskapsløftet LK20*) in 2020. *The Knowledge Promotion KP20* is a major nationwide curriculum reform implemented in Norway's primary and lower secondary education, as well as in upper secondary education and *Vocational Education and Training (VET)* (ISCED 1–3). The reform replaced *KP06*. While *KP06* had introduced competence goals in education, *KP20* introduced core elements in each subject to ensure deep learning and progression. *KP20* also introduced interdisciplinary themes relating to democracy and citizenship, sustainable development, and public health and life skills. These interdisciplinary themes reinforced *KP20*'s focus on inclusive education and personal development. *KP20* also strengthened *Vocational Education and Training*. According to Akernes et al.

(2022) there has recently been an increase in students applying for VET programmes, as well as closer collaboration between schools and apprenticeship providers. Skålholt et al. (2023) similarly confirm that VET has been strengthened in recent years. These effects, as measured by Akernes et al. and Skålholt et al., must, however, also be understood in light of a concomitant reform, the *Completion Reform (Fullføringsreformen)*, which was also implemented in 2020.

One of the primary issues requiring attention is infrastructure, which can be considered from two perspectives: the need for the ongoing adaptation of buildings and equipment to meet required standards, and the role of infrastructure as a foundation for implementing new initiatives. Adequate and complementary infrastructure is particularly critical in the context of curriculum reforms, as changes in pedagogical approaches, learning materials, or teaching methods often require corresponding material and spatial resources. For instance, reforms that emphasise group-based learning, individualised instruction, or technology-enhanced education necessitate classrooms designed for flexibility, access to digital tools, and specialised facilities such as laboratories, libraries, or makerspaces. Without such supporting infrastructure, even well-designed curriculum reforms may fail to achieve their intended outcomes, as educators may be unable to fully implement new teaching methods or provide the necessary learning experiences for students. Therefore, planning and investment in infrastructure must be closely aligned with curriculum development to ensure that educational innovations are both feasible and effective.

An example to illustrate the vital connection between material infrastructure and curriculum reforms are the reform initiative *Laboratories of the Futures 2022* (*Laboratoria przyszłości*) which was implemented in **Poland** by the Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with the Chancellery of the Prime Minister GovTech Centre. As part of the programme, 99% of public primary schools should receive funding for the purchase of modern equipment to develop future competencies, including 3D printers, microcontrollers or recording equipment. The equipment, which will be distributed to schools, will support the discovery of talents and the development of passions of young people in the areas that interest. Thanks to modern equipment, pupils will be able to conduct scientific experiments, acquire new competencies and skills that will be important in subsequent stages of education and will help them choose their career paths. The programme aims to equalise educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their economic status, emphasising that material disparities should not constrain children's developmental potential.

4.1.3. Upper secondary level

In some countries, the upper secondary level extends beyond the age of compulsory education, which lasts until age 18, either entirely or partly (starting from age 15). Nonetheless, the imperatives of a knowledge-based society (Hornidge 2011; Cervelló-Royo et al. 2025) necessitate the promotion of continued learning, thereby prompting critical reflection and policy measures aimed at ensuring equitable access and high-quality education. One potential approach involves the introduction of structured guidance and counselling mechanisms to support students and prevent drop-out. Another key measure is the reform of curricula, aimed at enhancing their relevance, flexibility, and responsiveness to the evolving requirements of both learners and society. The third are different forms of incentives (as in Italy's case). All these approaches are universal in nature, addressing the needs of all students. However, it is also possible to identify reforms specifically targeted at individuals at risk of social exclusion and dropping out of the education system. In addition to the factors present at lower levels of education, this includes communication-commuter-related exclusion, as vocational and upper secondary schools are more frequently located in larger urban centres. This often forces students from remote areas to endure long commutes, wake up earlier, and consequently have less free time for rest. Despite its significance, this issue is rarely considered within the framework of educational policy discourse.

Since reforms in this area vary significantly across countries, they have been grouped into several broad categories, reflecting their primary objectives and mechanisms. These include measures providing financial support and incentives, initiatives aimed at disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, reforms of curricula and educational pathways, actions to improve teacher quality and overall educational standards, structural changes in the organisation of schools, and developments in vocational education. This categorisation allows for a clearer understanding of the diverse strategies adopted across different national contexts.

4.1.3.1. Financial support and incentives

Legislative Decree No. 63 of 13 April 2017 strengthened in **Italy** the right to study by providing financial incentives aimed at helping students complete secondary education and improve learning outcomes. A particular focus was placed on students in the final years (Grades 12 and 13). Over EUR 40 million annually has been allocated since 2017 to cover tuition fees, textbooks, tablets, and transport costs for low-income students.

Eligible students were exempt from school fees. The decree also enabled local authorities to enter into agreements with public or private organizations to offer additional benefits. As an additional incentive, all Italian students received a EUR 500 “bonus culture” upon turning 18, which was intended for cultural consumption.

The *16 to 19 Bursary Fund* was implemented in 2011 in upper secondary education (ISCED 3) and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 4) in **England**. It replaced the previous *Education Maintenance Allowance* (EMA). It is a financial assistance programme in England designed to support students aged 16 to 19 who are engaged in education or training but may encounter financial challenges that hinder their ability to continue their studies. The fund aims to address these specific financial barriers, enabling students to remain in education. There are two categories of bursaries available: bursaries for defined vulnerable groups and Discretionary Bursaries, which are allocated by educational institutions based on their own policies in accordance with the funding guidelines. The bursary funding helps eligible students with costs such as travel to and from school or college, purchasing essential books, equipment, or specialist clothing (e.g., protective overalls) necessary for their academic programmes. Eligibility is determined based on factors such as age, enrolment in eligible educational provision, residency status, and whether the student is an accompanied or unaccompanied asylum-seeker. The defined vulnerable groups include students who are in care, care leavers, those receiving Income Support (IS) or Universal Credit (UC) due to financial independence, and those receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payments (PIP) alongside ESA or UC. The reform has been evaluated by the UK Government in a report by Britton et al. (2014). Assessing the impact of the policy reform is challenging due to its simultaneous implementation across England, meaning there was no control group for comparison. As a result, it is difficult to determine what participation and attainment rates would have been in 2011/12 had the EMA reform not occurred. Findings regarding attainment suggest that the reform's impact was most detrimental for the poorest students. For male students, the analysis shows a positive overall effect on participation rates for SEN students in both Year 12 (Y12) and Year 13 (Y13), which could be linked to increased eligibility for grants for SEN students under the Bursary. However, this positive effect is not observed for female students. When examining Level 2 attainment by subgroup, the results indicate negative overall effects, with more pronounced negative effects for both SEN and EAL[7] (*English as an Additional Language*) students, regardless of gender. In terms of

[7] *EAL (English as an Additional Language)* – a designation used in the English education system to identify pupils whose first or home language is not English. EAL status does not imply learning difficulties; it

Level 3 attainment, the results of the subgroup analysis are inconsistent, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

4.1.3.2. Target support for disadvantaged or vulnerable groups

In 2018, **Greece** introduced, under the law 4547/2018 (FEK A 102), t*he Centres for Educational and Advisory Support (Κέντρα Εκπαιδευτικής και Συμβουλευτικής Υποστήριξης, K.E.S.Y)*. The mission of the *K.E.S.Y.* was the support of school units and laboratory centres *(E.K.)* of their jurisdiction to ensure equal access without exception for all students in education and the protection of their harmonious psychosocial development and progress. To fulfil their mission, *K.E.S.Y.* are active in fields of educational and psychosocial research evaluations, planning and the implementation of educational and psychosocial interventions, as well as professional development actions orientation, the support of the overall project of the school units. Under the law 4823/2021 (FEK A 136) *KESY* were renamed to *KEDASY, Centres of Interdisciplinary Evaluation, Advisory and Support (Κέντρα Διεπιστημονικής Αξιολόγησης, Συμβουλευτικής και Υποστήριξης,* Article 11). Greece introduced also some specific reform focused on person with disabilities (see chapter 4.2.5 Special Educational Needs).

In **Hungary**, the *Arany János Talent Fostering Program* (A*rany János Tehetséggondozó Program,* 2000) and the broader *Arany János Programs* (A*rany János Programok*, 2013) represented major national initiatives to promote equity and inclusion in secondary education. They targeted students from rural areas—regardless of disadvantage—as well as socioeconomically disadvantaged and Roma students. The programs aimed to reduce drop-out rates, support secondary school completion and access to higher education, and develop labour market skills such as IT, languages, and driving. To achieve these goals, the programs eased students' financial burdens and provided comprehensive educational, social, health, and cultural support. Support was provided through the individual, differentiated development of cognitive and social skills, taking place throughout the 5-year program (including a preparatory year before entry to upper secondary education). Apart from schoolwork, participants also received support in

simply indicates that the student is developing proficiency in English alongside another language. Schools monitor EAL pupils' language development and support needs, which can influence the interpretation of their academic outcomes.

learning-to-learn, self-reflection and communication skills. Participants were also provided (mandatory) dormitory accommodation, where many of the extracurricular activities were also organised. *The Arany János Talent Fostering Program* started in 2000. Initially, the target group included students from settlements with under 5000 inhabitants. From 2003 onwards, the target group was expanded to students whose parents had lower qualifications or received family allowance. In 2004, the College Program and in 2007, the Vocation College Program was kicked off to supplement the original *Talent Fostering Program*. While the *Talent Fostering Program* supports particularly talented students to enter higher education, the goal of the two College Programs is to assist multiply disadvantaged students in obtaining secondary qualifications (academic or vocational).

The education system in **Spain** is strongly oriented towards supporting disadvantaged individuals, especially those at risk of dropping out of school. Educational programmes, such as *Itinerario+* since 2017, or *PROA+, Programme for Guidance, Progress and Educational Enrichment (Programa para la Orientación, Avance y Enriquecimiento Educativo)* since 2021, both at the institutional and individual level, take into account various factors that may place students in vulnerable situations (risk of poverty and social exclusion, violence, refugee status, belonging to socially stigmatised groups or special educational needs). The system also recognises challenges faced by families whose parents or guardians are unable to balance work with providing educational support at home. Many of the initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive and accessible education are driven by non-governmental organisations, which operate on a smaller scale to offer targeted assistance. Additionally, regional governments – such as *6000 Scholarships* in Andalusia – have introduced financial support, particularly aimed at upper secondary and vocational education levels, to help students concentrate on their studies and prevent them from leaving the education system prematurely.

4.1.3.3. Curriculum and educational pathways

The *High School Reform 2011 – GY11 reform* (*Gymnasieskola 2011*) - was implemented in **Sweden** in 2011 (ISCED 3). The reform restructured the upper secondary education system, covering all programmes for students typically aged 16 to 19. The reform aimed to modernise the curriculum and adapt the structure to better meet the needs of both students and society. Key objectives of the reform included enhancing the emphasis on deep knowledge and competencies that would prepare students for both the workforce and higher education. It introduced more flexible pathways, allowing

students to personalise their education according to their interests and future career aspirations. This flexibility aimed to cater to the diverse needs and backgrounds of students, helping them pursue the most suitable path for their individual circumstances. The reform also strengthened vocational education and training (VET) programmes to bridge the gap between education and the labour market, ensuring that vocational tracks were as rigorous as academic ones. The *GY11 reform* sought to reduce disparities in educational outcomes by improving access to high-quality education for all students, regardless of their socio-economic background. By focusing on both academic and vocational education, it aimed to level the playing field, ensuring that students from disadvantaged areas had access to the same educational opportunities as those in more affluent regions. The reform also included tailored support for students with special educational needs and focused on making the curriculum more inclusive, addressing cultural diversity and promoting social justice.

In **Denmark**, the most important act regulating the upper secondary education is the *Act on Upper Secondary Education* (*Lov om de gymnasiale uddannelser*) from 2016, which emphasises that what is taught and how educational institutions are organised at the upper secondary level must be "based on freedom of thought, equality and democracy" and provide pupils with "knowledge of and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights, including gender equality" as well as the "prerequisites for active participation in a democratic society" (§ 1). The reform, therefore, has both institutional-organisational and curricular implications.

4.1.3.4. Teacher and Quality Improvement

According to the *Education Development Guidelines: Future Skills for Future Society* 2021-2027, reforms at the secondary and vocational school levels in **Latvia** have primarily focused on the development of student competences, especially among those from disadvantages groups. This has been achieved by increasing the number of lessons and expanding the range of available courses offered in schools, so that students can have a strong start on the labour market later. Additionally, significant emphasis has been placed on the continuous development of teacher competences to support high-quality education delivery, recognising the importance of their support in students' improvement.

In **Sweden**, efforts have been made to strengthen the quality of education through the *Teacher Boost reform* (ISCED 3). The reform was implemented in 2007 to enhance the quality of education in primary and lower secondary education. The initiative followed a period of increased local authority over education and a rise in the number of private

schools. The initiative aimed to enhance quality education by bolstering the qualifications of teachers relative to subjects and age groups, and by contributing to an increase in the number of certified teachers, thus improving opportunities for all schools to hire qualified teachers. The reform did not directly tackle inequality, but it addressed it indirectly by aiming to provide quality education for all children through boosting teacher competences. The reform was replaced by the *Boost for Teachers* (2018).

4.1.3.5. Structural reforms

Starting in 2006, **Portugal** reorganised its public-school network around school clusters (schools of one or more education levels grouped under centralised leadership) that in 2012 represented a quarter of all pre-primaries, primary and secondary schools. School clusters aimed to facilitate transition across education levels, as well as to overcome geographical isolation and social exclusion. The government also closed isolated schools with poor facilities and below-average success rates. Students from those schools were transferred to larger schools, which were often newly built. This policy also aimed to foster greater collaboration among teachers, improve work organisation and provide wider learning opportunities for students.

In **Poland**, structural reform of the education system introduced in 2017, based on the *Education Law of 14 December 2016* (*Ustawa o systemie oświaty*), had a profound impact on the structure and functioning of secondary education. This reform reversed earlier changes introduced in 2008 by re-establishing the 8-year primary school model, concluded by a nationwide, mandatory 8th-grade exam. Previously (since 1999), the education system consisted of a six-year primary school, followed by three years of lower secondary school, and finally upper secondary education. Although the completion of primary school was initially not intended to constitute a point of selection – since lower secondary schools were to be organised on a catchment-area basis – this plan was eventually abandoned under pressure from politicians and the non-public education sector. The only remaining guarantee was that residence within a given catchment area would secure a place in the local lower secondary school. As a result, in practice, the selection threshold effectively occurred at the age of around 12. The 2017 reform raised this threshold to the age of 15. This change is significant for promoting educational equity, as it postpones to the moment when students are differentiated according to academic performance or socio-economic background. Earlier selection tends to reinforce existing inequalities, since educational achievement at the age of 12

largely reflects family resources, cultural capital and access to support rather than individual ability or potential. By extending the period of comprehensive education until age 15, the reform provides all students with a longer shared learning experience, allowing more time to develop key competencies and interests before making consequential educational choices.

4.1.3.6. Vocational education

Reforms in vocational education partially overlap with the objectives set for post-lower secondary education in general. They address issues such as continued education, preventing early school leaving, and providing guidance for educational pathway choices—topics that were partly discussed in the preceding section. All these issues are closely related to inequalities arising from the intersectionality of disadvantage, as students may experience a cumulative effect of multiple unfavourable factors. However, a key issue specific to vocational education is the adequacy of the training offered, particularly its alignment with labour market demands. While the dominant trend in the 20th century emphasised increasing specialization, the current pace of technological and labour market changes necessitates a greater degree of flexibility. This calls for a balanced approach that ensures both a solid general foundation and the possibility of pursuing targeted specializations. It is also essential to adapt vocational education to the needs of individuals with special educational requirements (see Greece, Section 4.2.5). Some of the reforms (see, for example, Portugal) also emphasise the importance of facilitating both horizontal transitions—between general and vocational schools—and vertical transitions, namely to the level of higher education.

In **Poland**, the Ministry of National Education began modifying the national core curriculum for general education and school vocational training programmes in 2008, continuing the reform initiated in 1999. The new curriculum shifts from narrow, subject-related requirements (described by the intended content of instruction) to more general, transversal skills and competences defined by learning outcomes. Emphasis is placed on experimentation, inquiry, problem-solving, reasoning, and collaboration. The curriculum sets unified requirements for the first year of all upper secondary schools (ISCED 3), both general and vocational. It also grants schools greater autonomy in designing programmes and managing instructional time, provided national learning outcomes are met. Importantly, the reform aims to improve the situation of vocational students and counteract their marginalisation by aligning educational standards and promoting equal access to quality learning experiences.

In years 2003-2009 **Hungary** introduced *Vocational Development Program* (*Szakiskolai Fejlesztési Program*) motivated by the realisation that 'leftover' students were concentrated in vocational schools, which did not manage to decrease dropout rates. The program aimed to reform vocational education in its entirety, targeting 'all issues' of the sector, attempting, for instance, to decrease grade repetition and dropout rates, provide students with the necessary skills for managing life and ensure quality workforce for the economy. To achieve this, the program had three main components in the first phase (2003-6): general knowledge and vocational foundations (9th and 10th grade), vocational training and reintegration. The fourth component consisted of mandatory institutional development and quality assurance. In the second phase (2006-9), the program structure was somewhat modified, but the main elements and the theoretical approach remained the same. The latter was based on complex development, providing general knowledge alongside the vocational training, and improving foreign language skills as well. Within the frames of the program, participating schools ran so-called *Vocational Development Program (VDP, Szakképzési Fejlesztési Program)* classes, and innovations were supposed to be introduced in an ascending order. However, there is no information about the actual rate of the spread of innovative methods (e.g., project method, self-development, more practical vocational training, job orientation, quality assurance).

In **Denmark**, the *Executive Order on Vocational Education and Training (Bekendtgørelse om erhvervsuddannelser)* from 2007 and subsequent, superseding EO's have included a provision of relevance to equality. According to § 66 of the current version of the EO, "[t]he the school must ensure that pupils or apprentices who need it are offered social, personal or psychological counselling", thus potentially compensating for unequal opportunities for completing vocational training.

In **Finland**, two reforms address vocational education and training. First the Finnish Ministry of Education initiated the *Preparatory instruction and guidance for VET* (*Ammattistartti*) (completed in 2010) which attempted to assist young students who have completed basic education and remained uncertain of their study prospects or are in risk of dropping out at beginning of their vocational studies.

Second, the *Programme to Develop Quality and Equality in Vocational Education and Training (Ammatillinen koulutus : Laadun ja tasa-arvon kehittämisohjelma 2020-2022)* from 2020 has as a central goal to reduce and prevent disparities in learning outcomes that arise due to factors such as gender, socio-economic background, place of residence, or the need for special support. Specific measures include increasing support for students, introducing versatile and student-centred pedagogical methods,

and providing targeted guidance for students with intensive special needs. It is also good to note the 2021 reform in Finland that extends compulsory attendance in education to the age of 18 years. This affects both vocational education and training as well as other education programmes.

The *Completion Reform (Fullføringsreformen)* is a **Norwegian** reform that was implemented in upper secondary education (ISCED 3). The reform aimed to ensure that more young people and adults achieve qualifications for vocational training or further studies, thus preparing them for higher education and future employment. The goal is for nine out of ten students to complete upper secondary education by 2030. Previously, students would have to pay for further training in subjects they had failed, but the reform gave students the right to additional training in failed subjects. The reform requires schools to systematically support students with a high degree of absence or those at high risk of dropping out. It also states that upper secondary education must better accommodate the diversity of the student population, including students with mental health challenges, health issues, school avoidance, or unstable and complex home situations. The reform further stipulates that upper secondary education should provide students with tailored courses, including differentiated durations for attending courses and study programmes. According to Akernes et al. (2022), there has recently been an increase in students applying for *Vocational Education and Training (VET)* programmes, as well as closer collaboration between schools and apprenticeship providers. Skålholt et al. (2023) similarly confirm that *VET* appears to have been strengthened in recent years. These effects, as measured by Akernes et al. and Skålholt et al., must, however, also be understood considering a concomitant reform, the *Knowledge Promotion KP20* reform, which was also implemented in 2020.

4.1.5 Tertiary level

At the higher education level, one of the most important solutions lies in reforms aimed at **improving accessibility**, in the general sense but also for SEN persons and those belonging to disadvantaged groups. During the period covered by this report, numerous reforms were implemented in the field of higher education; however, only some of them addressed issues of equality and equity, while others focused on areas such as quality of education or internationalization. To provide a clearer and more systematic overview of these measures, the chapter is organised to reflect the main areas where accessibility and equity are most directly influenced.

First, attention is given to changes that **facilitate transition into higher education**, admission procedures, and exam accommodations. These aspects are crucial because

accessibility begins at the point of entry: without fair and inclusive admission processes and appropriate support during assessment, students with special educational needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers that can prevent them from pursuing higher education altogether. The analysis then moves to **financial incentives** and **scholarships**, as economic constraints remain one of the most persistent obstacles to participation and completion of studies. Policies and programs designed to alleviate these barriers, such as targeted scholarships and grants, play a decisive role in ensuring that students from less privileged backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed. Finally, the chapter addresses **structural and governance reforms**, which are essential for embedding principles of equality and inclusivity into the very fabric of higher education systems. While individual accommodations and financial support are important, they cannot substitute systemic changes that reshape institutional frameworks and decision-making processes to promote long-term equity.

4.1.5.1. Transition, admission and exam accommodations

In **Greece,** 2019 According to the article 209 of the Law 4957/2022 *New Horizons in Highest Education Institutions (*Νέοι *Ορίζοντες στα Ανώτατα Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα: Ενίσχυση της ποιότητας, της λειτουργικότητας και της σύνδεσης των Α.Ε.Ι. με την κοινωνία και λοιπές διατάξεις*), every *HEI* is obliged to establish an “Equal Access Unit for persons with disabilities and persons with special educational needs”. The mission of the Equal Access Unit is to ensure the full participation of the members of the academic community, who are persons with disabilities and persons with special educational needs in all educational, research and administrative activities carried out by the *HEIs.* Successfully the establishment of the Equal Access Units has been almost completed in every *HEI* in the country; their full and active function, however, is still in progress for some of them. This reform constituted an extension of the earlier initiative introduced in 2014 when Common Ministerial Decision between the Ministry of Education and religion and the Ministry of Health has defined the procedure of access to tertiary education by persons with severe disabilities. An updated list of diseases and disabilities is released every year giving the possibility to enter universities without exams.

In **Poland,** to enable students with disabilities to study at public and non-public *HEI*s, financial support has been allocated from the state budget for activities such as remuneration of sign language interpreters and training courses to raise awareness of the presence of the disabled at universities. In 2015 Government allocated USD 11.5 million to support students with disabilities in higher education, and *Law on Higher*

Education and Science from 2018 (Ustawa o Szkolnictwie Wyższym i Nauce) codified support measures for students with disabilities, including: individualised study programmes, adapted admission procedures, infrastructure and learning support requirements.

Similarly, in **Denmark**, a sequence of various reforms has been concerned with the promotion of equality of opportunity in higher education for people with disabilities. However, in this instance, a significantly broader approach was implemented, encompassing support throughout the study period. An important piece of legislation at this level is the *Act on Special Educational Assistance in Higher Education etc. (Lov om specialpædagogisk støtte ved videregående uddannelser m.v.),* first enacted in 2000 and last revised in 2022. According to § 1 "[t]he purpose of the Act is to ensure that students with a physical or mental impairments who have been admitted to a higher education programme or an admission course to certain higher education programmes, regardless of the impairment, can complete the education in the same way as other students" (§1). The supplementing *Executive Order on Special Educational Assistance in Higher Education (Bekendtgørelse om specialpædagogisk støtte ved videregående uddannelse)* stipulates that assistance can be in the following forms (§ 5):

1. Advice and guidance on the importance of impairment for the completion of the education.
2. Aids and instruction in their use.
3. Secretarial help and practical help.
4. Sign language interpretation and written interpretation.
5. Specially designed teaching materials.
6. Support hours for the purpose of compensating for the disability.

Another reform targeting inequalities in circumstances and educational opportunities is the *Executive Order on Examinations and Tests at University Programmes (Bekendtgørelse om eksamener og prøver ved universitetsuddannelser)* first enacted in 2004 and updated several times since then. According to §6 of the current version of 2025, "[t]he university may grant exemptions from stipulated examination or test conditions, including offering special conditions to students with physical or mental impairments, when the university deems it necessary in order to place these students on an equal footing with other students." The same applies to students "whose mother tongue is not Danish." A parallel provision is included in the *Executive Order on Examinations and Tests in Professional and Vocational Higher Education* (*Bekendtgørelse*

om eksamener og prøver ved professions- og erhvervsrettede videregående uddannelser) (originally from 2012).

As with the case of the parallel provisions regarding examinations and tests, similar rules are also included in both § 27 of *The Executive Order on Admission to Business Academy Degree Programmes and Professional Bachelor's Degree Programmes* (*Bekendtgørelse om adgang til erhvervsakademiuddannelser og professionsbacheloruddannelser*) from 2021 and § 35 of *The Executive Order on Admission to Full-Time University Programmes* (*Bekendtgørelse om adgang til universitetsuddannelser tilrettelagt på heltid*) from 2022. The rule says that "[i]n the case of entrance examinations and admittance examinations, etc., the educational institution may offer special conditions to applicants with physical or mental impairments and to applicants with a mother tongue other than Danish, when the institution deems it necessary in order for the applicant to be placed on an equal footing with other applicants. The offer must not affect the purpose of the test, etc."

In 2005, the French Community of **Belgium** introduced new measures for regulating access to Higher Education with the *Skills Validation Consortium*. The initiative aimed to allow more students to attend Higher Education (ISCED 4+) by providing new criteria for validating skills acquired through formal and non-formal education.

4.1.5.2. Financial Incentives and Scholarships

In **England**, the *National Scholarship Programme* (NSP), launched by the UK government in 2012, was designed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing and succeeding in higher education. The programme was implemented at tertiary education (ISCED Level 4+). Its primary goal was to promote equal opportunities in education by aiming to double the proportion of disadvantaged students compared to 2009 and increase the number of students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds entering higher education by 20%. The reform required higher education institutions intending to charge above a specified tuition fee threshold to outline how they would sustain or enhance access, success, and progression for students from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups. In 2021, the government instructed the Office for Students to revise national targets to narrow the gap between the most and least advantaged students, focusing on both access (entry to higher education) and outcomes (degree classifications such as First or 2:1). The revised strategy also emphasised the quality of courses, qualifications, completion rates, and employability outcomes. Research by Chorcora, Bray, & Banks (2023), covering 19 studies on various

interventions aimed at widening participation in different contexts, including the UK, found some evidence supporting the positive effects of these interventions.

Other countries have also introduced reforms aimed at providing financial support to students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Because of the declining numbers of students, **Lithuania** undertook reforms in higher education financing – amendments to the *Law on Research and Higher Education* were adopted in 2022. Support mechanisms for students from disadvantaged backgrounds were mentioned, including scholarships and social support programs. Similarly, **Croatia** has implemented the *National Plan for the Development of Education and Training until 2027 (Nacionalni Plan Razvoja Sustava Obrazovanja za Razdoblje do 2027).* This strategic document aims mostly on enhancing the overall quality of education and promoting the internationalization of academic research and learning but according to the Plan students from marginalised groups were supposed to be eligible for material and financial support, helping to ensure equal opportunities in accessing and succeeding in higher education. In 2017, also **France** invested EUR 550 million in financial aid to students in higher education. The reform aimed at improving the success rates among students from lower-income families by increasing social grants. In **Finland**, the *Student Support Act (Laki opintotuesta)* provides financial assistance to students in Finland to support their studies. The act covers various forms of support, including study grants, housing supplements, and government-guaranteed student loans. It applies to students in secondary, vocational, and higher education institutions, and the eligibility is based on age, citizenship, and financial need. The aim of the Act is to ensure that all students have equal access to education by helping to cover living costs during their studies.

Portugal has undertaken a series of comprehensive reforms in tertiary education aimed at establishing a more coherent and equitable system although the proposed set of solutions primarily addresses financial issues. Central to these efforts is the promotion of access to higher education, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, through the introduction of scholarships and targeted support mechanisms. The reforms also address student dropout rates and overall well-being. A set of measures has been implemented in 2022 to reduce inequality and enhance qualification levels across the Portuguese population, with the specific objective of achieving a 50% higher education graduation rate among 30–34-year-olds by 2030.

These measures include:

a) The automatic granting of scholarships to all students who fall within the first, second, or third family allowance brackets and who are admitted via the national public higher education application system;

b) The introduction of "Extending and Superior" grants, worth €1,700 per year, for all scholarship recipients within the same family allowance brackets, awarded in addition to the standard scholarship;

c) A supplementary grant of up to €250 per year to assist scholarship students with travel expenses between their home and the higher education institution;

d) An accommodation allowance for scholarship students studying outside their usual country of residence, including students in emergency humanitarian situations, those under temporary protection, and Portuguese emigrants enrolled in Portuguese higher education institutions;

e) An increase in the scholarship eligibility threshold from 18 to 19 times the social support index;

f) An enhancement in the value of scholarships for master's degree programmes to better reflect the actual cost of tuition;

g) The creation of 2,572 special access places in the 2022–2023 academic year for students graduating from vocational and specialised artistic secondary education, within the framework of a special application route for dual certification course graduates.

Acknowledging the persistent underrepresentation of disadvantaged students—particularly in the most competitive programmes—the Portuguese government introduced further measures in the 2023–2024 academic year. Over 2,000 places within the National Access System were reserved for these students. Specifically, applicants receiving Social Support level A are to be prioritised through the allocation of at least two reserved places per study cycle (equivalent to 2% of total places). Although this is a pilot initiative and participation by public higher education institutions is not mandatory, all institutions have voluntarily opted in.

4.1.5.3. Structural and governance reforms

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, published in 2011, set a comprehensive vision for the development of **Ireland's** higher education system (ISCED 4+). Its primary goal was to position higher education as a central driver of economic

development, cultural enrichment, and social inclusion. A key aim of the reform was to expand access to and participation in higher education. The reform sought to increase participation rates across all demographics, with particular emphasis on underrepresented groups, including mature students, part-time learners, and international students. The reform also introduced a new category of institutions, Technological Universities, resulting from the merger of institutes of technology. These institutions focus on industry-relevant research and vocationally oriented programmes, aiming to create more diverse educational pathways.

In 2021, **Ireland** introduced the *National Skills Strategy 2025,* which sought to enhance the quality of education and the workforce by providing relevant skill development, emphasising lifelong learning, and implementing continuous evaluation (ISCED 4+). The reform had a specific focus on active inclusion to strengthen participation in education, training, and the labour market, aiming to reduce educational disparities among economically marginalised groups. The reform was designed to provide diverse learning opportunities, catering to various learner needs and backgrounds, by expanding apprenticeships and traineeships. The strategy proposed a comprehensive review of guidance services, tools, and career information to ensure that all learners, regardless of background, receive accurate and supportive career advice, facilitating informed decision-making.

In the Flemish Community of **Belgium**, the implementation of the *National Qualifications Structure* in 2009 made changes to the admission procedure to higher education with the aim to expand access. New short cycle tertiary education programmes were introduced to comply with labour market needs. Efforts to address potentially marginalised groups in society were also introduced at the level of Initial Teacher Training in 2018 by improving the curriculum content in relation to multilingualism and diversity.

4.1.6. Holistic approaches covering several ISCED levels

It is worth hypothesising whether, over the years, we have witnessed **a shift in the approach to educational reform**. **Instead of smaller-scale, narrowly focused reforms, some countries appear to be adopting a more comprehensive, holistic reflection on the needs of contemporary society.** Similarly, as in a Lifelong Learning perspective

(UNESCO and UIL, 2016, pp. 6-7; cf. Wiksten, 2021/2023, pp. 6-7), the individual and the citizen are considered in light of their education path from early age to adulthood (the entire period of compulsory schooling). We underscore as an important effort in this perspective a commitment to ensuring equity in education. **A holistic perspective supports students beyond the provision of equal access to high-quality education.** It reflects efforts to mitigate and remove selection and barriers associated with student background, including but not limited to social status, ethnic background and place of residence.

An attempt to implement such a comprehensive and equity-oriented approach to educational reform was undertaken in **Hungary.** The National Educational Integration Network (OOIH) was launched in Hungary in 2002; it remained operational until 2011. The network promoted integrated, high-quality education for children from disadvantaged milieus, with particular attention to Roma pupils. That same year, the Integrating Pedagogical System (IPS) was introduced with ministerial backing. It comprised two components: the *Unfolding Potential* programme (*Potenciál Kibontakoztatása Program*) and the *Integration Programme (Integrációs Program*), aimed at students facing single or multiple forms of disadvantage, though the latter received greater financial support. Initially available to grades 1, 5, and 9 (ISCED 1–3), by 2011, IPS was open to eligible institutions from ISCED 0 to 3. In 2003, 45 so-called “base schools” joined the program, implementing a mix of mandatory and optional pedagogical and organizational tools. Participating schools received financial incentives – first a per-student normative allowance, and later, a teacher wage supplement, which was discontinued after 2010, weakening the program’s financial base. IPS required participating schools to adopt institution-wide inclusive practices, ensure a balanced distribution of students within local areas, and foster cooperation with community partners. Success criteria included reduced grade repetition and early school leaving among disadvantaged students, increased enrolment in academic secondary schools, and improved learning outcomes measured through the National Assessment of Basic Competences. Evaluation results were mixed. Imre (2006), examining 28 base schools, reported a partial uptake of recommended methodologies, with more success in lower grades. Kézdi and Surányi (2008), comparing 30 base and 30 control schools (2005–2007), found greater integration in IPS schools, more child-centred practices, and improved literacy outcomes, with narrower performance gaps between Roma/non-Roma and disadvantaged/non-disadvantaged students. However, the study’s validity was later debated (Kabai 2010; Kézdi & Surányi 2010). According to Varga (2016), IPS only partially achieved its goal of creating inclusive learning

environments. Limited impact on student development was attributed to societal resistance to inclusion, reduced funding, and insufficient capacity to support newly joining schools. Bathó (2013) emphasised that even strong methodological training is ineffective without the right teacher attitudes, self-awareness, and reflective skills.

When it comes to primary and secondary education in **Cyprus**, there is a clear emphasis on creating a modern and inclusive learning environment. Since 2021, the government has been implementing the National Plan for Education, a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving the overall quality and equity of the education system. Among the key initiatives under this plan are increasing the number of qualified teachers to ensure better student-teacher ratios and introducing free breakfasts for primary school pupils to support children's well-being and learning capacity. Another important pillar of the reform is the promotion of inclusion and support for diverse student populations. Since 2023, individuals with disabilities have also been exempted from tuition fees in vocational schools, ensuring greater accessibility and support for their educational and professional development. Special attention is also given to children from migrant backgrounds, with policies focusing on their integration into the education system through language support and intercultural awareness. Efforts are also being made to reduce the gap in educational access between urban and rural areas, ensuring that children living in remote regions have the same opportunities as their urban peers.

To tackle underachievement at an early stage, the *Basic School Act* in **Slovenia** (amended in 2007) stipulated that basic schools have to provide supplementary lessons, individual and group assistance for low achievers and students with learning difficulties. Slovenia has also introduced measures to support disadvantaged students. The Act defined learners vulnerable to exclusion from inclusive education: minorities – Italian and Hungarian national communities, members of the Roma community, foreign citizens, learners in hospitals, gifted learners, special educational needs, learners with learning difficulties.

In **England**, the *Equality Act* was implemented in 2010. The reform has national coverage and affects all levels of education (ISCED 0-4+). The Act obliges educational institutions to eradicate biases against individuals on the basis of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and beliefs, sex, and sexual orientation. The Act's aims extend beyond education and form the legal groundwork for equal school environments. The Public Sector Equality Duty, a component of the Equality Act, requires public sector organisations to actively promote equality and eliminate discrimination, and it sets regulations for all educational institutions at national,

regional, and local levels. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) monitors the implementation of the reform through regular inspections of schools, providing public reports of measurable outcomes and recommendations for individual schools.

In **Ireland**, the action plan *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) was implemented in 2005 at all educational levels (ISCED 0-4+). The action plan introduced a comprehensive and strategic approach to support the education of disadvantaged children and young people, from ages 3 to 18. It was built on past initiatives, aiming to improve their impact by addressing previous shortcomings. This plan was part of a broader effort that also includes adult education, training, and improved access to further and higher education for under-represented groups. Additionally, it supported the ongoing development of special education services, following recent legislative changes and the creation of the National Council for Special Education. The action plan emphasised investing in early education for vulnerable children to yield lifelong educational benefits. It focused on improving literacy and numeracy, recognising their critical role in preventing educational failure and early school leaving, and sought to encourage active participation from parents, family members, and the community in children's education, particularly in socio-economically deprived areas. The action plan also aimed to develop strategies to enhance student attendance, progression, retention, and overall attainment, acknowledging the link between attendance patterns and educational success. Furthermore, it sought to ensure that schools in disadvantaged areas could attract and retain well-qualified principals and teaching staff. The action plan was evaluated in 2022 in the Government report Looking at DEIS Action Planning for Improvement in Primary and Post-Secondary Schools and in 2024 in a comprehensive OECD report taking a wider look at educational disadvantages in Ireland. In 2014, **Ireland** also implemented the *national strategy Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD) to 2030. The strategy aimed to integrate the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into non-formal education as well as at all levels of formal education (ISCED 0-4+). Against the backdrop of the UN's SDGs, the strategy seeks to balance social, economic, and environmental considerations. It emphasises principles of social justice, equity, and respect for human rights, and aims to cultivate active democratic citizens capable of tackling key 21st-century challenges such as poverty, inequality, and health and wellbeing. The strategy is also concerned with climate justice, anti-racism, and interculturalism.

In **Sweden**, the *National Digitalisation Strategy: 2016* (*Nationell digitaliseringsstrategi för skolväsende*) was implemented at early childhood, primary, and secondary education

(ISCED 0-2). The overarching objective of the government's national digitalisation strategy for the education system was for Sweden's education sector to become a leader in leveraging the potential of digitalisation. This vision aimed to ensure that children and students develop high digital competence, foster knowledge advancement, and promote equality. The reform stated that education must be universally accessible, with tools and resources tailored to meet diverse needs and circumstances. Particular attention was given to integrating a disability perspective. Children, students, and staff should have access to appropriate and accessible digital tools that align with the specific needs of educational activities. The reform aimed to provide access to compensatory or alternative digital tools for students with disabilities and those in need of special support. The reform was adjusted in 2023, seeking to reestablish and balance digitalisation with traditional and analogue teaching methods, as the initial reform appeared to have a negative impact on students' cognitive development and received nationwide criticism for promoting uncritical digitalisation.

In **Finland**, the *Student Welfare Act (Oppilashuoltolaki)* was enacted in 2013. It focuses on ensuring the well-being of students and mandates that schools provide comprehensive health and welfare services, including mental health support, to all students. It requires schools to provide students with access to school health care services, psychological and counselling services, and social support. As the compulsory age for staying in school was raised to 18 in 2021, this addresses all minors in Finland. Also in Finland, the *Action plan to prevent bullying (Toimenpideohjelma kiusaamisen, väkivallan ja häirinnän ehkäisemiseksi varhaiskasvatuksessa, kouluissa ja oppilaitoksissa)* was adopted in 2021. The plan was based on principles of non-discrimination, the right of every child and young person to physical integrity, and on zero tolerance for bullying at school.

In **Austria**, to advance a more individualised educational approach, the *Educational Compass* (*Bildungskompass*) was developed in 2015-2017. The aim was to document the resources, interests and potential of each individual child, taking into account their individual development over the course of their educational trajectory.

In 2015, the **French Community of Belgium** implemented the *Pact for Excellence in Teaching* (*Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence)*. This curriculum reform seeks to improve the quality, equity, and inclusivity of education within French-speaking schools. It is structured around several strategic objectives, including the promotion of inclusive education and the reinforcement of measures to address school failure, dropout rates, and grade repetition. Emphasis is also placed on fostering the well-being of all students within a high-quality, democratic school environment. Key actions include the

implementation of a unified curriculum spanning early childhood to lower secondary education (ISCED 0-2) to ensure coherence in learning outcomes; the creation of territorial support centres to aid schools in accommodating students with diverse needs; and increased investment in preschool education through enhanced staffing and resource allocation to support early childhood learning and development. A related reform was implemented in 2018, seeking to improve student outcomes by promoting inclusive teaching methods, reducing dropout rates, providing targeted support, strengthening inclusion and anti-bullying measures, and enhancing pastoral care systems.

Across the reforms, countries have pursued broad equity-driven strategies aimed at improving access, participation, and student outcomes for disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Efforts commonly include strengthening inclusive pedagogical practices, expanding early intervention and welfare supports, and enhancing the capacity of schools to meet diverse learning needs. Many reforms also introduce structural mechanisms – such as nationwide strategies, integrated support services, and financial or organisational incentives – to reduce early underachievement and promote equal educational opportunities throughout compulsory schooling. These initiatives collectively reflect a systemic shift toward more inclusive, responsive, and socially just education systems.

Within this approach, we also sought to draw attention to new dimensions of educational reform: ensuring students' mental health and well-being, enhancing parental agency in school, adopting decentralised strategies, and broadening the scope of educational analysis by emphasising the role of extracurricular activities. In the latter case, it is particularly important to highlight the inclusion of this aspect within the framework of reform. While extracurricular activities are often accessible and widely popular, access to them is frequently shaped by the economic disparities among students' families.

4.2. Target groups

In analysing education reforms, it is essential to consider their impact on specific target groups that face structural barriers or heightened vulnerability. We identified six key groups or analytical categories: socio-economically disadvantaged individuals, residents of disadvantaged regions, ethnic minorities and migrants, early school leavers

and NEETs (*Not in Education, Employment, or Training*)[8], learners with special educational needs, and LGBTQIA+ and gender-diverse populations. While previous analyses focused on reforms by ISCED levels, examining them through the lens of these target groups is crucial for evidence-based policy. This approach not only enables the identification of disparities in access, participation, and outcomes, but also reveals whether these groups have been the subject of broader policy attention and how strategies and priorities for reforms targeting them have evolved over time.

4.2.1 Socio-economically disadvantaged groups

Support for children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds or environments at risk of social exclusion represents one of the earliest measures associated with reforms targeting specific groups. While analysing educational policies, we observed that such measures may be formulated in a more general manner — encompassing all categories that can be considered disadvantaged — or they may specifically identify specific, distinct disadvantaged groups, which we present in the following sections of the report. One of the measures involves ensuring that all students begin their education in the best possible physical and mental condition. This includes, for example, providing a warm meal (or other important things and services like uniforms if needed or extracurricular activities) for children from poorer families or those experiencing insufficient parental care. In later stages, related interventions also addressed broader risks associated with family dysfunction, including the potential for neglect. Consequently, policy efforts increasingly focused on strengthening family relationships and supporting the development of parental competencies and engaging local stakeholders to ensure that responses were aligned with community needs and resources. Subsequent initiatives also placed emphasis on securing equal opportunities in school choice, aiming to reduce disparities stemming from socioeconomic or family-related constraints.

In **Portugal**, 2012, the *School Food Support Programme (Programa Escolar de Reforço Alimentar, PERA*, 2012) was introduced with an aim to provide a morning meal to

[8] NEET refers to young people who are neither in employment nor in education and training. The NEET population has its own definitional variations, as official policies switch between counting certain age groups. According to Eurostat, the term includes young people aged 20–34, who meet two conditions:

- they are not employed — in other words, they are unemployed or economically inactive;
- they are not receiving any (formal or non-formal) education or training.

Source: EASNIE glossary

students identified by their schools as facing food shortages, and to increase awareness among students and their families of the importance of a healthy diet and eating breakfast at home. The programme covered about 14 000 students in 2012/13, and about 12 000 students in 2013/14. It was a pilot project planned for two years. In 2023 the Council of Ministers Resolution No. 3/2023, approved the *Child Guarantee Action Plan* 2022-2030, which aimed to prevent and combat poverty, as well as social exclusion. It placed children and young people at the top of its priorities, defending their rights, fighting child poverty and promoting equal opportunities. In doing so, it fulfilled the principle of the 11th European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (Childcare and support to children), which aimed to reduce the number of children in this situation by at least 5 million by 2030.

In **Romania** the *Hot Meal (Programul Național „Masă sănătoasă”*) pilot program offered some financial support for parents, stimulating students' participation in the educational process and ensures a fair and non-discriminatory access to quality education for all children and students. The pilot *Hot Meals in Schools Program* began in 2016 in 50 schools and expanded significantly over the following years. By 2021, it was providing food support to preschoolers and students in 150 public education establishments. In the 2020/2021 school year, the program reached approximately 60% of all primary and secondary school-aged children, as well as some in early childhood education and vocational training. In total, around 1.9 million children received food through the program, out of the 3.2 million children in the country. The continuation of the program was approved by Government Extraordinary Decree No. 105/2022, extending support to students in 450 public schools for the 2022/2023 academic year. Beneficiaries received either a hot meal or a food package, with a daily limit of RON 15 per child. While the program's expansion has been considered a success, challenges remain, including insufficient infrastructure for meal preparation, limited funding, and staff shortages, which have raised concerns about potential mismanagement. The main purpose of the program was to reduce the school dropout rate and promote fair and non-discriminating access to education for all preschoolers and school students in Romania.

In **Malta**, various reforms seek to ameliorate the consequences of socio-economic inequality. Thus, the *National Action Plan for Child Guarantee 2022-2030* from 2022, the *Students Maintenance Grants Regulations* from 2016, as well as the *National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social inclusion 2014-2024* and the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024* from 2014, contains a range of measures intended to promote the educational opportunities for low-income students. For

instance, the *National Action Plan for Child Guarantee 2022-2030* (2022) included measures intended to help children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds by providing free-of-charge uniforms, lunch, photocopies and extracurricular activities organised in both state and non-state schools.

In 2015, **Hungary** created an initiative to create safe learning opportunities for disadvantaged (especially Roma but not only) children before they enter kindergarten. Since kindergarten attendance became mandatory in 2015, the target group in effect consisted of 0 to 3-year-olds and their parents (Hollósi 2017).) The goals of the project included the provision of the healthy development of disadvantaged children, providing them with complex skills development, improving parental competences, and strengthening the relationship between parents and children. Originally, the program was designed to improve the quality of available services in certain geographical areas, however, according to its 2018 modification, the focus has shifted more to mitigate individual and family-level disadvantages (Kovai, Szőke 2021). The international base of the program was adapted formally in 2003 by the Hungarian government as a pilot, eventually leading to the countrywide spread of Sure Start Houses. Following a decade of EU-project-based funding, *Sure Start Children's Houses* (*Biztos Kezdet Gyerekházak,* got included in the *Act on Children's Protection* as a basic service of children's welfare in 2013. Since 2014, their funding has been provided by the central budget on a project basis (Koscsóné, Kolkopf 2015). The evaluation by Németh et al. (2015) found that there are significant discrepancies between *Sure Start Houses* in terms of local embeddedness, attitude towards parents (from partnership to paternalism) and to some extent quality of services, too. Leaders of the houses reported that it is hard to reach disadvantaged families, especially the Roma living in geographically segregated areas, who constitute the primary target group of the program. The impact assessment of the Sure Start Program within the framework of the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy in 2016 also found that the most disadvantaged families were unfortunately not included in the program. However, the Houses have been successful at assisting the outreach of social and healthcare services towards clients, managed to integrate in local communities and adapt to them, and developed the social skills, adaptability and vocabulary of the children involved (Balás et al. 2016). The report set out that the 112 *Sure Start Children's Houses* running in 2014 were attended regularly by altogether 1700 children. In order to comprehend the limitations of the program, the evaluation of the HNSIS by CSOs (Roma Civil Monitor 2019, p. 61) notes that in the same year, the number of 0 to 5-year-olds was above 550,000 in the country, nearly 150,000 of whom lived in poor households. Keller's (2018) research into the operation

of the program revealed an alarming magnitude of geographical inequalities: her data showed that financial and human capacities of Sure Start houses were the lowest in the most disadvantaged, secluded settlements, where the need for their services was the greatest. In her opinion, the nationalization of Sure Start houses resulted in an improved image of statistics of children's welfare, but the quality of their services was extremely varied, thus their integrational potential is questionable. Kovai and Szőke (2021) also found that the institutionalization of the project curtailed the flexibility and adaptability of the program, and the growing administrative tasks have limited the time employees can spend with the clients.

The *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019* was implemented in 2015 in **Ireland** with the aim of promoting equality of opportunity in higher education across the country (ISCED 4+). Its primary goal was to ensure that the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan targeted several under-represented groups, including students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, first-time mature students, students with disabilities, part-time and flexible learners, further education and training award holders, and members of the Irish Traveller community. To achieve these objectives, the plan introduced measures such as developing local partnership initiatives involving educational institutions, government bodies, and other stakeholders to support communities with low levels of educational participation. It also emphasised the importance of creating clear pathways between further education and higher education, fostering regional and community partnerships, and enhancing data collection and analysis to monitor progress and inform policy development. The reform was adjusted in 2022 with the National Access Plan 2022–2028, which expands the focus to include additional marginalised groups and introduces new initiatives aimed at furthering inclusivity and support for all students throughout their higher education journey.

In 2002, the *Equal Opportunities Parliamentary Act* was implemented in the **Flemish Community of Belgium**, leading to a set of measures for primary and lower secondary education. The objective of these measures was to enhance equity in access to educational opportunities. Measures included the establishment of local frameworks aimed at promoting fairness in school admissions, the allocation of funding weighted in favour of schools serving communities with higher levels of socio-economically disadvantaged students, and the protection of all children's rights to enrolment and school choice. In 2014, the *Participation Decree* was also introduced in the Flemish Community Belgium. The decree established school councils and promoted the

involvement of socially vulnerable groups in these councils in an effort to increase stakeholder participation in schools.

In **France**, a range of redistributive measures have been enacted in the relevant period. In 2006-2007, to ensure that schools receive sufficient funding and to concentrate more resources on the most disadvantaged schools, the ZEP networks (priority education zones) were replaced by two networks with different needs: the *School Success Network* (*Réseau de réussite scolaire*) (RRS) and the *Ambition Success Network* (*Réseau ambition réussite*) (RAR). The RAR has a unit expenditure per pupil that is 16% higher than the national average. The schools concerned receive additional funding, mainly for more teachers (90%) and bonuses (8%). Since 2011, priority education for disadvantaged students and school is mainly based on the Network for Educational Success and the Primary and Secondary Schools for Ambition, Innovation and Success programme, where one-third are classified as of educational priority.

In 2013 another reform was initiated in **France** with the *Guidance and Planning Law for the Refoundation of the School of the Republic (Loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la refondation de l'École de la République)*. The aim was to reduce social and regional inequalities by, among other things, creating more teaching positions at to increase attendance rates, especially in priority education sectors, isolated rural areas and overseas regions.

A third reform in **France** was the *Priority Education Plan (La réforme de l'éducation prioritaire*) from 2014 which had as a primary objective to reduce the differences in basic skills between students attending priority education schools and those attending schools outside priority education by 10%. The plan focused on three key aspects: 1) updating the map of priority networks; 2) providing additional support to improve student-learning; and 3) reforming teaching practices to include collaborative teaching.

Finally in 2019 in **France**, 80 locations across the country were identified as *Educational Cities (cités éducatives)*. The programme aimed at improving the educational conditions in disadvantaged communities by mobilising all stakeholders within the educational community at a local level.

4.2.2. Disadvantaged regions

Why is regional differentiation recognised as a specific direction for addressing reforms? European countries, due to historical circumstances and uneven political, economic, and social influences, experience — at least in part — significant disparities in

the development of their respective regions. In such a context, the implementation of comprehensive, uniform reforms does not necessarily lead to a reduction in these disparities. On the contrary, the implementation of reforms—even the most effective ones—without addressing regional differences may lead, in the best-case scenario, to overall improvement and a reduction of disparities, or to their persistence at a higher level. Or — under less favourable conditions — regions facing greater challenges may be unable to fully benefit from the opportunities offered by reform programs, thereby existing inequalities would be reinforced. Consequently, some countries opt for targeted, regionally focused measures as a complementary or alternative approach to nationwide reform strategies. There are relatively few reforms of this kind, likely due to the difficulty of securing political support for initiatives targeted at only a part of the country. In some of the reforms discussed in earlier sections, regionally focused measures were also incorporated as a prerequisite for further changes.

In cooperation with the European Strategy for Education and Training (ET2020), the **Italian** Ministry of Education (MIUR) launched the *National Operational Programme 2014–2020* (*Programma Operativo Nazionale, Per la Scuola: competenze e ambienti per l'apprendimento*). The programme aims to reduce regional disparities in educational outcomes, with a specific goal of lowering the early school-leaving rate among 18–24-year-olds to below 16% by 2020 (from 17% in 2013). Italy reached this target nationally in 2015, but significant gaps remain in several least-developed regions: Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Apulia, and Sicily. Funding came from the European Social Fund (73%) and the European Regional Development Fund (27%).

The programme had four main pillars:

1. Instruction – promoted equitable access to education, aims to reduce school drop-out, enhance education quality across ISCED levels, support teacher training, and tried to strengthen school-to-work links.
2. Infrastructure – supported extended school hours, development of smart, eco-friendly school buildings, improved ICT and connectivity, and the creation of flexible, modular learning spaces. Schools were envisioned as community civic centres.
3. Administrative capacity-building – focused on public service efficiency, teacher and staff development, greater transparency, digital governance, and enhancement of the National Evaluation System.

4. Technical assistance – aimed to strengthen financial management by MIUR and other involved entities and improve communication around programme implementation.

Slovakia also addressed some measures to lower existing regional disparities by introducing targeted interventions in 82 municipalities (2015). A program for expanding preschool capacity and inclusive education in kindergartens aimed on improving access to early childhood education and care, supporting participation of disadvantaged children and providing childcare in the workplace. This support was financed both from the state budget and European Union structural funds. In 2015, municipalities with highest demand for ECEC were able to apply for financial support to expand their pre-school capacity (total budget allocation of EUR 15 million from the state budget). In the first round, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport supported the creation of 3'600 new ECEC places in 113 municipalities.

A different approach was adopted in **Hungary**, where significant regional disparities were, in fact, used as an argument in favour of re-centralising the education system. The 2012 education reform in Hungary aimed to tackle growing disparities in school funding and quality caused by the post-1989 decentralisation. The re-centralisation of ISCED 1–3 level schools, enacted by *Act CLXXXVIII of 2012* and effective from January 2013, transferred control and funding from local governments to the State. The goal was to ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background or region. Under the new system, local governments retained ownership of school buildings, but administration, funding, and pedagogy became centrally managed. Initially, this was done through numerous local and county-level school districts, later reorganised into 60 larger districts in 2016 following widespread dissatisfaction. However, school autonomy was not restored. Despite its intentions, the reform failed to reduce educational inequalities. Evaluations found no significant improvement in the distribution of resources, teachers' pay, or student outcomes. Persistent issues like school segregation remained unaddressed, largely due to political sensitivities and the limited authority of the central body. Analyses consistently show that the correlation between socioeconomic status and student performance has not diminished.

4.2.3 Ethnic minorities and migrant students

For decades, Europe has experienced significant levels of mobility, resulting in increasingly diverse school populations across the continent. In this context, the issue of students with a migrant background should constitute a key dimension of

educational reforms aimed at promoting equality and equity. Addressing the educational needs of these students is essential for building inclusive and fair education systems. It is also important to note, however, that the 29 countries under analysis differ considerably in terms of the scale of migrant inflows, the ethnic diversity of their student populations, and the length of time for which they have experienced immigration. These contextual differences shape both the challenges and the responses adopted in national education systems. Moreover, in some of these countries, policy initiatives concerning migrant children may have been implemented prior to the timeframe of our analysis (2000–2025) and thus may not be fully captured by a review limited to this period. Reforms in this area can be designed to support all children from migrant or minority backgrounds who may require additional assistance. Such support may include instruction in the language of schooling, as well as the introduction of support teachers, intercultural assistants or mediators. Another approach involves reforms or policy initiatives targeted at specific groups, considering their distinct linguistic, educational, and social needs.

Slovenia implemented a broadly conceived strategy for the integration of immigrant children in education, as outlined in the *Guidelines for the Integration of Immigrant Children in Kindergartens and Schools* (*Smernice za vključevanje otrok priseljencev v vrtce in šole ter njihove spremembe*) and their amendments (2009, 2012). Based on the *Strategy for the Integration of Immigrant Children, Pupils and Students in the Education System in the Republic of Slovenia* (2007, *Strategija vključevanja otrok priseljencev, učencev in dijakov v vzgojno-izobraževalni sistem v Republiki Sloveniji*), the guidelines define strategies, adjustments and methods to support immigrant children's integration, with particular emphasis on cooperation with parents. Schools provide support both prior to school entry and throughout the educational process. Parents are encouraged to participate in school and kindergarten activities, including learning Slovene alongside their children. The guidelines also assist schools in planning education tailored to the specific needs of immigrant students. A continuation and further development of the guidelines is the *Special Model to Enhance the Integration of Refugee Children and Students in the Slovenian Education System* (2015, *Posebni model za izboljšanje vključevanja begunskih otrok in dijakov v slovenski vzgojno-izobraževalni sistem*) which aims to ensure adequate professional support for children with international protection or those seeking it, helping them adapt to a new linguistic and cultural environment. It focuses on strengthening activities in social, linguistic, and cultural domains. The model offers kindergartens and schools guidance on implementing introductory or preparatory classes (*pripravljalnica*) before school entry and continuing or advanced classes

(*nadaljevalnica*) during the school year. Children follow individual programmes or activity plans, receive additional support for learning Slovene, and can participate in remedial, supplementary, morning, and after-school classes. They are integrated into mainstream classes alongside their peers. At the upper secondary and university levels, the state also finances additional language support and applies a special protocol to facilitate the integration of undocumented students. Last year's facing the growth in numbers of student with migrant backgounds the country introduced further measures supporting immigrant children including professional support in learning of Slovene, adapted assessment in the first and second year of schooling in Slovenia and access to lessons in the student's mother tongue. The state also funds supplementary Slovene language lessons for immigrant students at upper secondary level.

An introductory grade has also been introduced in **Slovakia**, covering all children (not explicit migrants or refugees) who are not yet ready for school at the time they become subject to compulsory education (School Act No. 245 in 2008 and once again 2023 as the amendment of the School Law as a part of Recovery plan).

In recent years, **Portugal** has experienced a significant increase in the number of children with a migrant background entering its education system. Over the past five years, the number of migrant pupils has risen by 160%, accounting for 13.9% of all students enrolled in the 2023/2024 school year. Notably, for three out of ten students, Portuguese is not their mother tongue. In response to this growing diversity, the Portuguese government has adopted targeted measures to support the integration, inclusion, and academic success of migrant students. To consolidate and systematise existing efforts, a new comprehensive plan was introduced in September 2024. This plan includes:

- employing language and cultural mediators;
- updating the tools for diagnosing and guiding students, particularly in Portuguese as a foreign language (PFL), so students whose mother tongue is not Portuguese can be better placed, according to their language skills;
- creating a zero level in PFL;
- clarifying the assessment of migrant students: adapting retention criteria in basic education and assessment in upper secondary education for those studying PFL, extending the guarantee of differentiated conditions for students taking PFL in all tests and exams;
- simplifying equivalences in basic education;

- expanding the network of Portuguese language courses for foreigners (Portuguese as a host language), which aims to boost understanding of the language, social integration and the involvement of parents in their children's school life - a key factor of school success.

Specific measures were introduced to facilitate the integration of children and young people from Ukraine, aiming to ensure their rapid and simplified access to the education system. To this end, Portugal engaged its administrative, pedagogical, and cultural institutions to streamline admission processes. All foreign children and youth between the ages of six and eighteen, regardless of legal status, had the same right to education. Extraordinary reception measures were implemented in school clusters and non-clustered schools, including simplified procedures for recognising foreign qualifications and school placement, gradual integration into the Portuguese curriculum with targeted language support, and the formation of multidisciplinary teams—comprising specialised teachers, psychologists, social workers, interpreters, and monitors—to design context-specific strategies. These efforts were coordinated and monitored by a dedicated working group involving the Ministry of Education and the High Commission for Migrations.

Several European countries have introduced targeted measures to support children's entry into a new linguistic environment, recognising language acquisition as a critical factor for educational inclusion and success, particularly among migrant students. Early and sustained language support is one of the cornerstones of integration policies, underscoring the shared recognition that language competence is foundational to educational equity and social participation.

In **Germany**, the *Language Daycare Centres Programme* (*Sprach-Kitas programme,* 2016–2022) aimed to promote early language development in day-care centres, with a particular focus on children from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds. The initiative sought to embed language learning into everyday activities in early childhood education settings, thereby fostering natural and consistent exposure to the German language. Although the programme was discontinued in 2022, its termination prompted widespread public criticism and protests from educators and parents, highlighting its perceived effectiveness and the ongoing need for structured language support at the pre-school level. Similarly, **Italy** has placed emphasis on structured language instruction as a tool for integration. *Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Pupils* (*The Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri* , 2014) support the systematic teaching of Italian as a second language to facilitate the academic and social inclusion of migrant pupils. In 2016, this commitment was further reinforced by new regulations allowing for the employment of fully qualified teachers of Italian as a

second language within the national education system, thereby institutionalising language support for non-native speakers. **Poland** has also acknowledged the centrality of language in the integration process. As part of the *Key Directions for the Implementation of State Educational Policy* for the 2024/2025 school year, a priority has been placed on working with students with migrant experience, including the provision of Polish as a foreign language. This initiative signals a strategic effort to enhance language instruction and respond to the growing linguistic diversity in Polish schools.

In 2014 the **Norwegian** government implemented the reform *The Right to Education for Young Refugees and Immigrants* (*Rett til ooplæring for unge flyktninger og innvadrere*) to provide immigrants and refugees of age 16-18 years the right to education. The reform aimed to provide immigrants and refugees with the necessary educational assistance to allow them to enrol in upper secondary education also when they had not previously attained education equal to primary and lower secondary education. The government emphasised the fundamental importance of primary and lower secondary education and upper secondary education for all Norwegian residents and for the successful integration of immigrants and refugees. In an attempt to recognise the importance of education as a fundamental and necessary right, the right was originally intended to be extended to people who had applied for legal residence in Norway but was still awaiting an asylum decision, but through parliamentary discussions the right was only extended to those who had already obtained legal residence in Norway. The effort has since been expanded in a response to Ukrainian refugees; however, Proba (2023) has in an evaluation of the effect of the reform on upper secondary school level concluded that the effort does not match all equally well, that the target group is too elusive, and that issues persist in relation to training offers.

In **Sweden**, the *Upper Secondary Schooling Bill* was introduced in 2017. The reform outlines a number of improvements for upper secondary education (ISCED 3), including provisions for students with learning disabilities. The proposed changes focused on enhancing the overall educational experience for students and imposed more specific requirements on introductory programmes. Under this reform, the National Agency for Education has been tasked with supporting school organisers and principals to improve conditions for students in introductory programmes, with the goal of ensuring they transition into upper secondary school or other educational pathways. Starting in 2019, students in introductory programmes were guaranteed a minimum of 23 hours of instruction per week, a regulation that did not exist previously. Additionally, schools were required to assess the abilities of newly arrived students at the start of the

Language Introduction programme, ensuring that their educational needs were properly identified, thus enhancing conditions for differentiated learning.

Migrants were also the target of **Sweden's** programme "*Collaboration for the Best School*" (*Samverkan för bästa skola*). This programme was initiated by the National Agency for Education, aimed at improving school performance and equity (ISCED 1 & 2). It targets schools with low academic achievement or high dropout rates, particularly those facing challenges in improvement. By the end of 2019, the programme had reached nearly 300 schools. The programme also included efforts to enhance education for newly arrived students and those with a mother tongue other than Swedish. This initiative offers both general and targeted support for principals, teachers, and other personnel in introductory programmes, with the goal of reducing achievement gaps between these students and others. In addition, the reform includes measures for education during school holidays, requiring providers to offer extra education for pupils in grades 8 and 9 who are at risk of not meeting academic goals or qualifying for upper secondary school programmes.

Also aimed at migrants, but at the other end of the educational system, the *Fast Track initiative* (ISCED 4+) for teachers and preschool teachers was launched in **Sweden** in 2016. It was developed through a collaborative partnership involving the Swedish Teachers' Union, the National Union of Teachers, the Employers' Organisation for the Swedish Service Sector, the Swedish Public Employment Service, various government agencies, and six Swedish universities. This initiative aimed to address teacher shortages, partly by accelerating the professional integration of newly arrived individuals with pedagogical qualifications into the Swedish education system. Specifically designed to support both educational and societal integration, the programme aimed to provide a structured introduction to the Swedish school context. By targeting newly arrived individuals with qualifications and teaching experience from outside the EU, the programme addressed structural barriers to employment and helped prevent the underutilisation of migrant skills. It also contributed to increasing diversity and representation in the teaching profession, thereby supporting representation in schools with multilingual and multicultural student populations.

In the **Flemish Community of Belgium**, *Priority Access to ECEC* was implemented in 2009. The reform prioritised access to childcare for children under the age of 3. The aim was supported by an increase in funding per child under the age of three whose native language was not Dutch. In 2015, a broad initiative was introduced at all levels of education in the Flemish Community. This initiative, termed *Special Measures to Enhance Integration of Refugees*, aimed at all levels of education and sought to strengthen the integration of refugees through the educational system. The initiative

included, for instance, language support measures, the introduction of welcome classes, and changes to the system of recognition of previously attained educational credentials by refugees. In the **French Community of Belgium,** the *DASPA Decree* was introduced in 2011. This decree created the DASPA programmes, aimed at newly arrived students, which focused on language development and training of immigrants. Through these programmes, the aim was to contribute to the inclusion of newly arrived students in mainstream educational institutions at all levels of education (ISCED 0-4+). In the **German Community of Belgium**, legislative amendments for newly arrived children were made in 2017. These amendments were implemented in response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 and introduced bridging classes and provided teachers with resources to enhance their capacity for meeting the diverse needs of newly arrived students. These resources addressed both trauma, language barriers, and cultural differences.

In **Denmark**, various reforms have been concerned with assessing linguistic competencies and identifying pupils in need of special assistance. One of these is the *Executive Order on Primary and Lower Secondary School Teaching in Danish as a Second Language (Bekendtgørelse om folkeskolens undervisning i dansk som andetsprog)* first enacted in 2006, which is concerned with the rights of bilingual children. According to §2 of the EO, "[b]ilingual pupils in need of linguistic support must be given instruction in Danish as a second language upon admission to primary and lower secondary school in connection with the start of school or later in the school course".

Another Danish reform targeting linguistic competences is an amendment of *The Act on Primary and Lower Secondary School (Lov om folkeskolen)* of 2009 which establishes compulsory linguistic assessments of all pupils at the beginning of primary school. According to § 3, the assessment is meant to ensure that all children are taught in a manner that is sensitive to the individual child's linguistic competences and abilities. In 2019, the same act was amended again to include a provision requiring linguistic tests of children at the beginning of primary school in schools where more than 30 % of the pupils live in residential areas on the Government's list of "vulnerable residential areas", and they have to pass the test before they can start in 1st grade (§ 11a). Children who fail the test must complete a so-called "language stimulation course" before taking the next test.

Immigrant pupils have been the focus of attention for **Luxembourgian** reforms also. The *Grand-Ducal Regulation of 10 May 2012 (Règlement grand-ducal du 10 mai 2012)* defines the terms of recruitment and mission of so-called intercultural mediators who is available for immigrant families in order to help with verbal and written translation of documents and, on request, with support in class. Furthermore, the *National Action Plan*

on Integration (2018) provides a framework for projects and tools to promote integration between different ethnic groups. One important focus area of the Plan is linguistic and school integration.

In 2015, **Finland** implemented the *National Core Curriculum for Instruction Preparing for Basic Education (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet)*. One aim was to promote the integration of immigrant and refugee students. One element in the reform was the establishment of 50 new groups of preparatory studies for basic education. Students have access to courses in either Finnish or Swedish, or they can attend classes in their native language. At the upper secondary level, the *General Upper Secondary Education Reform (Valtioneuvoston asetus lukiokoulutuksesta)*, which came into effect in 2019, included a commitment to provide preparatory education for general upper secondary education for immigrants. The aim of this measure is to enable immigrant pupils to gain the language competences and other necessary skills to undertake general upper secondary education. The *Right to Learn* programme *(Oikeus oppia - varhaiskasvatuksen ja perusopetuksen laadun ja tasa-arvon kehittämisohjelma)* (2020) and the *Action Plan to Strengthening Basic Skills and Language Skills (Toimenpideohjelma maahanmuuttotaustaisten oppilaiden perustaitojen ja opetuskielen vahvistamiseksi perusopetuksessa)* (2022) consist of different initiatives, including a commitment to strengthening the basic skills and language of instruction of immigrant pupils. The aim is to ensure that pupils who have recently moved to Finland have the capabilities to pursue further studies.

In 2008, an agreement was concluded between the **Austrian** federal government and the federal states to provide support to children with insufficient skills in the German language in ECEC institutions. To identify the needed level of support, special observation sheets have been developed to assess the language skills of children with immigrant backgrounds. Since 2010, half-day attendance of kindergarten has been mandatory, with the aim of ensuring that children with another mother tongue than German can improve their competencies in the German language. For this purpose, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research has developed a range of measures for the early language support of children in childcare institutions. The federal government also provides language support courses for non-German speakers, additional support to non-German speaking students during the first two years of school, and specialised language support staff in primary and lower secondary schools.

In **France,** the *National Action Plan for the Reception and Support of Migrants (Plan d'action national pour soutenir l'accueil et l'accompagnement des publics migrants)*

(2017) concerns all levels of education. The plan utilises inspection units and specialist academic centres and ensures timely support for immigrants. Migrants can access information on their rights on the “Welcome refugees” information portal and academic courses offered in French as a foreign language.

Across these reforms, several clear trends emerge. First, language acquisition is treated as the foundational prerequisite for educational inclusion, with countries widely expanding preparatory classes, second-language instruction, and linguistic assessments. Second, early and structured support – whether through introductory programmes, specialist staff, or tailored assessment procedures – has become a central mechanism for enabling migrant students’ integration. Third, many systems increasingly combine universal measures with targeted interventions for newly arrived students, refugees, or specific linguistic groups, reflecting the growing diversity of migrant experiences across Europe. Finally, reforms commonly stress collaboration with families and communities, recognising that successful integration extends beyond the classroom and depends on broader social and cultural support structures.

4.2.3.1 Cultural and religious context – Muslim and Jewish communities

In the course of our analysis, we also identified reforms aimed at countering discrimination in cultural and religious contexts, targeting Muslim communities or Jewish communities.

Acknowledging the religious and cultural dimension, as well as the observed social isolation of minority populations, **Greece** introduced the *KESPEM* reform (*Κέντρο Σπουδών Παιδιών Μουσουλμανικών Μειονοτήτων*) in 2010 under the *Education of Muslim Children* programme. This initiative aimed to prevent the isolation of the Muslim minority in the Thrace region of north-eastern Greece, targeting primary and secondary school children (ages 6–12). The reform focused on two key strategies: the use of specially developed textbooks by trained teachers and the recognition of students as non-native speakers, which allowed educators to embrace the children’s different languages and cultural identities. These measures were essential in fostering an inclusive educational environment that respected the religious and cultural backgrounds of the students, promoting equal educational opportunities and integration.

In **Germany,** 2021, the Central Council of Jews in Germany, representatives of the Federal-Länder Commission of Anti-Semitism and the Standing Conference adopted a joint *Recommendation on dealing with Anti-Semitism in schools (Gemeinsame Empfehlung zum Umgang mit Antisemitismus in Schule*). The recommendation stated that knowledge about the history and present of Jewishness as well as about the origins, manifestations and consequences of hatred of Jews is necessary to prevent and combat Anti-Semitism. The first step would be to sensitise teachers in all subjects to recognise Anti-Semitic incidents as such in order to be able to react accordingly. The inclusion of the perspective of those affected would be of particular importance. In this way, pupils should be enabled to recognise Anti-Semitism in all its forms and to take a stand against it.

A similar measure has been adopted in **Denmark** in 2022 in the *Action Plan Against Anti-Semitism (Handlingsplan mod antisemitisme)*. According to this plan, "Danish children and young people must be equipped to speak out against anti-Semitism and all other forms of intolerance" (p.13). A range of initiatives at different educational levels were included to serve this goal. At the upper secondary level, for instance, one of the initiatives was to change the curricula for the history subject, making it compulsory to teach about the Holocaust (p.14).

Reforms in this area may also adopt a different approach. While the aforementioned measures focus on counteracting stereotyping and discrimination against specific groups, recent years have also seen the emergence of initiatives targeting so-called vulnerable groups, aimed at reducing their potential for radicalisation**.**

In 2015 the *Anti-Radicalism Network* was introduced in **all three autonomous communities of Belgium**. The aim of this network is to reduce and prevent radicalisation among Muslims in educational contexts. This is achieved by integrating an Islamic Religious Education component into teacher training programmes.

These reforms reflect a broader trend of addressing cultural, religious, and identity-based inequalities in education. They emphasise the recognition and inclusion of minority students' cultural and religious backgrounds, whether through adapted curricula, specialised textbooks, or targeted teacher training. Additionally, there is a growing focus on preventing discrimination, anti-Semitism, and radicalisation by equipping students and educators with the knowledge, skills, and awareness to recognise and respond to intolerance. Overall, these measures combine educational, cultural, and social strategies to foster inclusive and respectful learning environments.

4.2.3.2 Roma students

Roma children and youth represent one of the key target groups of educational reforms aimed at reducing educational inequalities. Countries with Roma minorities have implemented measures primarily focused on early childhood education (widening participation) and compulsory education (preventing early school leaving)—often within the broader category of disadvantaged students but also as a special priority. In recent years, however, there has been a growing emphasis on supporting continued education and even encouraging access to higher education. A second key area of intervention is the prevention of segregation, as data indicate an overrepresentation of Roma students in special schools, as well as the persistence of intra-school segregation practices. The third, and broadest, category of measures involves the implementation of comprehensive operational education programs. These include, in addition to desegregation efforts, language support, changes in teaching methods, and enhanced cooperation with parents and local communities. An additional form of action aimed at promoting equality consists of initiatives that incorporate elements of Roma culture into mainstream curricula, as well as educational efforts directed at the majority population. Nonetheless, it is important to note the persistently low success rates: Roma children remain significantly excluded from educational opportunities.

One of the first political initiative towards Romani children in education area in our report time was ban on segregation in **Romania**, issued 2004 and 2007 (encompassing ISCED 1–3 levels). The segregation of Romani children in education on the basis of racial or ethnic origin was first officially acknowledged in 2004 when an internal notification of the Ministry of Education was enacted which prohibited segregation in the pre-university education system: Ministry of Education and Research Notification No. 29323/20.04.2004. It was only in 2007 that a Ministerial Order officially prohibited school segregation of Romani children as a form of discrimination and a methodology for preventing and eliminating school segregation has been subsequently adopted (Order 1540/19.07.2007. In Romania, legislation defines the following categories of students at risk of school segregation: Roma students, students with lower socio-economic status (operationali**s**ed by parents' level of education and student's status as recipient of social scholarship), students with disabilities, students coming from rural areas, or students with low academic attainment. For each of the categories of students aforementioned, there is evidence supporting their vulnerability in schooling, generally, and particularly a high risk of exposure to school segregation. In terms of spatial/methods of organising teaching, Romania has included in its legislation: a) segregation at the level of the educational establishment, b) segregation at the level of

the school building, c) segregation at classroom level, and d) segregation at the level of the last two rows of school benches in each classroom. The aforementioned Romanian legislation brings a new element to monitoring and diagnosing school segregation. Alongside residential segregation (inter-school), which is of interest (but still unmonitored as such due to a lack of data regarding the sociodemographic configuration of school catchment areas, as already mentioned), segregation within the same school (intra-school segregation) is being monitored, within the buildings, classrooms, or the back rows of the classroom (Costache, Crai, & Ivan, 2022). The legal obligation is established to mix students so that the socio-cultural, ethnic diversity, etc., of the student population is reflected within the school buildings, at the classroom level, or at the level of the last two rows (Costache et al. 2024). In the new Education Law adopted in 2023, Romanian legislators made some amendments to the previous legislation in the field, initiating the transition towards a mainstreaming education system based on the principles of quality inclusive education, including for students with disabilities.

Portugal's *National Strategy for the Integration of Roma Communities (Estratégia Nacional para a Integração das Comunidades Ciganas*, ENICC, 2013-20) aimed in education area (as the strategy encompassed more social issues) to ensure access of children from Roma communities to pre-primary education, as well as to increase their completion of compulsory education and access to tertiary education. In 2013, the Ministry of Education created a database of students from itinerant families to monitor school attendance and help ensure completion of compulsory education. As ENICC national co-ordinator, the ACM produced a report to evaluate implementation of this plan in 2013-14. The strategy's actions revolve around five axes. The report found that, during the period analysed, the overall execution rate of actions associated with ENICC was 81%, including 59% for transversal initiatives, 23% for education, 10% for employment and training, 6% for housing and less than 1% for the health axis. The report identified budgetary and legal issues, including concerns about the collection of specific information on Roma communities and the need to involve a wide range of public and private actors to achieve the various priorities in each axis. This led the ACM, to create the *FAPE - ENICC Support Fund* which will, through a line of project financing, highlight the priorities set out in the plan. The first year of implementation of the FAPE in 2015 aimed to improve the success of some of the priorities in 2013-14 (High Commissioner for Migration and Government of Portugal, 2014).

The rights of ethnic minorities in **Slovenia** were enshrined in law and gradually integrated into educational policy frameworks. A pivotal moment occurred in 2007 with

the adoption of the *Roma Community Act*, which formally defined the rights of the Roma population and established a legal basis for targeted policy measures in various sectors, including education. Between 2008 and 2021, Slovenia implemented a series of targeted projects aimed at promoting the successful integration of Roma students into the education system. These initiatives focused not only on children but also on broader family and community engagement, e.g. introduced home visits conducted by educators and social workers to raise awareness among Roma families of the importance of early education and to build trust between families and institutions. Roma assistants were employed to support communication between families and school or kindergarten staff, while also helping to improve the educational performance and social integration of Roma children. In addition, multi-purpose centres located within Roma settlements provided support to both children and their families, strengthening basic competencies and offering extracurricular activities tailored to their specific needs. Several major projects were carried out during this period. The *Projects for the Successful Integration of Roma Students in Schools* (*Projekti za uspešno vključevanje romskih učencev v šole*, 2008–2015) aimed to promote the academic and social inclusion of Roma students. The *Projects for Raising the Cultural Capital* (*Projekti za povečanje kulturnega kapitala*, 2011–2013) sought to enhance the educational environment by incorporating cultural elements relevant to Roma identity. The 2011 initiative *Liven Up the School* (*Iniciativa Oživimo šolo*) focused on increasing motivation and engagement among Roma students. Later, the *Together for Knowledge* project (P*rojekt Skupaj za znanje*, 2016–2021) expanded support to preschool education, promoting the inclusion of Roma parents in educational activities and providing coaching sessions and after-school support for Roma children. Slovenia also participated in international initiatives such as the TOY for Inclusion project, implemented in nine EU countries. This project, which began in the late 2010s, focused on children from Roma backgrounds, migrant families, and other ethnic minorities. It introduced low-threshold community-based “Play Hubs” to provide informal learning opportunities and promote early childhood inclusion in culturally responsive ways. A significant advancement came in 2021 with the launch of the *Roma Education Strategy* (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2021b), which outlined a comprehensive set of measures to enhance Roma children’s participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC). These measures included the introduction of free and shorter kindergarten programs during the year prior to school entry for children not yet enrolled in kindergarten; a revision of the Kindergarten Curriculum to reflect more inclusive content; increased cooperation with parents; and the inclusion of Slovene and Roma culture and language in all programs. Additionally, the strategy provided for organised

transportation for Roma children attending full-day kindergartens and promoted the employment of Roma parents as drivers or companions. The availability of high-quality children's literature in the Romani language was also supported, alongside proposals for the co-financing of informal preschool educational activities, such as TOY libraries. Finally, in the same year, the government adopted the National Programme of Measures of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Roma for the period 2021–2030 (Gov.SI, 2021), which defined strategic goals to be achieved by 2023. These goals included increasing enrolment rates of Roma children in ECEC programs, ensuring the acquisition of basic social and language competencies prior to primary school, strengthening knowledge of the Slovene language while preserving and promoting Romani language and culture, and supporting the regular participation of Roma children in educational processes with the objective of completing primary education. In 2005 in **Hungary** *On the Road* (*Útravaló*) Bursary Programs aimed to support disadvantaged students in lower and upper secondary and vocational schools and thus enhance equal opportunities for them. Apart from providing financial support (bursary), the program also included mentoring. Mentors agree to cooperate with students to achieve goals they set together (such as secondary or higher education entry or vocational qualifications), and they receive financial incentives depending on the success rate of their mentees. The program started in 2005, and in 2011, a separate bursary program (MACIKA) was added to it, designed exclusively for Roma students. It is also an explicit objective of the program to include as many Roma students as possible. Initiatives supporting Roma education have also been implemented outside the public education system. One notable example was the Network of Christian Roma Special Colleges, established in 2011 to assist Roma students in higher education by addressing structural disadvantages. Support was offered in the form of accommodation, stipends, mentoring, and extracurricular activities focused on Roma identity and language (Cserti & Csapó, 2019). The program was modelled on the earlier Romaversitas Foundation, a civil initiative launched in 1996. According to Trendl (2023), these colleges provided a stable environment that fostered students' social integration and developed skills relevant to the labor market, while also reinforcing a positive Roma identity. Data showed that 69% of students identified as Roma, 52% were officially disadvantaged, and 47% came from rural areas, although most had parents with at least lower secondary education (Trendl, 2023, p. 53; Biczó & Szabó, 2020). By the early 2020s, the colleges served around 250 students and received growing financial support (Rostas & Kovacs, 2021). However, the exclusive allocation of EU funds to church-run institutions raised concerns, as it excluded more experienced civil society actors and was criticised

as potentially discriminatory (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2019; Roma Civil Monitor, 2019).

A series of the reforms encompassing ISCED 1-3 was introduced in recent years in **Slovakia.** To address long-standing educational inequalities affecting Roma communities, Slovakia launched also two major reforms aimed at improving access and equity in education. The 2012 Strategy for Roma Integration by 2020 marked Slovakia's first comprehensive reform to increase Roma participation in education and reduce segregation from early childhood to higher education. Key goals included raising pre-primary enrolment among disadvantaged Roma children from 18% to 50%, improving attendance and outcomes in elementary education, and increasing upper secondary (ISCED 3) completion rates. The strategy also promoted support for teachers, the use of the Romani language, and the elimination of unjust placements in special education. Despite these ambitions, implementation was limited. A second reform in 2015 introduced legislation to prohibit the placement of socially disadvantaged students in special schools and classes. It aimed to end segregation through legal safeguards, control mechanisms, and financial incentives for inclusion. Then the *Operational Program Human Resources* (2014–2020) aimed to promote employment and social cohesion, with a strong emphasis on education and training reforms. Key measures included all-day schooling, teacher and teaching assistant training tailored to Roma children's needs, and awareness-raising within Roma communities. Efforts focused on expanding access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), vocational education, and reducing early school leaving, targeting over 100,000 learners. Support extended to disadvantaged groups—children, the unemployed, and people with disabilities—through initiatives enhancing school-to-work transitions, vocational training quality, and alignment with labour market needs. Lifelong learning and improved access to higher education were also promoted, emphasising skills development and flexible pathways. A special priority was given to Roma inclusion. Integrated funding supported 150 municipalities with marginalised Roma communities. Dedicated axes—funded by the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund—targeted Roma integration via education initiatives and improved early childhood infrastructure in Roma-populated areas.

Nonetheless, progress has been limited. According to the 2023 Education and Training Monitor, early school leaving rose from 5.3% (2012) to 7.4% (2022), with nearly 75% of Roma youth leaving education prematurely. Only 33% of Roma children attended early childhood education and care (ECEC), compared to 78% of the general population. Discrimination remained a concern, with 8% of Roma reporting unfair treatment by

school staff. Roma students remain overrepresented in special education and often segregated within mainstream schools. By 2023, 65% of Roma children aged 6–15 attended schools where most or all pupils were Roma—up 5 percentage points since 2016—making Slovakia the EU country with the highest level of Roma segregation in education. Due to insufficient compliance with EU non-discrimination standards, the European Commission launched infringement proceedings in 2015, issued a reasoned opinion in 2019, and referred the case to the European Court of Justice in December 2023—the first such case under the EU Race Equality Directive in education. Amnesty International (2024) continues to highlight systemic misplacement of Roma children in special education as a persistent barrier to desegregation, despite the use of EU funds requiring inclusive schooling. Then, 2024, national project *Opportunity for All*, also targeting ISCED levels 1–3, started. The project seeks to eliminate educational segregation and promote inclusion, with a specific focus on children from marginalised Roma communities. It pilots innovative desegregation measures and supports the development of inclusive schools ensuring equal opportunities for all pupils. Core activities include the design and implementation of local desegregation plans, forming the basis for a sustainable, systemic approach. The project also aims to enhance educational mobility and accessibility for students with disabilities. Efforts are directed at identifying the root causes of segregation in various localities, with solutions tailored to specific community contexts. A participatory methodology ensures active involvement of Roma communities and local stakeholders throughout the process.

In **Germany**, in 2022, the Standing Conference, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma), and the Alliance for Solidarity with the Sinti and Roma of Europe adopted a *Joint Declaration on Teaching the History and Present of Sinti and Roma in Schools (Gemeinsame Erklärung…)*. The declaration encourages schools to strengthen their engagement with the history and current realities of Sinti and Roma, both in the classroom and in extracurricular settings. A key focus is raising awareness of antiziganism. The topic is relevant in subjects such as history, political education, religion, ethics, language, literature, and the arts. It should be reflected in curricula, teaching guidelines, and educational materials, and can also be introduced at the primary level. The reform was intended to operate in a different direction than is usually the case—not so much by reducing the level of educational inequalities within a specific social group / category, but by impacting society, thereby laying the foundation for more equal future.

Also addressing Roma and Travellers, **Ireland** introduced the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021*. The inclusion strategy led to a number of key

initiatives. It resulted in the state's formal recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group, investment in community-based support systems to improve the retention of Traveller and Roma children in education, and increased funding to promote awareness and pride in Traveller culture. Additionally, the strategy sought to develop initiatives that address feuding within the *Traveller* community. Through the strategy, a system of ethnic identifiers was introduced across the public sector to track the progress and challenges faced by these communities. Furthermore, the strategy emphasised renewed efforts to ensure that Travellers and Roma fully engage with the public health sector to address their health-related challenges. It highlighted several important measures in education, such as investing in community-based support mechanisms to help Traveller and Roma families, enhancing their involvement in education, and promoting a deeper understanding of Traveller culture within schools. This included supporting culturally appropriate initiatives and providing educational resources that recognise the unique needs of these communities. Additionally, the strategy outlined the need for increased funding to raise awareness about Traveller culture and heritage in schools, fostering an inclusive environment where Traveller and Roma students feel valued and supported. By focusing on these areas, the strategy aimed to reduce educational disparities and provide better opportunities for Traveller and Roma children, ultimately contributing to their social inclusion and equality in Irish society. A review of the strategy identified that, while it had led to some positive developments, progress was hindered by the absence of clear targets, indicators, outcomes, timeframes, and budget allocations. This lack of specificity made it challenging to effectively monitor and evaluate the strategy's success (Pohjolainen 2021) and a revised version, entitled *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II* 2024–2028, was therefore implemented in 2024.

In 2011, the **Swedish** government implemented a *Roma Inclusion Strategy*, which involved training Roma individuals as "bridge-builders". The effort was directed at primary and lower secondary schools (ISCED 1 & 2). These bridge-builders were intended to act as cultural mediators, facilitate communication, and build trust between Romani families and educational institutions. From 2012 to 2019, Södertörn University provided specialised training, offering courses in Romani language, history, and cultural studies. Evaluations of the programme have produced mixed outcomes. While some internal assessments highlighted positive developments, such as enhanced knowledge and greater Roma inclusion, independent evaluations and research raised several concerns. These include an excessive focus on intercultural mediation and the potential misrepresentation of Romani culture as homogeneous, which could fail to acknowledge

the community's diversity. The programme was extended with new funding between 2022 and 2024.

These reforms illustrate persistent efforts across Europe to address educational inequalities affecting Roma children and youth. Key trends include combating segregation, enhancing access to early childhood and compulsory education, providing language and cultural support, and promoting family and community engagement. While some initiatives also aim to support tertiary education and broader societal awareness of Roma history and culture, overall progress remains limited, with persistent gaps in enrolment, attainment, and inclusion. The reforms demonstrate a combination of legal, policy, and programmatic approaches, yet challenges such as discrimination, underfunding, and inconsistent implementation continue to hinder full educational equity for Roma populations.

4.2.4 Early School Leavers / NEETs

One dimension of educational inequality is the high rate of early school leaving. This may refer either to dropping out of education entirely or to choosing not to pursue any learning beyond the compulsory level. Reform efforts, therefore, focus on two main areas: on the one hand, providing support aimed at reducing the risk of premature school dropout, and on the other, encouraging and guiding young people in choosing further educational pathways—whether academic or vocational—as a preventive measure against becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

In **Denmark**, a new education called *Preparatory Basic Education* (*Forberedende grunduddannelse*) was established in 2019 as part of the effort to combat inequalities in educational outcomes. Targeting young people in risk of permanently being excluded from the labour market and educational opportunities, the aim of the educational programme is to prepare students for upper secondary education, vocational education, or to achieve employment in the labour market *(The Act on Preparatory Basic Education, § 1)*.

In the years 2014-2017 the project *The CroCooS - Prevent dropout! (CroCooS – Preprečimo odhajanje iz šole!*) was realised in **Slovenia**. It was financed under the Erasmus+ Program, developed in the framework of the EC proposal "Implementation of the European strategic objectives in education and training" under the Lifelong Learning Programme, aimed to identify means to prevent early school leaving in Slovene VET schools, with emphasis on cross-sectorial co-operation and early warning systems. It also tested its applicability with national pilots focusing on contextual factors affecting

the evaluation. *The CroCooS* programme resulted in a comprehensive Toolkit of practical tools for day-to-day school use, a set of Guidelines to support the implementation of institutional early warning systems, and a rich Resource Pool of professional literature and materials, all aimed at preventing student dropout and supporting cooperation across sectors.

Similar approach was in **Italy**. As part of the *Youth Guarantee* initiative (*Garanzia Giovani*, 2014), the country aimed to re-engage 15–18-year-olds—especially early school leavers—by strengthening their basic skills and supporting their integration into the labour market. Around EUR 1.5 billion has been allocated to this goal (OECD, 2017g), complementing existing social insurance exemptions for employers hiring eligible youth, such as *Youth Guarantee* participants, those from lagging regions, or those completing internships or work-based learning in upper secondary education (OECD, 2017f). Since 2018, high tax incentives have also been introduced to encourage permanent youth employment (EC, 2017b). Evaluation results showed positive effects, including greater standardisation and individualisation of services, and reduced hiring barriers for companies. Registrations increased from 900,000 in 2015 to 1,205,000 in 2017, with 982,000 receiving offers. However, the 2017 OECD report noted a lack of quality criteria for apprenticeships, persistent regional disparities, and gaps in local-level data. Despite these issues, the delivery rate of measures at local level reached a national average of 81.5% (ANPAL, 2017).

In November 2015, the **Swedish** government launched the *Paths Ahead Strategy – A Strategy for NEET Young People* (ISCED 3). This strategy outlined the measures the government had implemented or planned to implement between 2015 and 2018 to improve the opportunities for NEET youth to establish themselves in both the workforce and the community. Recognising that young people in different age groups are at various stages in life and face distinct challenges, the strategy aimed to tailor its approach to meet these diverse needs. For young people aged 15 to 19, the primary focus was on encouraging them to begin, resume, and complete upper secondary education, while for those aged 20 to 25, the emphasis shifted towards motivating participation in further education or employment. The strategy stressed the importance of individualised and coordinated support, aiming to help youth either enter the labour market or pursue and complete their education.

This was followed by the *Plug-in initiative* (or *Plug-in till framtiden)*, an upper secondary education (ISCED 3) initiative launched in 2016 by the **Swedish** government to support young people who were not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET). The initiative sought to improve the inclusion of these young individuals, particularly those

at risk of long-term exclusion from both the education system and the labour market. The primary goal was to provide targeted, individualised support to help NEET youth reconnect with education or employment opportunities. This included offering personalised interventions designed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by these young people. Key elements of the initiative included career counselling, mentoring, and various training programmes intended to help young people gain the necessary skills and confidence to progress in their personal and professional lives. Furthermore, the Plug-in initiative emphasised cross-sector collaboration, bringing together local authorities, schools, social services, and employment agencies to create a more integrated support system. By focusing on both educational pathways and employment opportunities, the initiative aimed to ensure that young people were given the tools they needed to pursue a balanced approach to education and work. As part of Sweden's broader efforts to reduce youth unemployment and educational exclusion, the initiative aligned with other policies such as the Paths Ahead Strategy for NEET youth, with the overarching aim of helping young people successfully re-enter education or gain work experience. A study by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) indicates that the initiative has had a positive impact on dropout rates and student well-being.

In the **Netherlands**, the *Drive to Reduce Dropout* (*Aanval op schooluitval*) *Rates* initiative was introduced in 2002. The initiative targeted primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools (ISCED 1-3). Initially, it aimed to reduce the dropout rate to a total of 35,000, but this target was later lowered further to 25,000 in 2016. The initiative focused particularly on the transition from lower secondary schools to vocational training. Measures included enhanced student guidance and counselling, as well as the strengthening of special education facilities in schools. Targeting potential early school leavers was also part of the Dutch initiative to reduce the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic school lockdowns. This was implemented through the Catch-Up Programme (2020), aimed at primary to upper secondary schools (ISCED 1-3), specifically targeting students who experienced learning gaps or delays. Schools could apply for subsidies to mitigate the effects of the lockdown, with a total of EUR 500 million allocated for the initiative. The programme included summer holiday teaching, after-school activities, and additional in-school support. Students currently in teacher training were encouraged to assist.

In the **Flemish Community of Belgium**, similar measures were introduced in 2020 to address the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown. Through *Circulaire 7705*, the Flemish Government aimed to mitigate current and future problems arising from lockdowns. The measure included additional and differentiated teaching, with a special focus on students who faced the most significant learning challenges during the lockdown. In

2013, the Flemish Government implemented an *Action Plan on Early School Leaving*, targeting lower and upper secondary education (ISCED 3). The action plan aimed to improve data collection and analysis, allowing for more targeted interventions. In 2014, these efforts were further continued through the *New Master Plan for Secondary Education*, which introduced a dual learning system and differentiation in teaching, and were reiterated in 2015 with the initiative Together against Early School Leaving.

In **Malta**, various reforms address the problem of early school dropout. The *National Strategy for Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET)* and the *National Action Plan for Child Guarantee 2022-2030,* both from 2022, as well as the *National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social inclusion 2014-2024* and the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024* from 2014, contains a range of preventive measures intended to minimise early school dropout, as, for instance, reinforcing the connection between school and home via family community school link programmes.

In **Luxembourg**, several reforms have focused on preventing early leaving from education and training. The *Grand-Ducal Regulation of 25 March 2009* (*Règlement grand-ducal du 25 mars 2009*) established procedures according to which secondary schools organise activities or classes to prevent the exclusion of pupils with severe learning or behavioural difficulties before they have obtained a qualification. The *Law of 18 July 2018 (Loi du 20 juillet 2018)* introduced a mediation service for school retention, inclusion, and integration. Furthermore, the *National Reform Programme of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg 2021 (Programme national de réforme du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 2021)* implemented measures falling under the categories of prevention, intervention, and skills development.

In **Austria** several reforms address early school leaving. Since 2012, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has been pursuing a strategy of youth coaching to prevent early school leaving. By providing tailored support and guidance to vulnerable young people, *Youth Coaching (Jugendcoaching)* aimed to bring down the early school leaving rate and to make the school-to-work transition easier. Also in 2012, the *New Upper-Level Scheme (Neue Oberstufe*) was adopted with the aim to better prepare students for higher education as well as detecting learning deficits at an earlier stage and reduce the number of school dropouts. Finally, in 2016-2017, mandatory education/training for all under the age of 18 was implemented because of the *Compulsory Education Act (AusBildung bis 18)* (2016). The aim was to provide all young people with qualifications that go beyond compulsory schooling to increase their chances of participating in economic and social life in the long term. The *Compulsory Education Act* provides for

administrative penalties for parents or guardians in the event of non-compliance, but the main emphasis is on helping and preventing early school leaving.

France implemented the action plan *United Against School Dropout (Tous mobilisés pour vaincre le décrochage scolaire)* in 2014. It integrates previous educational support measures geared towards students at the lower secondary education and focuses on the prevention of early school leaving and school retention. The plan includes several measures to prevent school dropout, such as educational and personalised support, and a personalised programme for educational internships and tutoring. Furthermore, the *Law for a School of Trust (LOI n° 2019-791 du 26 juillet 2019 pour une école de la confiance)* (2019) also addressed early school leaving in making it compulsory from the start of 2020/21 for 16-year-olds to remain in education or training until age 18. To promote school retention, the law provides for various measures, including apprenticeships or traineeships, employment, civic service, a mentoring programme and specific programmes for social integration and labour market transitions.

In **Finland,** the *New Act on Compulsory Education* was adopted in 2021. As a consequence, upper secondary education became compulsory for all students completing their basic education, and basic education providers and municipalities became responsible for guidance and for tracking of students' transition to upper secondary education. The students who have difficulties finding a school place can be assigned to preparatory education, which provides them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to apply for an upper secondary qualification.

These reforms reflect a strong European focus on preventing early school leaving and supporting youth at risk of disengagement. Common trends include creating preparatory or tailored education programs, implementing early warning systems, offering individualised guidance and mentoring, and fostering cross-sector collaboration between schools, social services, and employment agencies. Many initiatives also responded to specific crises, such as COVID-19, by providing catch-up programs and targeted support. Overall, the reforms emphasise both retaining students within compulsory education and facilitating transitions to further education or employment, combining preventative, supportive, and integrative strategies.

4.2.5 Special Educational Needs

An analysis of reforms targeting special educational needs (SEN) indicates that this is one of the key challenges of the 21st century. In order to ensure equal opportunities, most reforms in this area take the form of interventions across the entire education

system, or at least its compulsory segment. These interventions address legislative changes, the removal of barriers (architectural as well as conceptual models based on segregation) and the provision of support within the learning process by e.g. supporting teachers, introducing individualised education programs or employment of assistive technologies.

Slovenia has undertaken significant reforms in the field of special educational needs (SEN) over the past two decades, gradually shifting from a segregated system toward a more inclusive and integrated model of support across all levels of education. These reforms have addressed legislation, assessment practices, early intervention, and professional capacity-building, and have been supported through national and European funding instruments. A major turning point occurred in 2000 with the adoption of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (ISCED 1-8). This legislation marked the first time SEN education was incorporated into the core of the Slovenian educational framework. The act introduced two fundamental changes: the transition from an exclusively segregated model of education for children with special needs to a more flexible and inclusive system of placement, and the transfer of responsibility for the identification of SEN from the field of social affairs to the education sector. The act defined a broader and more precise categorisation of special needs and types of impairments, established the procedures for identification and placement, outlined the responsibilities of the competent bodies, and required the development of an individualised education programme for every child placed under the act. The legislation was amended in 2013 to further expand the categories of children entitled to support. encompassing blind or partially sighted, deaf or hard of hearing, children with speech, language, and movement impairments, those with chronic illnesses or deficiencies in specific areas of learning, as well as children with intellectual disabilities and behavioural disorders.

To support the implementation of this legislative framework, the Ministry of Education, in partnership with the European Social Fund, launched a number of targeted projects. Between 2017 and 2020, EUR 4 million was allocated to the establishment of a Network of Professional Institutions for Support to Children with Special Needs and their Families. This network aimed to create local contact points for pedagogical and professional assistance to both families and school staff. An additional EUR 1.8 million was allocated for the professional development of educators. Another key initiative was the development of a more comprehensive approach to working with children with emotional and behavioural disorders. Between 2017 and 2019, EUR 2.8 million was invested in upgrading and adapting educational methods and institutional practices.

Simultaneously, a programme aimed at enhancing the social inclusion of SEN children and youth in their local communities was launched. With a budget of EUR 2.8 million from 2017 to 2022, it focused on developing modular and alternative forms of education and training, particularly for children and adolescents transitioning out of formal education.

Complementing these reforms at the legislative level, Slovenia also introduced measures to support more inclusive assessment practices within the basic school system. In 2003 and 2004, the country implemented guidelines and rules specifically tailored to the needs of students with SEN in mainstream education outlining how both formative and summative assessments should be adapted to ensure equitable evaluation. Key areas of adaptation included the design of questions, modes of response (such as oral assessment for students with reading and writing difficulties), elimination of time constraints, division of assessment tasks into manageable parts, the use of graphic elements and colour in written materials, employment of assistive technologies (including calculators, computers, and didactic tools), and provision of alternative assessment spaces such as quiet rooms or settings outside the regular classroom.

In 2017, Slovenia also adopted the Act on Comprehensive Special Treatment of Preschool Children with Special Needs. This initiative was supported by the pilot project *A comprehensive early treatment of children with special needs and their families and strengthening the competencies of professionals*, developed in accordance with the guidelines of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASIE). The project aimed to establish professional centres integrated within existing child development units, providing in-kind support to kindergartens through multidisciplinary teams. These teams typically included paediatricians, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, special and rehabilitation education professionals, social workers, and parents. Placement procedures were initiated by parents and coordinated by the National Education Institute of Slovenia (ZRSŠ), which issues placement decisions based on recommendations from the multidisciplinary team and the child's individual plan.

In **Denmark**, several reforms in the 2000-2025 period have been concerned with pupils with physical or mental impairments. The *Executive Order on Special Grants for Special Educational Assistance, etc. for Pupils, Course Participants, and Participants with Impairments or Similar Severe Difficulties (Bekendtgørelse om særlige tilskud til specialpædagogisk bistand m.v. til elever, kursister og deltagere med funktionsnedsættelser eller tilsvarende svære vanskeligheder)*, first enacted in 2006,

establishes a subsidy for special educational assistance for pupils with impairments or "similar difficulties" in order to mitigate educational inequalities. The EO supplements the *Act on Upper Secondary Education (Lov om de gymnasiale uddannelser)* (§ 61) from 2016 (and updated several times since then), as well as the *Act on Vocational Education (Lov om erhvervsuddannelser)* (§ 29) originally from 1990 which both include a provision to the effect that pupils with impairments or similar difficulties must be offered assistance to compensate for their impairments. Another act targeting pupils with impairments is the *Act on Specialised Youth Education (Lov om særligt tilrettelagt ungdomsuddannelse)*, first enacted in 2007. According to this act, young people with "special needs" who cannot complete an ordinary upper secondary education despite special educational assistance, have a right to a "youth education" tailored to their individual needs. The purpose is to enable such pupils "to acquire personal, social, and professional skills for as independent and active participation in adult life as possible, and to provide [those] with the potential for this with the prerequisites for further education and employment" (§ 1).

Similarly, a range of reforms in **Malta** have been concerned with students with disabilities during the last 25 years. Thus the *Inclusive Education Policy* (2000), *For All Children to Succeed* (2005), *Special Schools Reform* (2009), *Education for All: Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta* (2014), the *National Vocational Education and Training Policy* (2015), the *National Children's Policy* (2017), and *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion* (2022) all express the commitment to inclusive educational practices that are sensitive to individual educational needs. They aim to promote attitudes and practices based on egalitarian values, but also individual support and guidance through (for instance) VET for vulnerable students and students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

In **Luxembourg**, a range of reforms have aimed at creating more inclusive educational institutions for pupils and students with disabilities. The *Grand-Ducal Regulation of 22 May 2006 on Obtaining the Bachelor's and Master's Degrees of the University of Luxembourg (Règlement grand-ducal du 22 mai 2006 relatif à l'obtention du grade de bachelor et du grade de master de l'Université du Luxembourg),* the *Law of 16 December 2008 on Child and Family Assistance (Loi du 16 décembre 2008 relative à l'aide à l'enfance et à la famille),* the *Law of 6 February 2009 on the Organisation of Elementary Education (Loi du 6 février 2009 portant organisation de l'enseignement fondamental),* the *Law of 15 July 2011 on Access to Educational and Vocational Qualifications for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (Loi du 15 juillet 2011),* the *Grand-Ducal Regulation of 7 September 2018 Determining for the Centre for the Development of Children and Young*

People with Autism Spectrum Disorder its Specific Name, its Missions, as well as its Quota of Staff Needs (Règlement grand-ducal du 7 septembre 2018 déterminant pour le Centre pour le développement des enfants et jeunes présentant un trouble du spectre de l'autisme sa dénomination particulière, ses missions, ainsi que son contingent de besoin en personnel), and the *Law of 30 June 2023 (Loi du 30 juin 2023)* (modifying several of the previously mentioned laws) grant pupils and students with special needs the right to reasonable accommodations to follow regular educational programmes and pass examinations, and establish various institutions providing information and support to children and young people with special educational needs.

In **Finland** in 2011, an amendment to the *Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki)* was adopted. The purpose of the reform was to ensure that steps are taken within mainstream schools to include pupils with special educational needs before they are moved to dedicated special education schools. **Slovakia** has gradually developed a legislative and institutional framework as well, aimed at supporting children and students with special educational needs (SEN) at all levels of education. In 2002, Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education Institutions introduced key provisions for students with specific needs. According to §100 of the Act, universities are required to create conditions that ensure equal access to education for students with physical, sensory, or multiple disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental disorders, autism spectrum disorders, and learning difficulties. Support is provided upon the student's request and based on submitted documentation from qualified professionals such as psychologists, speech therapists, or special educators. Support begins once approved and is not applied retroactively. Each application is individually assessed, and universities are obliged to appoint coordinators for students with specific needs, with responsibilities defined by internal regulations. The impact of these efforts has been documented in research by Sender et al. (2022), which shows a steady increase in the number of students with specific needs participating in higher education since 2015.

In 2021, the term "inclusive education" was formally introduced into **Slovak** legislation through an amendment to the School Act (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2008). It was defined as a shared educational process based on equality and respect for individual differences. Despite its symbolic value, the amendment had limited practical impact on the existing educational framework. On 24 August 2022, a national policy of debarrierisation was introduced to enhance accessibility in secondary education. Under this initiative, secondary schools with 275 or more students could apply for funding to eliminate architectural barriers, enabling students with disabilities

to select schools based on academic interests rather than physical accessibility. This represented a shift toward equal educational opportunities at the secondary level.

A major reform followed in 2023 with another amendment to the School Act (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2023), replacing the term "integration" with "inclusive education" and establishing a three-tiered system of support measures. These include universal support (available to all students without diagnosis), targeted support (based on assessment by school staff or counselling and prevention institutions), and specialised support (requiring diagnosis by counselling and prevention institutions). The definition of SEN was expanded to include students without formal diagnoses, allowing broader access to support services, depending on available school resources. Simultaneously, the Act on Financing Schools was amended to introduce a new financial model—an allowance for support measures—allocating a lump sum to each school based on total student numbers, rather than the number of diagnosed SEN students.

To a slightly lesser extent, as it covers only compulsory education (ISCED 1–3), the *M-Decree* reform was implemented in the **Flemish Community of Belgium** in 2014. The reform aimed to reinforce the right of students with special educational needs (SEN) to be enrolled in mainstream education. The decree mandated that schools provide specialised equipment and support staff and exhaust all reasonable local measures before referring a student to special education, and bolstered parents' rights to appeal a mainstream school's refusal to enrol a child with SEN. The effort was further emphasised with the *Parliamentary Act on Students with Specific Educational Needs*, introduced the following year in 2015. In 2019, the *Guidance Decree* aimed to strengthen schools' capacity to meet the needs of students with SEN. This decree introduced enhanced collaboration between mainstream schools and special education centres to individualise support for SEN students. In 2016, the *Decree of 4 February 2016* introduced similar measures in the **French Community of Belgium** to make mainstream education more inclusive for students with SEN. Children with SEN in primary school were also addressed in the German Community of Belgium in 2015 with the introduction of specialist educators for fast and targeted support. This group of students was further targeted by the *Dekret über Maßnahmen im Unterrichtswesen*, implemented in 2016 across primary, lower, and upper secondary education (ISCED 1–3).

In **Hungary** the *Springboard (Dobbantó) Program* (2008–2011) developed a special, preparatory 9th grade that would support students with special educational needs (SEN) to enter vocational education and study in integrated environments successfully.

Indirectly, the Program aimed to provide young people (age 15–25, not necessarily SEN but falling out of the system) with behavioural or learning difficulties who already dropped out of the education system with individualised paths back to education and/or the labour market, based on vocational education. The target group was therefore rather diverse, but all of them were characterised by earlier failures in school and an inability to enter vocational education without additional support. The Program was implemented in vocational schools. It included a complex support system: learning took place in small groups, students were provided weekly meetings with a personal mentor teacher, an individual learning plan, and newly renovated, modern space to work in. Learning included not only competence development for academic success, but also career-planning and self-knowledge. According to the summary of the Program developer National Centre for Disability and Social Policy (FSZK n.d.), the Program proved that changing the learning environment can strengthen students and help them overcome their earlier negative experiences with school. However, these outcomes are conditional on a full and complex change in the learning environment (including the physical space, the structure of learning, the methods of organisation, the pedagogical approach. The Springboard Program was generally considered by experts as highly successful (Györgyi 2015). The Program's goals were fully achieved: the preparatory 9th grade of vocational schools was able to prepare SEN students for integrated education and help their transition to vocational education. The follow-up monitoring and impact studies indicated that the program had been effective, far less than 10% of students dropped out and the majority of participants remained in the education system following the program (Mártonfi 2013).

Reforms targeting special educational needs (SEN) across Europe have focused on creating inclusive education systems that remove barriers, support teachers, and provide individualised learning opportunities. Slovenia, Denmark, Malta, Luxembourg, Finland, Slovakia, Belgium, and Hungary have implemented legislative changes, professional development, and assistive measures, including early intervention, specialised programs, and inclusive assessment practices. Key objectives include integrating students with disabilities into mainstream education, enhancing access to vocational and higher education, and promoting social inclusion. Programs such as Slovenia's multidisciplinary early support, Hungary's Springboard Program, and Belgium's M-Decree exemplify the combination of tailored support, environmental adaptation, and systemic reforms to improve educational outcomes for SEN students.

4.2.6. LGBTQIA+ and Gender

In recent years, traditional dimensions of inequality like gender have been increasingly accompanied by new issues related to gender identity (LGBTQIA+) and gender expression. Although this matter presents an increasingly significant challenge to educational practice, it has thus far been addressed in only a limited number of reforms and only in the past few years. Apart from classical initiatives such as supporting girls in STEM subjects or studies, a deeper reflection and intervention have emerged here, aimed at building a safe school environment, introduction of anti-bullying policies, inclusive curricula and enhancing gender equality among students.

In **Malta**, some reforms have been adopted that are concerned with issues related to gender. One of these is the *Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy* (2017) which has as an objective to promote an inclusive and safe school environment. Another reform – the *Higher Education Strategy for Malta* – aims among other things at "reducing gender differences" in higher education. Some of the measures proposed to achieve this goal are more research "on gender differences in subject choices and higher education attainment", improving "career education", incentivising "females to take up careers in STEM-related subject matters", and other "projects and initiatives aimed increasing aspirations and participation of underrepresented groups in higher education" such as summer schools and camps (pp. 24-25).

In 2022 the **Danish** Government adopted an action plan regarding inclusion of LGBTQIA+ pupils and students at different educational levels. According to the plan, which is called *Room for Diversity in the Community – LGBT+ Action Plan 2022-2025 (Plads til forskellighed i fællesskabet LGBT+ handlingsplan 2022-2025)*, "[s]chools, institutions and society in general must meet and support LGBT+ children and young people so that they experience acceptance and do not suffer because of their sexual orientation or gender identity." (p.13). OBJ Furthermore, "LGBT+ children and young people must be able to feel safe at school, and they must be able to receive counselling and support to a greater extent." The plan therefore commits the government to set up an "application pool […] targeted at organizations and associations that will contribute to combating prejudice against LGBT+ children and young people and to providing them with advice and support" (p.14). Another initiative is a series of webinars for pedagogical staff and teachers with the aim of supporting "inclusive learning and teaching environments as well as [promoting] the well-being of children and students with an LGBT+ identity or a potential LGBT+ identity (p.15)".

In 2018, **Ireland** implemented the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020*. Based on this strategy, a number of documents, resources, and initiatives were developed for primary and post-primary schools (ISCED 1–4+). Developed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the strategy aimed to ensure that LGBTQIA+ young people aged 10 to 24 felt visible, valued, and included in Irish society. It sought to create safe, supportive, and inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ youth, particularly in schools. Measures included the introduction of anti-bullying policies, inclusive curricula, and training for educators and service providers to better support LGBTQIA+ youth. The strategy also aimed to improve the physical, mental, and sexual health of LGBTQIA+ young people by enhancing access to appropriate health services, promoting mental well-being, and providing comprehensive sexual health education tailored to their needs.

Additionally, the strategy called for improved research and data collection to better understand and address the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ youth. This included gathering disaggregated data on sexual orientation and gender identity and conducting studies to inform policies and services. The development process involved consultations with nearly 4,000 young people across Ireland, ensuring that their voices and experiences directly influenced the initiative. A Youth Advisory Group played a key role, offering insights and feedback to ensure the strategy addressed the real needs of LGBTQIA+ youth. The strategy has been recognised by the European Commission as the world's first LGBTQIA+ youth strategy, and evaluations show that progress is being made in achieving its objectives.

In **Sweden**, the *Nordic Gender Equality Promotion E-training* is an online educational programme funded by NIKK (Nordic Information on Gender), designed to enhance gender equality in early childhood and basic education (ISCED 0–2) across all Nordic countries. The programme is aimed at principals, teachers, and other school staff and seeks to bolster dialogue and the sharing of best practices regarding gender equality in education. It aligns with Sweden's Gender Equality Act (2018), which mandates gender equality measures in education and across sectors. The programme focuses on equal opportunities for both boys and girls to participate in school and provides guidance for Swedish schools to develop Gender Equality Action Plans. These plans enable schools to monitor and improve gender equality among students, develop collaborative support for gender-neutral values in partnership with parents, and increase gender balance among school staff.

Recent reforms addressing gender and LGBTQIA+ issues in education focus on promoting inclusive, safe, and equitable learning environments. In Malta, initiatives

support gender equality in STEM and higher education, alongside policies protecting trans, intersex, and gender-variant students. Denmark's 2022 *LGBT+ Action Plan* and Ireland's *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy* create supportive school environments, anti-bullying measures, inclusive curricula, and guidance for educators. Sweden's Nordic Gender Equality E-training targets early childhood and basic education, equipping school staff to implement gender equality action plans and foster inclusive school cultures. Across these reforms, emphasis is placed on visibility, well-being, and equal opportunities for all students regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

5. Discussion. Increased Focus on Inequality, Equity, and Social Inclusion in Educational Policy?

5.1 General remarks

An examination of educational reform activities in Europe between 1999 and 2024 reveals a clear trend: a steady increase in the number of reforms registered in international policy databases (see Chapter 3 in this report). Annual reform counts rose from a modest 6–13 reforms per year during 1999–2007 to an average of more than 20 reforms in the early 2020s. While this development might signal an intensification of educational policymaking across Europe, it also raises urgent methodological and interpretive questions about the validity and comparability of such data over time.

The upward trend in policymaking could reflect an acceleration in response to broader issues such as socio-economic pressures, increased global competitiveness in education, international governance mechanisms, or compliance with European and other international treaties and directives. Scholars such as Stephen J. Ball (2012) and Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2021) have underlined that global policy discourses have had a growing influence in education, especially through the proliferation of international and cross-country assessment regimes and standardisation practices, e.g. PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS, and the Bologna Process[9]. This has driven national governments to adopt new reforms and reform initiatives to meet international standardisation requirements and to address various and shifting national performances in international assessment regimes. In this perspective, the increase in reforms can be interpreted as a general trend resulting from broader globalisation dynamics, competitive positioning vis-à-vis

[9] PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment,
PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study,
TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study,
are large-scale, competency-based international assessments.
See STRIDE Working Paper on data and methodology "Key indicators of mapping inequalities in educational achievements in Europe", December 2025

other countries, and compliance with international governance initiatives. However, without this broader perspective, the increase in reforms analysed in this report might also reflect a growing emphasis on implementing reforms that specifically target inequality, equity, and social inclusion.

Over the last 25 years, the European Union, UNESCO, OECD, and other international organisations have increasingly focused on inequality, equity, and inclusion, producing a number of major treaties and directives. It is highly likely that this heightened international focus has influenced the rise in reforms within European countries that seek to mitigate inequality and support equity and social inclusion.

Test regimes such as PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS, and broader soft governance initiatives such as the Bologna Process, have not merely been a driving force behind policy development in general, as mentioned above. In addition to enabling cross-country comparison, benchmarking regimes like PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS have made inequalities in educational outcomes visible across social groups, by providing data for both research and policy-making that is especially suitable for identifying inequality in educational achievement. Beyond their general policy impact, these assessment regimes can also be expected to have provided evidence and justification for policy interventions aimed at addressing the inequalities highlighted in the data.

Beyond introducing measures related to standardisation and quality assurance, the Bologna Process (1999) also aimed to create inclusive and accessible educational pathways for students, thereby underpinning a political focus on reducing inequality and exclusion across European countries. Similar European strategies, e.g. the Lisbon Strategy (2000–2010) and the Europe 2020 Strategy (2010–2020), have emphasised social inclusion and education as key areas of focus, thereby further propelling educational reforms addressing these issues.

The apparent increase in identified reform initiatives may suggest an increased focus on and awareness of inequality in education. Conversely, it also raises concerns about the reforms' ability to address and achieve their stated aims. As underlined by Michael Fullan, rapid and frequent reform implementation can overburden administrative capacities and complicate implementation processes (Fullan 2025). Likewise, in an OECD report, Schleicher notes that such way of implementation has been shown to cause fatigue among teachers and administrative layers, leading to subpar implementation processes and limited progress in achieving reform goals (Schleicher 2021).

Furthermore, some scholars emphasise that policy proliferation might reflect national compliance with international educational norms and standards – often referred to as institutional isomorphism or convergence – which guarantees little to no substantive changes in educational quality (Verger, Novelli & Altinyelken 2012). Rather, reform implementation under rapid policy cycles may encourage performative rather than transformative changes (Ball 2000).

Lastly, the apparent rapid reform implementation identified in the datasets connects to a broader and perhaps deeper issue in politics and policy development. In a large-scale and ongoing review of the state of Danish democracy in the 21st century, it was recently found that an overly burdened Danish Parliament processed legislation and policy initiatives at an unprecedented rate compared with previous decades. This discovery aligns with the findings of this report at a broader level. Reviewing the legislative pressure on e.g. the Danish Parliament, the authors have raised concerns about the implications for democracy at large. The growing workload on lawmakers leaves less time for democratic debate as well as for gathering and utilising research-based support for legislative processes. Moreover, Parliament and the sitting Government have unequal resources to support their work, typically favouring the Government. As part of the response to these developments, the process of developing legislation and policies has become increasingly dependent on external stakeholders' contributions (Pedersen, Mortensen, & Herby 2025). A similar trend is present in education, where various international non-governmental actors contribute to shaping educational policy, which, as has been reported, may undermine democratic transparency and lead to inferior policy responses to educational challenges (Verger, Novelli & Altinyelken 2012; Lingard & Sellars 2013; Sahlberg 2016).

Clearly, drawing firm conclusions about whether the increase in reforms surveyed in this report reflects a wider increase in educational reforms in general, or specifically an increase in reforms targeting inequality, equity, and inclusion, requires caution. A further critical examination of the datasets may reveal that the development in identified reforms is partly attributable to changing practices in data registration and categorisation among European countries, rather than to an actual increase in policy production or 'policy churn'. According to Steiner-Khamsi (2014), international organisations have responded to demands for an increasingly data-driven policy environment by refining their methods of data collection and categorisation. Databases, such as those provided by Eurydice and the OECD, are likely to have undergone development and increased digitalisation over the last 25 years, increasing the availability and granularity of data.

Thus, the apparent increase in educational reforms aimed at addressing inequality, equity, and inclusion might be genuine, it might reflect broader tendencies of 'policy churning,' or it might reflect developments in data registration and categorisation practices. This indeterminacy underscores the need for both empirical caution and interpretive reflexivity, since without due consideration, the developments and identified trends risk conflating changes in administrative reporting practices with substantive transformations in educational policy. This introduces a central methodological dilemma: to what extent is it possible to compare different national reform initiatives across time when the underlying datasets themselves develop and are refined? As demonstrated by Grek (2009), educational governance is largely guided by data that establishes normative frameworks to determine what counts as legitimate policy interventions. When the underlying data infrastructure of policy decision-making changes over time, so does the basis for comparative analyses and conclusion.

It is also important to emphasise that the statistics recorded in Chapter 3 should be treated with caution. We cannot assume that the databases are complete, nor that the methodology for including an initiative as a 'reform' is fully consistent across countries. In some cases, reforms may appear only once in the database or be represented in a simplified form, which means that significant amendments or iterations might not be fully captured. These limitations further complicate cross-national comparisons and highlight the need for methodological transparency when interpreting trends. It also calls to one's attention the potential and need for further developing and systematise data registration practices among the European countries to foster greater potential for cross-country analysis and comparation.

5.2. Evaluation as key for disseminating good practices

Evaluation is a crucial component in assessing the impact of educational reforms. The effective use of social resources – including financial, political, human, and cultural capital – should be closely linked to evidence regarding the outcomes of implemented changes. Without systematic evaluation, it is difficult to determine whether the investments made translate into meaningful improvements in teaching, learning, and equity. However, a recurring issue that emerged across the analysis concerns the limited or entirely absent evaluation of educational reforms. Despite the scale and ambition of many reform initiatives, systematic mechanisms to assess their outcomes

remain weak or even non-existent. Out of the 431 reforms examined in this analysis, as many as 300 had no identifiable evaluation component recorded by the project team. The term *identifiable* is crucial here, especially for an international audience: it is highly likely that some form of evaluation was conducted, at least partially, but no information about it was provided in the databases. Regardless of the underlying reason – whether evaluations were not conducted or not broadly disseminated – the result is a significant gap in systematic assessment and underscores the need to integrate evaluation as a standard element of educational reform processes. In numerous cases, reforms are implemented with substantial investment of time and resources, yet without clear frameworks to measure whether the intended objectives have been achieved. While such evaluations may take place, at least partially, at the national level, it would be valuable to strengthen similar mechanisms within international or cross-institutional contexts. Establishing shared spaces for evaluation would enable the exchange of good practices, facilitate comparative learning, and support the development of common quality standards. This collaborative approach could also help identify context-sensitive strategies that work across diverse educational systems. The absence of evaluation not only limits the possibility of evidence-based reflection but also weakens institutional learning: policymakers and educators are left without reliable data to understand what works, under what conditions, and for whom.

Even when evaluation processes are present, they often lack methodological rigor. The criteria used to judge success are rarely made explicit, making it difficult to assess whether outcomes are measured against pedagogical, social, or administrative goals. Moreover, evaluative approaches tend to focus on short-term outputs – such as compliance with new regulations or completion of procedural targets – rather than long-term impacts on teaching quality, student engagement, or equity in access to learning opportunities. As a result, the knowledge produced through these assessments provides only a partial and often superficial picture of reform effectiveness.

Another layer of complexity arises from the unstable policy environment in which reforms take place. Frequent political changes and shifting ministerial priorities lead to the introduction of new initiatives before the effects of previous ones can be properly understood. This discontinuity disrupts longitudinal analysis and makes it difficult to distinguish between reforms that failed to deliver meaningful results and those that were prematurely abandoned for political reasons. From a broader perspective, the lack of robust evaluation mechanisms reflects deeper systemic challenges within governance culture. Strengthening evaluation frameworks – by embedding them from the design phase, ensuring methodological transparency, and maintaining continuity

across political cycles – would not only improve the quality of reform processes but also support a culture of reflective policymaking grounded in empirical evidence.

A noteworthy example of systematic evaluation can be found in Finland, where all educational reforms are assessed on a regular four-year cycle. This structured approach ensures that reform outcomes are not only monitored but also continuously informed by evidence. The Finnish evaluation framework is guided by four key questions, one of which focuses specifically on the state of equality and equal opportunities in education. Within this dimension, three distinct areas receive particular attention: the differentiation of competence, equal opportunities, and the accessibility of education alongside learners' participation. By embedding these considerations into the core of the evaluation process, Finland demonstrates how sustained, evidence-based assessment can support both the quality and the equity of educational reforms.

In conclusion, addressing the current gaps in the evaluation of educational reforms is essential for building more resilient education systems. Without systematic assessment, reforms remain isolated interventions rather than components of an evolving policy systems. Establishing consistent evaluation practices, supported by transparent criteria and longitudinal data, would allow policymakers and practitioners to learn from both successes and failures.

5.3 Measures applied – towards good practices

In the reforms under analysis, a wide array of approaches, measures, and instruments were employed. Some were primarily **formative**, intended to cultivate the civic dispositions and egalitarian orientations that support sustained democratic engagement, embedding equality and inclusion as basic cognitive and behavioural frameworks within institutional practice and educational content. Others formed a second **preventive** strand, seeking to forestall emerging problems. A third strand comprised **compensatory** measures designed to address existing deficits or inequalities. Regardless of type, these measures may be directed at the general population of children and young people across all or selected ISCED levels or targeted more specifically toward particular groups.

The first category encompasses the broadest scope of activities, aimed at fostering an inclusive community. A pertinent example can be found in Denmark, where the Danish

Parliament enacted the *Educational Environment Act (Lov om elevers og studerendes undervisningsmiljø)* in 2001. According to §1 of the Act, 'pupils, students and other participants in public and private education are entitled to a good educational environment so that teaching can take place in a safe and healthy manner. The educational environment in schools and educational institutions […] must promote the participants' opportunities for development and learning and therefore also includes the educational institution's psychological and aesthetic environment.' In 2017, the Act was amended to require all primary and secondary educational institutions to develop an anti-bullying strategy, including measures against cyberbullying. Collectively, these legislative efforts aim to ensure the inclusivity of educational institutions and build resilient, democratic societies. Similar educational principles are currently being formulated in most European countries.

Within the category of preventive measures, several key approaches can be identified. These include the extension of compulsory education to cover part or all of the preschool period, the use of various incentive-based strategies aimed at engaging families, and the introduction of mechanisms designed to reduce access barriers or to guarantee equal access to appropriate infrastructure and adequate learning conditions. The latter may include, for example, fee reduction, the provision of warm meals, guaranteed transportation, or free educational materials. An additional important dimension involves the development of curricula and teaching methods that address the diverse needs of children, as well as structural interventions—most notably, the postponement of selective thresholds to a later stage in a child's educational trajectory. Finally, a crucial aspect is the adequate preparation of teachers and the provision of appropriate professional support, which, however, is not an explicit assumption in many reform agendas.

The starting point for compensatory measures is the recognition of explicit and hidden costs that may increase inequalities. Furthermore, significant regional disparities—particularly between urban and rural areas—as well as differences linked to socioeconomic status (SES) create unequal opportunities for access and quality. Compensatory strategies therefore aim to mitigate these inequalities by providing targeted financial support, subsidies, or free services, and by addressing structural gaps in provision. Such measures often include programs designed to reduce the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit from early education on equal terms with their peers. Most importantly, these interventions seek to prevent children from dropping out of the

education system altogether, as early disengagement tends to reinforce cycles of disadvantage and social exclusion.

Despite the multiplicity of measures implemented across countries, educational inequalities remain highly visible. Certain groups—such as children from low-income families, linguistic minorities, or those living in rural areas—continue to experience systemic disadvantages. Moreover, these disparities are often shaped by intersectionality, where multiple factors of exclusion (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and migration background) interact and compound disadvantage. A recent example comes from Slovakia: in September 2023, an amendment to the Education Act introduced the *Catalogue of Support Measures* (*Katalóg podporných opatrení*), which will be applied universally by 2026. This catalogue identifies pupils at risk of failure or early school leaving, including those repeating a grade, showing significant decline in subject performance, accumulating unjustified or justified absences, coming from families in material need or socially disadvantaged environments, returning from abroad, having different mother tongues, living with disabilities, or facing emotional and behavioural challenges, as well as those exposed to bullying or sudden critical family situations. Such a detailed classification illustrates the complexity and diversity of risk factors that reforms must address. Addressing these complex patterns requires moving beyond isolated interventions toward comprehensive strategies that integrate social, structural, and pedagogical dimensions. Within this approach, we also sought to draw attention to new dimensions of educational reform: ensuring students' mental health and well-being, enhancing parental agency in school governance, adopting decentralised strategies that allow for local adaptation, and broadening the scope of educational analysis by emphasising the role of extracurricular activities. Finally, only the combination of diverse measures and the active involvement of both educational actors and stakeholders from the broader social environment can increase the likelihood of sustainable change. Such an approach would also help make reforms less dependent on shifting political constellations, which often result in unfinished initiatives, withdrawal under pressure from interest groups, or termination of funding. Moreover, it could counter another persistent weakness of reform agendas—*top-down reforming*, where interventions are designed at the central level without incorporating the voices of local communities, target groups, teachers, and other school-related actors.

While some reforms incorporate elements of both formative, preventive, and compensatory approaches, others are limited to one or two. This raises the question of whether, for instance, formative reforms that operate primarily in an expressive capacity

can meaningfully advance egalitarian objectives, or whether they risk being perceived as largely symbolic. Educational reforms that are not accompanied by concrete measures may have limited practical impact and may therefore be vulnerable to accusations of tokenism. Similarly, formative reforms implemented in contexts characterised by substantial structural inequalities may face significant constraints. In societies marked by pronounced disparities across socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ability, or other dimensions, efforts to cultivate egalitarian values through education may lack credibility. When the values promoted within educational settings are starkly misaligned with the broader social and institutional environment, students may be less likely to internalise them. The effectiveness of formative reforms thus appears to be contingent on a minimum level of consistency between educational messaging and the surrounding social order. Finally, the political and social feasibility of compensatory reforms may depend in part on the success of expressive and formative initiatives. Compensatory measures typically entail material costs, at least in the short term, and require public support from those who bear these burdens. Where egalitarian values are weakly embedded or widely contested, individuals may be less willing to endorse redistributive policies, particularly if they perceive them conflicting with their immediate interests. In such contexts, compensatory reforms aimed at equalising educational opportunities may encounter substantial resistance, undermining their prospects for successful implementation.

This challenge is further intensified by the fact that education functions, at least in part, as a positional good; that is, its value depends not only on absolute attainment but also on relative standing. Beyond a certain threshold, additional educational attainment derives much of its value from its role in facilitating access to desirable employment rather than from intrinsic benefits alone. As Brian Barry observes, “in the job market, what matters is not how much education you have but how much you have in relation to others. If half the population have a degree, then a degree will become the minimum qualification for entry-level positions in many jobs that previously would have been filled by those who had completed secondary education but gone no further” (Barry, 2005, pp. 176–177). From a policy perspective, this positional dynamic has important distributive implications. If egalitarian educational reforms succeed in raising the attainment levels of previously disadvantaged groups, individuals from more advantaged backgrounds may experience a relative loss in their competitive position within the labour market. Such reforms may therefore entail perceived costs for advantaged groups, even when overall educational levels increase. In the absence of normative commitments that extend beyond narrow self-interest, it is difficult to identify incentives for these groups

to support reforms that potentially diminish their relative advantages. This underscores the importance of a broadly shared egalitarian ethos in sustaining political support for redistributive educational policies.

Achieving a more egalitarian society requires educational reforms that taken in their entirety incorporate expressive, formative, and compensatory dimensions. When effectively designed and implemented, these three roles can be mutually reinforcing, suggesting that policymakers should address them in an integrated manner when developing future educational reforms. Limiting policy interventions to only one or two of these dimensions risks undermining their overall effectiveness.

5.4. Missing areas

Education reforms in Europe undertake various actions aimed at reducing educational inequalities. In many cases, they address issues related to socio-economic capital of the family, spatial inequalities, migrants' background. At the same time, we observe that several topics remain unaddressed. This primarily concerns issues related to health, understood as a state of well-being.

Health is among the most pressing concerns in contemporary societies. From one point of view, the focus is on wellbeing, which is crucial for healthy individuals and communities; on the other, the mental health crisis among children and adolescents is alarming. Recent studies in Europe indicate a sharp increase in anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders among young people, exacerbated by factors such as academic pressure, social media influence, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wellbeing in the context of education refers to a holistic state of physical, mental, emotional, and social health that enables students to thrive both academically and personally. It encompasses not only the absence of illness or distress but also the presence of positive conditions that support learning, development, and a sense of belonging (WHO, 2024). The OECD also emphasises that wellbeing in education is not just about individual happiness but is closely related to equity, inclusion, and life satisfaction, which are essential for long-term societal outcomes (OECD, 2019).

Despite the extensive scope of reforms across European education systems aimed at equity, inclusion, and access a significant gap in addressing student wellbeing and mental health as core components of educational equity is noticed. While some

countries have begun to integrate these dimensions into broader strategies, they often remain peripheral, underdeveloped, or treated as secondary to structural and curricular reforms.

The concept of a "good educational life" encompasses more than access to schooling it includes the quality of the educational experience, emotional safety, and the capacity for personal development. Yet the report shows that wellbeing is rarely a central focus of reform. For example, while Ireland's *Education for Sustainable Development – ESD to 2030: 2014* explicitly mentions physical and mental wellbeing as part of its vision, such comprehensive approaches are the exception rather than the rule.

In most cases, wellbeing is addressed indirectly, through measures like free meals (Portugal's *PERA* programme, England's *Pupil Premium*, Romania's *Hot Meal*) or homework assistance (Norway's *Leksehjelpsordningen*), but these are framed as tools for reducing socio-economic disparities rather than as part of a holistic wellbeing strategy. The Swedish *Collaboration for the Best School* programme includes support for students at risk of academic failure, but again, mental health is not foregrounded.

Moreover, the integration of wellbeing into curricula is limited. Denmark's curriculum reforms mention democratic formation and respect for diversity, which may contribute to emotional wellbeing, but do not explicitly address mental health or emotional literacy. On the other hand, another Danish reform from the beginning of our period seems pertinent here, namely the *Educational Environment Act (Lov om elevers og studerendes undervisningsmiljø)* of 2001. According to §1 of the Act, "[p]upils, students and other participants in public and private education are entitled to a good educational environment so that teaching can take place in a safe and healthy manner. The educational environment in schools and educational institutions […] must promote the participants' opportunities for development and learning and therefore also includes the educational institution's psychological and aesthetic environment." In 2017, the Act was amended to include a requirement that all educational institutions at the primary and secondary level draw up an "anti-bullying strategy", including a strategy against cyberbullying. These provisions, while not framed explicitly in terms of wellbeing or mental health, introduce concrete strategies that indirectly support emotional wellbeing by fostering safe, inclusive, and psychologically supportive learning environments. Similarly, Norway's *Knowledge Promotion* reform includes "public health and life skills" as interdisciplinary themes, yet the implementation and impact on student wellbeing. The *Completion Reform* in Norway acknowledges students with mental health challenges and school avoidance, proposing tailored courses and differentiated

durations. However, this is a reactive measure, targeting students already at risk, rather than a preventive strategy embedded in everyday school day.

The expressive aims of educational reforms – such as those in Malta, Luxembourg, and Denmark – often emphasise values like equality and democracy. However, wellbeing is rarely articulated as a civic value or a foundational element of democratic education. This omission is significant, as emotional resilience, empathy, and mental health literacy are essential for active citizenship and social cohesion.

While the wellbeing context could be found indirectly in analysed reform mental health support is fragmented across different levels of education and rarely embedded in systemic reform and underprioritised. For instance, Greece's *KEDASY* centres (formerly *KESY*) provide interdisciplinary support, including psychosocial services, but their integration into the broader educational framework is not well elaborated. In Denmark, vocational education reforms include provisions for psychological counselling (§66 of the *Executive Order on Vocational Education and Training*), yet such support is not extended uniformly across all educational levels.

Furthermore, mental health is absent from most early childhood education reforms. While countries like Hungary and Ireland have implemented programs to support disadvantaged children, these focus on cognitive and social development, with little attention to emotional wellbeing or trauma-informed care.

The Irish LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy (2018–2020) is a notable exception, explicitly aiming to improve mental and sexual health among youth and create inclusive environments.

European strategy was published for the first time (European Commission 2020). Although the absence of reforms does not exclude the possibility that the lack of identification of such reforms to some extent might reflect methodological limitations of this report, it is noteworthy that countries' effort to include and mitigate any disadvantages experienced by this group of students have not been sufficiently registered. Although the three identified action plans do not necessarily exhaust the actual number of LGBTQIA+ initiatives in the European countries, the relative low degree of registration of such reforms might showcase a general tendency among European countries to give problems experienced by this group of people a low national policy priority.

Second, although European education reforms have made significant progress in addressing inequalities related to socio-economic status, migration background, and spatial disparities, several areas remain overlooked. Most notably, issues of health and

wellbeing—both physical and mental—are rarely treated as central priorities, despite an alarming rise in anxiety, depression, and stress among children and adolescents. Where wellbeing is mentioned, it is often approached indirectly through measures such as free meals or homework assistance, rather than through comprehensive, preventive strategies embedded in everyday school life. Emotional literacy, resilience, and life skills are seldom integrated into curricula, and support for marginalised groups, particularly LGBTQIA+ students, remains limited, with only a handful of countries implementing targeted initiatives despite clear evidence of disproportionate risks of violence and exclusion. Third, for various reasons, it is not easy to conduct systematic evaluations of reforms or longitudinal studies that reveal the delayed effects of these changes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

For the last 25 years, European countries have implemented more than 400 reform initiatives to combat educational inequalities that reveal a clear systemic approach to tackling inequality that spans all levels of education, from early childhood to tertiary education. Among these many reform initiatives, some common trends appear.

All countries prioritise access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which indicates that early intervention is seen as key to bolstering educational equality and equity. Enhancing access to ECEC has been promoted by reforms that include **extending compulsory education** into preschool, **guaranteeing a place in ECEC**, improving the **institutional infrastructure in terms of geographical access**, and **reducing economic barriers**. In different ways, reforms of this sort produce interventions in relation to both local administrative requirements as well as in relation to parents to increase children's enrolment. **Disadvantaged groups, such as migrants or socio-economically disadvantaged, are targeted with reforms**. In addition to reforms aimed at securing access, many reforms also aim at mitigating inequality by adjusting **pedagogical practices and curriculum**.

Although primary and lower secondary education are obligatory and free in all countries, the different reform initiatives showcase that formal access is insufficient in addressing inequality. Reforms that **reduce hidden costs** and **geographical disparities** aim to decrease inaccessibility in systems that are formally accessible. Similarly, some reforms target socio-economically disadvantaged students by introducing **homework support, additional tuition,** or by modifying **resource allocation** scales to financially support schools in vulnerable areas. Many reforms thus seek to **enhance inclusion of groups that need additional support**, such as migrants, children in need of special education, or students at risk of early school leaving and drop-out. In addition to securing access, many reforms therefore adjust school **curriculum and transition** to upper secondary education. The European countries thus consistently aim to reduce dropout rates and improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged groups, integrating strategies like tutoring, mentoring, and curriculum adaptations.

Upper secondary education is increasingly prioritised as a vital part of lifelong learning. At this level, expenses in education are oftentimes introduced again after the formally

costless level of primary and lower secondary education. Some reforms therefore seek to **ameliorate the disparities that might be experienced due to economic constraints**. However, the reforms at this level of education often seek to address inequality in education by strengthening the **quality of education** through sustained **teacher training** or through introducing curriculum reforms, often with a strong component of aligning the curriculum with needs in the job market. **Tailored support to students with special needs or at risk of early school leaving** is also a very common trend at this level of education.

Reforms targeting vocational education similarly seek to avoid school drop-out and securing transition to job or further short-cycle education. Tailored support and mentorship are common trends at this level, as is reforms aligning curriculum with job market needs. Significantly, we see vocational reforms meeting the needs of a dynamic and ever-changing job market by way of enhancing educational flexibility and transferable skills. **At the tertiary level of education, common trends are reforms that enhance access and reduce economic barriers, but reforms that target special educational needs are also very common.**

Taken together, these reforms reveal a multi-level, holistic trend: early intervention, inclusive practices, targeted support for vulnerable groups, and alignment with societal and labour market demands are integrated across the system. Equity is pursued not only through formal access but by shaping the quality, relevance, and inclusivity of education at every stage, reflecting a clear commitment and European-wide shift toward developing education systems that are both socially just and adaptable to diverse student needs. However, the 25 years of educational reforms also **reveal a significant increase in reform implementation**, raising concerns of rapid policy-cycles, while a **substantial number of reforms also appear not to have been evaluated**, which undermines both the potential for European cross-fertilisation as well as a national evidence-based approach to policymaking.

This policy analysis have documented a host of reforms that attend to challenges associated with efforts to improve educational opportunities for students representing low socio-economic status, migration background, special education needs, early school leaving, and geographical disparities. However, we also note that **comparatively fewer reforms address overall wellbeing, mental health, recognise LGBTQIA+ students, racism, and inclusive education**.

This report concludes with recommendations intended to advance sustainable, evidence-based policymaking:

Adopt a holistic approach to educational equity by ensuring inclusive education for all learners and create a safe, inclusive school communities

As many reforms analysed in this report showcase, it is necessary to move beyond formal access to include, for instance, physical and mental health and provide tailored support for students with diverse needs, including those with learning difficulties, special educational needs, different gender identity, sexuality, or ethnic background. While several of these dimensions have been addressed in education reforms for many years, as we have discussed in chapter 5, new and increasingly prominent areas – particularly students' mental health and overall well-being – continue to emerge and warrant more systematic, coordinated policy responses, while others – such as the LGBTQIA+ population – have already attracted significant attention in policy discourse but which have apparently not translated into a significant number of educational reforms yet. Tailored support for diverse student populations can be strengthened through streamlining a focus on well-being and mental health as well as diversity sensitivity in policy initiatives.

Ensure strategic alignment and policy continuity across political cycles to provide sustainable long-term policy interventions

As has been indicated with chart 3 in chapter 3 "Total Number of Reforms per Year" and discussed in chapter 5, a significant increase – it has roughly tripled – in annual policy development and implementation has taken place between 1999-2024. Although this policy analysis does not provide knowledge into why this is so, it is possible that this reflects common practices of rapid reform-cycles. One of the possible consequences of this (observed in many of the examined cases) is that evaluation processes are not carried out or are prematurely interrupted, making it impossible to fully assess the effects of reforms or to prevent recurring problems in subsequent reform cycles (see also below). Rapid and frequent implementation of new reforms can also overburden administrative capacities, to undermine motivation of teachers, parents and pupils, and complicate implementation processes. Therefore, we recommend that policymakers commit to align reforms with long-term strategic frameworks (national and EU-level) to maintain continuity across political cycles, strive to avoid superficial or insufficient implementation practices, and seek to avoid rapid reform-cycles.

Strengthen evaluation and evidence-based policy to better understand reform effects, improve subsequent initiatives and to support the international exchange of good practices

As it has been discussed in chapter 5, it is clear from the number of identified reform evaluations in chapter 3 (chart 9), that the practice of reform evaluation appear to be either a lower priority than developing and implementing new policies, or that reform evaluations oftentimes are not made accessible to a general public. A significant share of the reforms examined did not report evaluation results in a comprehensive manner, which limits the usability of evidence and underscores the importance of transparent, publicly accessible evaluation practices. Out of the 431 reforms analysed, as many as 300 had no identifiable evaluation component. This gap illustrates how the absence of systematic evaluation weakens the ability to understand reform effects, draw policy lessons, or improve subsequent initiatives. In contrast, some countries have introduced structured, recurring evaluation cycles for education reforms, ensuring that reform outcomes are regularly monitored and continuously informed by evidence. On this basis, we recommend making systematised and publicly available evaluation a component of all reforms, both before implementation and after, to assess long-term impact. This will also improve the benefits of European cross-fertilisation – fostering the exchange of good practices and avoiding repeated mistakes – through enhancing the possibility to compare European evaluations by making national evaluation data available in major European languages. Similarly, this can encourage systematic research and longitudinal studies to understand delayed effects of reforms. Establish interdisciplinary teams at European, national, and local levels to address specific issues, such as the situation of migrant children,

Enhance transparency and accessibility of reform data to strengthen comparability and enable the use of effective solutions for evidence-based policy

As highlighted in the report, existing statistical and database limitations — including incomplete registration practices and inconsistencies in how reforms are recorded across countries — constrain the comparability of reform data. This underscores the need to further develop and systematise data-registration practices at the European level to strengthen the evidence base for cross-country analysis.

In conclusion, educational policies aimed at promoting equity and social inclusion should: adopt a comprehensive approach that combines diverse types of measures;

explicitly integrate components that address student wellbeing and provide targeted support for marginalised groups; employ robust and systematic evaluation practices; and strengthen data infrastructure to support research and policy learning. Collectively, these measures address both systemic barriers and emerging challenges, fostering educational environments that are inclusive, resilient, and evidence based.

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List of acronyms

Term	Definition
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EU	European Union
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
REA	European Research Executive Agency
SEN	Special Education Needs
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation public body

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