STAIRS

Stakeholders together adapting ideas to readjust local systems to promote inclusive education

EUROPEAN ADAPTATION GUIDELINES

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

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1. IDENTIFYING NATIONAL CHALLENGES

It makes no sense to look for good practices and solutions if there is no problem at all. The identification of challenges and learning needs is therefore the first and crucial step in learning lessons from other countries.

Anecdotal evidence and generalised opinions are not sufficient and verified indicators of existing national challenges. Instead, an evidence-based approach should be applied, utilising existing and new original research findings in the field. In the era of measurement, various data at the EU and international level are also available in the field of social inclusion (e.g. EU Education and Training Monitor, UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education data, etc.). The international (quantitative) comparative insight in combination with proper (qualitative) contextualisation of the national context can signal national challenges in the field. This must be further supported by existing national research.

Identifying key actors and indicating their assessment of the current situation is of utmost importance as well. As dissatisfaction with the current situation can foster the introduction of novelties and change, satisfaction with the current situation can present resistance to them.

Assessment of the current situation in the field and identification of the problems and challenges should be appropriately summarised in terms of learning needs. For such purpose, the **Country Report Template** (See Supporting materials) can be used to identify the learning needs of countries and key actors involved.

Quick tips on how to identify national challenges:

- It is recommended that it be based on measurable data and evidence-based practice.
- It should be prepared by a national team with in-depth knowledge of the national educational system and initiatives.
- It is recommended that members of the team are from different institutions and levels within institutions (e.g. systemic level, practitioner level) to provide various perspectives. It is particularly important to obtain insight and advice from personnel working in the field (practitioners etc.).
- It is recommended that substantial time be allocated to the preparation of the Country Report as it is to serve as the basis of all subsequent activities. It is also to provide an important background document that can be used to select and evaluate potential good practice initiatives.

Supporting materials:

- Country Report Template
- Country Report of each learning country:
  - Croatia
  - Czech Republic
  - Hungary
  - Slovenia

Example: Summary of the Country Report template

The STAIRS project consortium has developed a template to prepare country reports to provide an overview of the learning needs of a country. The template consists of six chapters and is to be filled in by experts in the field.

The basic rules for preparing a Country Report are as follows:

- Introduce key data
- Focus on key issues regarding equity and inclusive education
- Focus on proven good practices on the policy level; briefly introduce recommended interventions and measures of your country
- Raise your questions, and identify learning needs from a national perspective

The main chapters of the country report are:

1. Education in the partner country (structure of education system)
2. National context and current research: key issues regarding social inclusion
3. Terminology: integration, inclusion, social inclusion, special needs, equity vs. equality, etc.
4. Identifying key local stakeholders: institutions and professionals
5. Critical analysis of national indicators regarding social inclusions
6. Recommendations: local focus
7. Appendix – Statistics

Case: Slovenian learning needs

Based on the presented template, the Slovenian national team summarised its focus and accompanying learning needs in the STAIRS as follows. Slovenia's first challenge is related to the educational success of students with low socioeconomic status (SES). In terms of educational expectations for completing only secondary school, it is more prominent among low SES students compared to high SES students. High SES students are mostly enrolled in general programmes, and students with low SES are mostly in vocational programmes. The second challenge is related to the increasing number of students with special educational needs in vocational education and training.

2. FINDING SHARING PARTNERS

While selecting a country that could share its good practices based on available data is a relatively straightforward task, more emphasis has to be put on selecting the actual sharing partner from the country (i.e. the institution that is responsible for coordinating the collecting and sharing of good practices).

Sharing partners must be carefully selected based on their capacity and competencies pertinent to the policy learning process. To organise an in-depth policy learning experience, such a partner should be familiar with the national education system and the subject matter of the study visit(s); have time management, organisational and logistical skills; and have an open and positive social attitude and capacities for long-term cooperation. Ideally, they should be embedded within education either as a state research/policy institute or higher education institution that has developed strong links across the education landscape (preschool, primary, post-primary, etc.).

Furthermore, a sharing partner should support the entire policy learning process – fully understanding the learning needs of the learning countries, as well as being available to assist them in their adaptation dilemmas in the future. Therefore, it is an advantage if the sharing partner is present – from the identification of learning needs throughout the formulation of national adaptation plans and their implementation.

When choosing a partner, a good idea is to think about your key learning needs, and find an answer to the following questions:

- What specific areas should your sharing partner have experience/expertise in?
- Which kind of organisations (NGOs, schools, juvenile associations, institutions, etc.) will better suit your needs?
- Will a small or large organisation suit you the best?
- Are there specific countries and/or regions that you particularly want to connect with?
- Is your potential sharing partner thematically relevant? Do they have the relevant capacity, knowledge, and skills?
- Does the organisation have relevant and solid project history and good quality project outputs?

Moreover, it is important to choose an organisation that has suitable resources and the capacity to carry out the cooperation and deliver the results. It must be also sustainable regarding financial and organisational capacity.

The so-called **3Rs** should also be taken into account. First, the sharing organisation should be **reliable** so that you can be sure that expected results will be achieved in good quality. Second,

the sharing partner should be **responsible** for the tasks that have been assigned to it. Finally, the partner should be **reachable** to you so that a fluid and constant exchange of information be available.

Nevertheless, exploring your existing networks could be a good opportunity as well to find the most suitable partners.

Quick tips on how to find a sharing partner:

- Based on evidence-based data, select a successful country (i.e. high achieving) in the field of interest. Evidence for a country's success can be found in reports from various sources (e.g. European Commission, international large-scale assessment data such as the PISA).
- To identify a sharing partner organisation, rely on existing networks (e.g. as part of EU Erasmus projects of your organisation), or identify an organisation based on a common work interest (e.g. a research institute) and make contact.
- It is recommended to select a sharing partner that is knowledgable on a large variety of reforms, initiatives, and/or projects in its national context and/or has a widespread network of partner organisations that can provide good practices for adaptation.
- For the learning and adaptation process to be successful, trust in the sharing partner has to be developed and sustained. Trust can be developed through a previous working relationship (e.g. in a previous project) or can be developed during the duration of the adaptation process. The sharing partner must have appropriate knowledge and networks, also, must be willing to share, and be committed to the project.

Example: Sharing countries in the STAIRS

In the STAIRS, **Ireland and Portugal** have been selected as sharing countries due to their successful efforts in fostering social inclusion in education. The justification for this can be found in results of the Programme for international student assessment (PISA). In 2018, Ireland was one of the highest performing OECD countries in reading, while Portugal was one of the countries with the most positive trends in improving students' reading, mathematics, and science achievement between 2000 to 2018 (OECD, 2019). Underachievement (i.e. students' insufficiency in reading, mathematics, or science) is a benchmark that can be used when assessing social inclusion in education. For example, Ireland has also been recognised by the European Commission as one of the countries with the lowest levels of underachievement supported by large-scale assessment data (Education and Training Monitor, 2020).

Case: Sharing partners in the STAIRS

In the STAIRS project the following two institutions have been selected for sharing good practices of Ireland and Portugal in the field:

Mary Immaculate College (MIC) is the second-largest state-funded College of Education in Ireland. It has a long and distinguished history in the field of teacher education in Ireland. At the heart of the College Mission statement lies the foundational commitment to promoting equity in society and to providing "an environment where all have freedom and opportunity to achieve their potential". The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) is the main Faculty research centre focused on driving teacher education through research and knowledge transfer to practice. One of the primary objectives of the CDU has been to undertake and publish evidence-based educational materials of the highest caliber to support teaching and learning in Irish primary schools. It has undertaken research and development, and publications across a wide range of pedagogical areas including literacy, numeracy, science and technology, social personal and health education, early years care and education, inclusive education, and more latterly in entrepreneurship education and development education. Centered under the auspices of the CDU, the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) project has a long history of facilitating linkages between mainstream primary schools and the community, particularly amongst marginalised communities.

The Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies (ULHT) is the youngest university in Portugal, and it is also the largest non-state university. The Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Education and Development (CeiED) is an I&D unit founded at ULHT for the fields of Education, Heritage, Human Development, and Museology. It has its origins in the Centre for Research and Intervention in Education and Training (CeiEF) and was created in 2013, after some years of joint projects, with researchers from the field of human geography and museology from TERCUD (Centre for Territorial Studies, Culture and Development). CeiED integrates, in an interdisciplinary way, research and advanced training. The Centre is organised in two different Research Groups: Education, Identities and Public Policies; and Memory, Training, Culture(s) and Territory.

3. SEARCHING FOR GOOD PRACTICES

After learning countries identify and define their learning needs based on available national and international data and choose their sharing partners, sharing partners collect examples of good practices from their national context that are attuned to the defined learning needs. The data about good practices can be identified in the rich EU and international comparative data on various aspects of social inclusion in education. In addition, there are several established portals (such as the European Learning Space on Early School Leaving - ESLplus), where case studies of good practices are available and can be used for adaptation.

However, the criteria for identifying good practices that could be adapted to other national contexts should be clearly defined and should match the learning needs of the learning countries. A systematic approach must be taken when assessing good practice initiatives. In the first instance, there has to be agreement about what a *good practice* is, and what it looks like. An evidence-based approach needs to be applied, where initiatives are evaluated against criteria that when evident (in an initiative) appear to promote good practice. The approach taken in the STAIRS project has been to develop a good practice grid (the STAIRS GRID), based on approximately 40 indicator questions collectively drawn up by the project partners. These indicators help identify and recognise good practice education initiatives across a variety of contexts. The GRID questions are broadly divided into five key areas to help tease out issues, reflect upon, or investigate further into initiatives they may wish to gain more insight into.

In addition, the application of the following skills is recommended when assessing potential good practices: critical thinking, analytical thinking, effective communication, and attention to detail.

We also recommend the use of the **Good Practice Template** for uniformly presenting selected practices (i.e. as case studies). A case study of a good practice elaborates on its main characteristics, success factors, and processes identified in its implementation, a description of the good practices' impact, a summary of lessons learnt from it, and resources needed for its implementation (e.g. financial, personnel).

Quick tips on how to search/select good practices:

- Build or rely on an existing network of stakeholders that can provide and elaborate on good practices.
- It is recommended that stakeholders involved in selecting good practice initiatives be based at different levels of the education system (e.g. policy makers, university professors, researchers, school heads, counselors, and teachers). This provides a rich variety of viewpoints and considerations in the evaluation phase.

- Potential good practices can range from the macro policy level to specific micro good practices that are based at the level of individual schools in the particular educational system.
- It is recommended that good practices be evidence-based, if possible.
- It is highly recommended that a thorough desk research review of the good practice is carried out, before selecting the project.
- In particular, an identified good practice should be evaluated by an independent body. These evaluation reports can be useful in identifying key strengths and challenges, which can then be assessed by the project partners, particularly to determine whether the project should be included or excluded as a relevant good practice for the project.
- It is recommended that the **STAIRS GRID** be used when selecting good practices. Before using the tool, it is advised to gather documentation on the good practice or interview a person closely involved in the initiative to create thorough GRID indicators.

Supporting materials:

- STAIRS GRID
- Good Practice Template

Case: STAIRS' good practices

In the STAIRS project, the following good practices of Ireland and Portugal have been identified to serve as case studies of good practices.

Ireland:
- Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)
- Limerick DEIS Primary Schools' Literacy Initiative
- Special Education Initiative
- Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project
- Youthreach Programme

Portugal:
- A School for Everyone
- Inclusion Practices in a Rural Environment – the Case of José Saramago Cluster of Schools and Educational Territory of Priority Intervention
- Promoting Inclusion and Valuing Vet Courses
- Curriculum Enrichment Activities
- Modular Training for the Unemployed without Upper-secondary Qualification
- Learning Courses to Improve Employability and to Enhance Social and Professional Inclusion