National Summary of STAIRS Study Visits
SLOVENIA

The aim of this summary is to synthesise the information collected in the study visits and focus on what is relevant for the respective country and to create a reflective report on the findings that have emerged from group discussion or the Learning Diaries. The report will be an input for the National Adaptation Plans and the European Adaptation Guidelines. Please, reflect on both study visits.

Deadline for delivering the national summary: **31st January 2021**

Recommended resources for the Summary

- Learning Diaries of the participants (Request from participants by e-mail or find it in Canvas in the Modules "Learning Diaries Limerick, Ireland" and "Learning Diaries Lisbon, Portugal")
- Padlet board of Study Visit Ireland
  https://padlet.com/tka_tudaskozpont/wcn7tetulvpwejc0
- Padlet board of Study Visit Portugal
  https://padlet.com/tka_tudaskozpont/oanj72ye161c5cue
- Country consultation in national teams (Study visit to Portugal):
  https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/16_kh4Sai8_B3UJK7wc66GIEFyEkE4vzE3_TyA0bUEmU/edit?usp=sharing
- Link to the Irish Study Visit videos here:
  https://www.dropbox.com/sh/i5eti8le1ys13nn/AAAiRVBOVuK2L4y04juVzAXfa?dl=0
- Link to the Portuguese Study Visit videos here:
  https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ynNmTuFMWk036jiYhK5gMDVRjwa_jkV1?usp=sharing

Guiding questions and aspects to prepare the summary

The questions below can serve as a starting point to prepare your summary and they represent the minimum requirement to reflect on.

- What are the **lessons learnt by each individual participant** based on the national/individual focus during the study visits?
- What are the **lessons learnt** that you can synthesise **at the national level**? Which of these lessons can be adapted to your specific national context? Which of these lessons cannot be adapted and why?
- Please **compare your newly acquired knowledge with your practice identifying similarities and differences.**
- Please formulate your **preliminary plans for adaptation**.

Please, feel free to add any other aspects that you feel relevant in your national context.

National summary of Slovenia

Please, expand the box according to your needs. Min. 2000 and max. 4000 words.

Individual lessons learned by study visit participants

All of Slovenia's team members present at the study visits served in the role of "experts" (project members and external experts). Below we are presenting individual lessons learned by all participating members. Based on the individual lessons, we have synthesised national lessons, reflected on our country context and provided preliminary ideas for adaptation.

Expert 1:
Lessons learned based on my individual focus: one of the things that is very valued in Ireland and Portugal is teachers' attitude towards teaching – not only the policies but the way the teachers apply those policies. Teachers need to be flexible and adapt to students' needs. The inclusion mostly depends on teachers, but on the other hand teachers need support from above in order to be inclusive in the right way. Collaboration of school and other educational professionals and policy makers is also important. It is of the utmost importance for all sides to be able to listen to each other (teachers, community, policy makers, trainers, parents etc.) and learn from one another. When they are cooperating only then can they work in the benefits of students.

Expert 2:
The main lessons learned taken are as follows: importance of long-term central commitment from policy makers, funders, agencies, suppliers and all participants (willingness to engage on all levels).

Initiatives have to come from the state level and be based on long term action plans. They need to be founded on research and rely on evidence-based practices with constant adaptation and revision. Furthermore, the good practices stressed multi and inter agency collaboration – establishing strong partnership between government departments, academic institutions, statutory bodies. On a school level the role of schools is very important (school as the main source of change, schools needs/issues are thus the starting point for change) which means schools need to be constantly supported as teachers are the key stakeholders (teacher education continuum is important – e.g. continuous professional development). Schools can be supported by establishing strong networks among principals and teachers. Lastly, in regards to school, parents and the whole community should be recognized as partners which means encouraging constant parental education, empowerment of parents and involving parents in school activities.

Expert 3:
The key findings related to my individual focus are: the realization that the inclusion of children with special educational needs is similar to that in our country, except that the specifics of inclusion are also related to the national mentality and the historical background of understanding inclusion (Ireland, Portugal). The key finding at the national level is the need to connect professionals from different departments, institutions, and faculties. Many projects and experiments that take place at the national level and are related to children with special needs remain only at the project level and often do not get implemented as a systemic solution. Thus, fostering long-term sustainability of projects, initiatives, and/or planning is required.

Expert 4:
The concept of inclusion is, by definition, very broad. My assumption that inclusion is not a measure that can be ordered "from the outside" and "from the top down" has been confirmed. In addition,

we have to understand that inclusion is also a practice that only those involved in it can perceive themselves as included or not.

In a broader sense, I think it is very important that we pay attention to the international presentation of the situation in Slovenia. We must understand inclusion in the broad sense (not only related to people with special needs) supporting and encouraging inclusive pedagogical practices. Thus, it seems students' needs and perceptions have to be accounted for when establishing and assessing inclusion.

Expert 5:
Based on my individual focus and national learning needs I've learned the following: Importance of engaging the parents to be involved in students' school life. If parents are involved in their child's school activities and learning process, then this is transferred to the student and engages the student, which in turn can lead to better student outcomes. Students should also receive adequate social and emotional support in school (e.g. developing students' socio-emotional competencies). In addition to students, one of the main stakeholders and actors of change are teachers. Teacher training is essential (both in-service teachers and teachers in training – e.g. actively learning about inclusion). During each study visit we talked extensively about the continuous professional development of in-service teachers. From my understanding, it is crucial to establish programs for continuous development (e.g. teacher trainings on literacy, numeracy enable teachers to receive additional competencies in this domain, which in turn is crucial for better academic outcomes of students). It was important for me to understand, that by focusing on teacher's teaching competencies we can help support academic achievement, motivation, and essentially the well-being of low SES students. Independent of continuous teacher training, it is necessary to cultivate teacher reflection. We discussed how the ability for constant, frequent self-reflection of teachers is an important element for establishing change.

At school-level I learned that establishing a whole-school approach is fundamental for fostering success of implemented initiatives. In addition, it is helpful to develop a sense of belonging to school of all the main stakeholders (i.e. students, teachers, principals, parents) and like previously mentioned, to support a constant self-reflection of these stakeholders (this might be harder for parents in my opinion, but I believe teachers and principals should take part in it). In addition, when working with research institutes self-reflection is required in order to identify needs of students.

In regards to lessons learned that may be implemented at the school level, but can also have a broader reach, I learned that establishing networks is essential (networks of schools, networks of principals, networks connecting schools to research institutions, the government-level, and policy makers) in order to develop strategies/interventions to strengthen social inclusion. Furthermore, clearly defining multi-professional teams is important.

Concerning policy level, a policy at the national level is needed to provide support for inclusion (top-bottom approach), however it is equally essential that teachers and school staff are "on-board" with inclusive practices (bottom-top approach). Policy makers and key stakeholders need to work together before implementing changes. In addition to an established policy, it is essential that the policy and funding is supported/provided for the long-term in order to be successful (also having in mind that change takes time). Moreover, having a national network/initiative that is widely known and accepted in the country is key for implementation (i.e. DEIS in Ireland, TEIP in Portugal). As with implementing any policy or initiative a regular evaluation of changes/projects/initiatives is needed/required for them to be successful. In the study visits we talked about the importance of

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internal and external evaluation (e.g. how parents and teachers can be connected as internal evaluators of a specific school).

Concerning dealing with low SES students specifically, I've learned two main things. Firstly, low SES schools get additional support (double working hours assigned to teachers to be able to teach these students more, hiring additional teachers, other professionals; providing financial support to schools as well as individual students). Secondly, having a national supported plan for dealing with low SES students, i.e. school social action in Portugal that responds to the "real needs" of students (for example providing laptops and stable internet connections during COVID-19 pandemic) is essential.

Lastly, the national educational system and privately-owned companies or NGO's can work together to provide support for students (i.e. Edugep) enrolled in the national educational system.

Expert 6:
I've learned a few key things: First and foremost, the government addressed the problem seriously. It provided the systemic frame, very high and stable financial means. The measures supporting go where the needs are identified. The government took those measures to the expert database. The government listens to the experts. Moreover, initiatives are regularly evaluated. Furthermore, the variety of stakeholders in the initiative who cooperate very closely and very well. All of them follow the same goal.

What I have also observed is that the measures actually reach the students. In addition, the systematic education of teachers (initial teacher education, as well as in-service education) on inclusive education is crucial and should be well financed, long-term based and of good quality. However, the truth is that it is impossible to ever be fully prepared for inclusion. It is just needed to jump and swim in it like one of the presenters said. Lastly, I have found that the following is important for inclusion: developing inclusive policies, having a flexible curriculum in school, collaborating (impossible to be inclusive by yourself), inclusion cannot be just another project of the school – it is a fundamental value of the school, inclusion is a whole school approach value. Just having resources for inclusion does not make us inclusive automatically.

Finally, it is important to note that human rights are not a matter of opinion. Inclusion is therefore not optional. Inclusion multiplies other rights.

Expert 7:
I have established a few key takeaways from the study visits. Firstly, concerning DEIS - I liked the effort shown to keep young people in schools. Secondly, this is also quite well taken care of in the YouthReach & Education Training Board. Moreover, in the field of working with those who drop out of school (because of their problems), in my opinion, there is a lot that needs to be done in Slovenia. Thirdly, concerning the literacy Initiative - in my opinion that is a very good project that involves all stakeholders, offers support and training of professional staff.

Expert 8:
A systematic approach is absolutely essential; it has to be fully supported by the government, which we learnt firstly in Ireland and then secondly in Portugal as well. In Ireland, I learned that success lies also in the opposite direction - listening to the problems of teachers, parents, principals and their suggestions for possible solutions. Therefore, it isn't just emphasizing the top bottom approach, but also the bottom up approach.

In both countries there are national programmes for tackling exclusion - DEIS in Ireland and TEIP in Portugal. I am now familiar with the concept, but I would like to learn in depth how they really work.

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From what I have learned so far, I believe systematic support for the schools would be very beneficial in Slovenia. Especially SES should be addressed more systematically.

However, I felt an important aspect of our national focus was missing from the study visits. Namely, I didn't get a lot of insight of VET in Ireland and Portugal. But I did get the confirmation how important it is to start with tackling SES and SEN students at an early age of students.

Expert 9:
During the study visit I have learned the following lessons. Firstly, the importance of a systematic and holistic approach known to all actors (practitioners, theorists, policy and users - students) which is supported by government. Secondly, clarifying the concept of inclusion by all the actors involved. Understanding it on the level of values and as a way of life (how we understand the concept of inclusion, what is an inclusive community, does SEN include just children with special needs, how do we define SES (low SES), what kind of inclusive pedagogical practices we have and why are they successful). Thirdly, to provide continuous support and education to teachers, supervision, planning, and evaluation. Fourthly, exposing examples of good practices, upgrading them and looking for the causes and reasons for practices that are not successful. Fifthly, the importance of involvement of children and adolescents in planning, evaluation and reflection.

Expert 10:
It is important to understand that inclusion is about long-term activities and moves slowly as a process. The main idea to consider after the study visits is to recognize inclusion as a value. This view should be pointed out and included in EU education priorities immediately. From the lessons learned during the study visits I feel top priorities concerning inclusion should be as follows: an ideology shift in understanding inclusion as a value; long-term consensus and commitment of policy makers to enable preconditions for successfully dealing with inclusion problems; constant teacher development and training to make them prepared for activities, organization of initiatives and their implementation; supporting institutional networking on horizontal and vertical level; incorporating a multidisciplinary approach in problem solving activities; system tracking framework for detecting personal educational and post educational journey and systematic work on relationships between parents, school, local community partnership, and their engagement.

Lessons learned synthetized at the national level

As can be seen through the individual lessons learned by each participant, we have noticed a lot of the same things from both the Ireland and Portugal good practices, and thus we are able to agree on lessons learned. The most important lesson that resonated in us, was that inclusion really means inclusion for all – and this is the starting point.

As can be seen through the good practices presented at the study visits, the concept of inclusion is, by definition, very broad. It is not a measure that can be ordered "from the outside" or "from the top down" and be accepted as it is. Constant work of all involved is necessary for the success of social inclusion, and it should be (at a bare minimum) based on the cooperation of policy makers (e.g. government-level) and practitioners (e.g. teachers). However, we have to keep in mind that inclusion in practice is judged by those who are the direct beneficiaries of an inclusion setting. Thus, only individuals involved in inclusion settings can perceive themselves as included or not. Evident from this is to also focus on the students – the main beneficiaries of an inclusion setting. We learned the actual needs and well-being of the students should be at the forefront of any initiative concerning social inclusion. Knowing what the students' and schools' needs are is fundamental.

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In addition, we must understand inclusion in the broadest sense, in which diversity is a fundamental starting point. Inclusion applies to all students facing adversities in learning and participation. This places responsibility on the school to establish learning conditions for all children, and to teach them how to accept diversity.

However, in Slovenia, also due to historical context, inclusion is mostly understood from the special-pedagogy domain – which means teachers in regular schools who do not have adequate special-pedagogical knowledge are less involved in inclusion of students (Portugal and Ireland either provide continuous teacher training or have a higher number of special education teachers). Thus, in our country context it is necessary to work on accepting inclusion as a general pedagogical goal. This can be achieved by both intervening on the systemic level and school level. On the systemic level this means to transform programs for initial teacher education a) provide specific subjects that focus on special-pedagogical topics; b) topics and goals of inclusion are integrated into various subject areas c) having adequate educational programs of in-service teachers and its promotion/dissemination). On the school level it means creating a heterogenous school climate and culture (classes are heterogenous by more than one criterion: SEN; SES; gifted students, cultural differences among students); and strengthening cooperation among school, parents, and the local community.

Based on the individual lessons learned we can agree that for successfully tackling exclusion, a systematic approach is essential. Initiatives must come from (or at the very least be supported by) the state, be adequately planned (policy and funding support), and widely known and accepted in the national context.
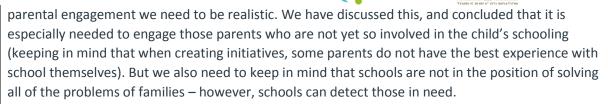
There must be constant research that enables evidence-based practices. In turn constant adaptation and revision (internal, external evaluation) is needed. To us it seems that an important aspect of this is to adequately educate evaluators so they are able to assess initiatives properly. This can be especially beneficial if we consider parents can give important feedback on school inclusive practices (similar to Portugal).

Long-term commitment and willingness to engage on all levels is very important. However, we strongly believe inclusion cannot work if it is just "ordered from the top" (as we are a democratic society after all). Change needs to happen at all levels for it to be successful, while keeping in mind our historical context (regular schools vs SEN schools; and the structure of initial teacher education).

However, schools are in the central position and can be considered the main source of change, meaning their needs and issues are the starting point. As seen from Ireland and Portugal, schools are constantly supported by policy makers (top-bottom approach). However, it is equally essential that school staff and teachers are "on-board" with inclusive practices (bottom-top approach). Constant self-reflection of all involved is a requirement. Working together (strong networks of schools, networks of principals, connecting with research institutions etc.) before implementing changes is an important consideration. In order to foster the success of initiatives, programs, projects the continuous professional development of teachers is crucial.

Concerning schools, a vital lesson is that we are aware of the fact that teachers can help foster change towards a more inclusive setting. As policy comes from „above", but teachers are the ones who work directly with the students and teachers have their own attitudes/beliefs.

Lastly, inclusion is a fundamental value of the school – this was very evident from the good practices of Ireland and Portugal. Thus, inclusion can be considered a whole school approach value. Taking parents and the community as partners (engaging them to be involved in school/student's life and activities, developing a sense of belonging etc.) was shown to be important. However, in terms of

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parental engagement we need to be realistic. We have discussed this, and concluded that it is especially needed to engage those parents who are not yet so involved in the child's schooling (keeping in mind that when creating initiatives, some parents do not have the best experience with school themselves). But we also need to keep in mind that schools are not in the position of solving all of the problems of families – however, schools can detect those in need.

Unfortunately, we didn't get a lot of insight into VET schooling. SEN and low SES are prevalent in vocational education in Slovenia. Low SES is a specific case in Slovenia, because data show that students with low SES are four times less likely to enrol into general educational programs compared to students with a higher SES when accounting for equal abilities. We wish to address this, at the very least to communicate this issue, as part of our adaptation and try to develop possible solutions.

Lessons learned that can be adapted to our specific national context

Based on our synthesis, we believe we can adapt several lessons learned to our national context, while keeping in mind what already works well in our setting and what more needs to be done.

- Providing a framework which connects all the relevant stakeholders (systematic support for the schools, maybe on the basis of DEIS or TEIP that also connects all the relevant stakeholders)

- Systematic support for SES (identifying key areas/schools with low SES students, establishing the basis for practical support such as delivering laptops and a stable internet connection during Covid-19 epidemic, focus on low SES in VET)

- Connect professionals/stakeholders from different departments, institutions, faculties etc. at the national level who work in social inclusion

- Continuous professional development of teachers (developing programs for continuous teacher development, encouraging obtaining of funds for substitute teacher salaries while the teachers are focusing on learning from the development program)

- Focusing on achieving outcomes in the long-term

- Providing and supporting regular evaluations of initiatives or the state of inclusion in particular schools (internal/external evaluations; having a criterion to define schools as an „inclusive school")

- Supporting evidence based/practices by first conducting research on school's/students' needs and then developing initiatives.

- Focusing on long-term planning of initiatives and supporting them with policy measures (e.g. establishing financial support measures in a similar way that is handled in DEIS)

Lessons learned that cannot be adapted in our specific national context and reasons

We also liked the idea of potentially grouping schools in a local area into school clusters – like the good practice was observed in Portugal. Per our understanding the Portugal educational system strongly supports and encourages school clusters – that in some cases enables students to be followed by the time they enter primary school level until they go off to obtain a university degree at the tertiary level. As of now, we believe, adding school clusters in Slovenia would require a major change to the way education is organized and that is why this lesson cannot be adapted. However, Slovenia does have "school centres" (i.e. Šolski center Ptuj, Šolski center Novo mesto) that incorporate school programs at different levels.

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Comparing newly acquired knowledge with our practice – similarities and differences

We have observed that the initiatives in Ireland and Portugal follow a large nationally supported framework. Those being DEIS in Ireland and TEIP in Portugal respectively. It seems to us adapting these initiatives (taken as they are) are beyond the reach and scope of this project. As it would be difficult to establish a framework/initiative from the ground up based on the time available on the STAIRS project. This also corresponds to the limited level of influence our team has (as evident in the learning diaries of the study visits). However, what we can do is adapt specific elements of these two initiatives (DEIS; TEIP) and prepare recommendations that can be used to properly start a similar initiative in Slovenia. Thus, STAIRS provides a foundation to work on inclusive practices in Slovenia.

Thus far we observe Slovenia has some good practices that are comparable to Ireland and Portugal (i.e. "razširjen program v osnovnih šolah" – the extended program in primary schools; cooperation among schools and external institution in co-financing programs) that in some aspects can be comparable to those by Ireland and Portugal, however these are usually on the level of projects – thus ideas and progress can get lost when the project ends. Inclusion initiatives must be based on long term action plans and on multi and inter agency collaboration (strong partnership between government departments, academic institutions, statutory bodies, schools etc. with clearly defined roles).

We came to the realization that we are doing some things very well in Slovenia (e.g. detection of students with special needs, the previously mentioned "extended" program). In addition, there also various projects on inclusion (i.e. working with the Roma community, "Z roko v roki pomoč") that have similarities presented with the Ireland and Portugal good practices. However, where the differences seem to occur is on the level of longevity. In addition, compared to both Ireland and Portugal, we still have a lot of work to do in regards to providing systemic support for low SES students.

Preliminary plans for adaptation

By establishing our learning needs, familiarising ourselves with the good practices in Ireland and Portugal, and through our workings in the national team we have set one main goal that we wish to achieve through adaptation in our national context*: We aim to strengthen the inclusive orientation and sensitivity to inclusion towards members of the most vulnerable groups* (i.e. SEN, low SES).

Thus, based on this main goal we wish to address four main points with our national adaptation plans:

- Suggesting means to encourage inclusive orientation and sensitivity towards social inclusion

- Identification and empowerment of low SES students

- Empowerment of teachers (continuous professional development/education of teachers)

- Establishing networks among stakeholders

We aim to incorporate the lessons learned and aspects of the presented good practices in the mentioned four points. Based on these main goals we aim to provide recommendations for the relevant stakeholders.