



Outcomes of the EUNEC exchange meeting

15 October 2021

Participants

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1. Purpose of the exchange

In April 2021 EUNEC members gathered online to exchange ideas on how our councils, and our education systems, dealt with the impact of COVID on education. It was then interesting to see the different perspectives. During this follow-up exchange, we focus on how our education systems work towards recovery after the crisis, and what is the position of education councils.

2. Plenary introduction to the exchange

- Looking back at the outcomes of the exchange on 21 April 2021 (DOC 019)
- Preparing the follow-up exchange (DOC 025 Summary OECD-publication: [Ten Principles for Effective and Equitable Educational Recovery from COVID](#))

3. Exchange in two small groups

EUNEC members discussed in two smaller groups, trying to answer two guiding questions:

- How is your national education system working on recovery?
- How did your council position itself in view of recovery?

Input by Raymond Kubben, Dutch Education Council

A recent report by the Dutch Inspectorate shows that the effects of the pandemic on education remain manageable: primary schools are catching up, this is a bit less the case in secondary schools. Also, in VET and in Higher Education, delays are manageable. The government foresees an important amount of additional funding for primary and secondary education.

Today, most schools and universities are running as before the pandemic. There is a toolkit for schools with suggestions on possible interventions. Progress is being monitored: schools will have to account for how they spent the money.

The Council is producing strategic advice, as much as possible. At one exception: the advice related to the national programme for education. But even there, the Council's advice tries to connect recovery measures with longer established programmes.

Some relevant links:

- <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2021/10/12/gevolgen-van-16-maanden-corona-voor-het-onderwijs> A study by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education shows the impact of 16 months of Covid on education. The results indicate that we worry less about cognitive losses than at the start of the pandemic, but less attention was given to the social and emotional skills of students. The State of Education in April 2022 will look back at this study.
- <https://www.nponderwijs.nl> The National Programme for Education is the Dutch plan for recovery and development during and after Covid. It is a support programme that is directed at catching up on learning losses and improving education. A first report on the progress of the programme is available.
- <https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/publicaties/adviezen/2021/06/3/advies-nationaal-programma-onderwijs> The Dutch Education Council published an advice about the National Programme for Education that focusses on recovery during and after Covid. They state that the government should connect the programme with structural investments in education and underlines the importance of sustainable improvement and development. The Council advises to make an evaluation of the effects of the programme after two years.
- <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/onderwijs-en-kinderopvang> This webpage bundles the available documents and information about the consequences of Covid for every level of education. Information about the impact on parents, childcare organisations, students, and education in general can be found on this page.

Input by Maryse Lassonde, Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation, Québec

In Québec, a lot of resources are invested in infrastructure and in mental health, assuring provision of professional psychological help for students and for teachers. The Ministry of Education has established a mentorship programme for students.

There is no assessment of where the students are now; schools are getting forward with the resources foreseen. The question of guilt (students? teachers?) is not perceived as relevant: teachers and pupils do not have to feel guilty about possible learning losses.

In the context of the pandemic, communication between the Ministry and all other actors has increased: there is at least one meeting per month, and the advice of the Council is highly solicited.

A report on the results of the pandemic will be ready for the Ministry in December. In this report, the Council gives orientation and some recommendations for actions they want the government to take to overcome the pandemic.

Today, everyone is back in school. Children over the age of 12 are being vaccinated. But extra-curricular activities remain restricted to fully vaccinated pupils. Instruction is open for all, the rest is restricted to those with a COVID-passport.

The Council has been extremely influential during the pandemic, as it is stated in law that for each regulation the advice of the Council has to be asked. There have thus been 11 consultations, putting the Council in the light. The Minister of Education has also put in place a forum on how to succeed on learning achievement, to provide guidelines, with high implication from the Council.

The Council stresses the fundamental right to education, education as an essential service. But, if education is considered to be an essential service, why did schools have to close? The crucial question is: why is education not, just as health, considered as an essential service?

Input by Elena Hadjikakou, Cyprus Education Council

In Cyprus, an important effort has been made to keep schools open, taking into account strict protocols. Now the Government is doing a lot of effort to move forward with vaccinations, for children as well, as this might help to keep the schools open.

The curriculum has been revised related to digital skills, guided by experts. At the same time, teacher training on digital skills is provided. The emphasis is on areas where pupils need more help (migrant population, violent neighbourhoods, ...).

The effort of providing schools with the right equipment is still ongoing (network, equipment); a lot of progress is to be made this academic year.

In brief: the main focus is/has been on keeping schools open and on supporting pupils and teachers.

Input by Juan Francisco Gutierrez, State School Council, Spain

Fortunately, the Spanish education system is doing well in this 2021-2022 school year: Classroom face-to-face teaching, following strict COVID-19 measures, is the type of non-University schooling for every region (Autonomous Communities). COVID outbreaks in schools are rare, so the situation is getting back to normal.

Moreover, the students do not have the feeling that they have to come back to school after a long time, because Spain succeeded in keeping schools open full time in the past school year 2020-2021 despite some big COVID outbreaks, especially in January and February 2021, before the general vaccination process began.

The high rate of fully vaccinated people (90 % of the population, starting from the age of 12, is fully vaccinated) contributes decisively to this success, as well as the continued use of facemasks and new ventilation standards.

We are not yet able to measure the whole impact of the pandemic on education, and especially on the students learning process. The more disadvantaged pupils have suffered the most, but we can also highlight some positive consequences:

- Digitalisation is now more integrated in our school system.
- Last year, the Spanish society realised that Education is an essential service, and teachers' social status has been reinforced, according to the official statistics.

The Spanish Council has been very active throughout this pandemic period, putting forward a set of useful proposals addressed to the Public Administrations and the educational community as a whole. The Spanish Council also undertook a specific study in which Annex II is devoted to an international report, and the input provided by EUNEC has been essential.

<https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/mc/cee/publicaciones/estudios/situacion-pandemia.html>

Now, once the health situation improved, the Spanish School Council tries to take advantage of the digital structures implemented. Among other initiatives, they are organising a cycle of Webinars in collaboration with the School Councils from each Autonomous Community. The topic of the first session was how to assure and encourage stakeholders' active participation:

<https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/mc/cee/buscando-convergencia/agenda-temas/participacion-educativa.html>

Input by Manuel Miguéns, Portuguese Education Council

In Portugal, 85 % of the population is vaccinated. Schools are now trying to work as normal as possible. The Government came up with a programme 'Schools plus' for 2021-2023 focusing on three main axes:

- Learning and teaching;
- Support for the education community;
- Knowledge and assessment.

The system is striving for continuity, in relation to the first phase, during the pandemic. Money is put into providing access to digital networks and computers for all.

It seems that there are indeed learning losses, but at the same time there is more or less a consensus not to go to extra days/weeks of schooling. This path will not be chosen.

A survey conducted in July shows

- closure of schools gave visibility to social inequality;
- reinforced cooperation, inside and between schools;

- distance education brought forward a discussion on educational practices (How can we teach better?) and on the issue of technology in education;
- the pandemic might have strengthened the relation between school and families, recognising that schools are not there just for learning.

The Portuguese Council published an advice on the European Union Resilience Fund (with a dimension related to education), with a list of recommendations, insisting on the need to focus on education.

The Parliament has asked a study on the impact of education on inequality; it will be published later in October. In this study, it is stressed that schools are an important pivot in the relation between the community institutions, schools are centres of proximity. The pandemic also gave visibility to schools as spaces for the promotion of wellbeing. Parents expressed their trust in this institution.

Input by Rahma Bourqia, Higher Council for Education, Training and Research, Morocco

Morocco is one of the African countries which has relatively been successful in managing the pandemic period by taking many measures:

- Early vaccination for teachers (among the first);
- All students were vaccinated;
- A fund for compensation of the loss of jobs and for vulnerable social groups;
- Vaccination of all children between 12 and 17 years old this October;
- 60% of Moroccans were vaccinated;
- The ministry of education adopted distant learning for students during the confinement period;
- Many sanitary measures were taken;

Measures for recovery came in a good time.

- A new Moroccan government has been nominated this October. It has in its mandate to come up with a policy for recovery within a global framework of a new model for development of Morocco. In this model, the shift towards a social state has been announced. It deals essentially with social issues, such as health, education and boosts the economic reforms (a new minister of education was appointed).
- Education is a priority in this new policy within a program that focusses on governance, the training of teachers, reforming pedagogy, digital learning...
- This change opens the way for a close collaboration between the Council and the Ministry of education.

When the pandemic started, the National Council of Education Training and Scientific Research in Morocco had planned to follow education during the pandemic period within the framework of its mission of giving advice and conducting evaluation.

It has conducted in partnership with UNICEF an evaluation and produced a report on distant leaning based on a fieldwork study with teachers in the primary and secondary education and with students.

Based on this evaluation, the Council plays its role of giving advice to the Ministry of education and addresses the following issues:

- The issue of inequity in terms of access to distance learning and to the digital infrastructure in schools.
- Strengthen the digital education or the digital literacy: the Moroccan children are well connected. This has to be strengthened with a good digital education.
- The reform of education undertaken before the reform in the government, should imply doubling the effort to catch up and overcome the negative effects of the pandemic on education. Reforms should be carried on.
- Help the teachers in a recovery process. They have been facing difficulties with distance learning, being away from schools and not always with a direct contact with students. To face the difficulties of teaching, some have been involved in collaborative work. This could be used as a positive start for formalising the collaborative work among teachers to build up their collective capacities.
- To address the psychological damage of the pandemic on children and teachers. The Ministry should keep the students in school in case the pandemic continues.
- One of the lessons learnt from the pandemic, is to think about the strategies of facing risks in education in the future.

Input by Maria Emilia Brederode Santos, Portuguese Education Council

A study by consumers association about trust in institutions took place in many southern countries. The results for Portugal showed that the public education system is the most trusted institution. Last time this study was conducted, in 2016, the Portuguese public education system was already in the top 6, but now it is the most trusted institution. This is a good sign that shows that the pandemic was dealt with in a good way and everything was done to get to the children to school. These results also show that the time for reforms is now, because they will be better accepted and implemented in schools if the trust in the institution is high.

An inquiry with teachers gave a good return, but the Council is worried about the students who were not reached. The impression is that certain ethnic groups and suburbs of big towns are not reached. There is now a deeper issue to involve these groups and show them that school is useful for them. This inquiry was very much discussed in media too. Lots of people were consulted to discuss the position of the Council, but only individually. Not enough time was taken for this discussion and a formal approach was put aside because the Government wanted a solution quickly.

Inequalities and social and emotional problems became more visible. The current Government already did a lot for inclusion, but it is really hard to bring about change in schools. Teachers can say they agree, but in practice everything stays the same and goes back to how it was before. In regard to digitalisation, there were good examples in individual schools. The schools that were dedicated to focus on the autonomy of students, had less problems with the digital shift.

The Government asked the Council for advice on recovery and there was a vote about this advice. Key points: Government needs to provide resources without telling schools what to do. Schools should get enough autonomy to decide how they want to deploy the resources.

The Parliament asked for a study on inequality because they want to look at how to deal with these inequalities that were already present but became even more visible due to

the pandemic. An example is the digital divide. A lot of equipment was distributed and connections have been made stronger, but there is still a lot to be done.

Input by Deimantė Žegunė, Lithuanian Education Council

All institutions in primary, general and vocational education are open; the formal as well as the non-formal education is organised. Hybrid education was introduced in September of this year, be it with some guidelines. No more than 10-20% of junior classes and no more than 30% of senior classes can be organised via distance learning.

Every week teachers and students are tested in schools. When positive, a quarantine of 10 days is required. There are currently about 500 cases of COVID infections in schools. The government recently decided that institutions themselves should have the right to decide whether to continue the education process.

In higher education, the situation is different. Education is organised in classes again in universities and colleges, and teachers and students need to be vaccinated or should provide the result of a PCR-test to be allowed to attend the class. There are individual cases at universities and colleges where lectures and seminars are organised temporarily in distance, due to a higher risk. Around 90% of students and professors in higher education are vaccinated.

In spring of this year, the council provided recommendations about the learning process in general and vocational education:

- Priority should be given to contact classes;
- Assistance packages should be provided for teachers and students and should include IT equipment;
- Assistance package for principals and schools, for example ventilation system;
- Assistance package for municipalities in general;

The recommendations also covered non-formal education and additional assistance to children and parents from lower income. The Council also insisted on preparing for the new school year in advance.

Deimantė also notes that the Council was not involved in crisis management and that they did not advise on health-related issues. The Council also did not provide recommendations about higher education because universities and colleges are autonomous in Lithuania. However, they did formulate recommendations about the social dimension of higher education.

Overall, the Government handled the crisis quite well and made efforts on the digitalisation. Every school constructed an overview of all students that had no access to a computer or online facilities. The Government then provided resources so that schools could provide these students with laptops. In some cases, teachers even went to the students' home, to make sure there was no breach in their learning.

Input by Tomás O'Ruairc, Teaching Council Ireland

In Ireland, there exists a system of registry for all teachers. Every teacher is registered in a database that now holds 111000 teachers. A budget of 50 million was allocated to support schools. This amount was meant to provide more hours for students with special needs. The challenge now is to find teachers that have the time to teach these hours, so the problem only grows. Thanks to the registry system, Ireland knows there are enough

teachers who could fill the gap, but something is going wrong in the deployment of the teachers. The system cannot see where each teacher is working, or if they are currently teaching. This is a problem on local level, so a more systemic response to local issues is needed.

During the pandemic the Government agreed that special education teachers could jump in and substitute where needed. That is no longer the case now and it has become hard again to find teachers who can substitute for others. Parents are getting worried and the Government was surprised by that because they thought that the pandemic had come to an end and the measures could go away again.

Due to the pandemic, there is a bigger focus on teacher learning. Teachers have had to implement a lot of technologies into their teaching practice during the pandemic and people are starting to notice that teachers had to learn and innovate quite a lot in recent years. For example, student teachers became teachers of their colleagues on the subject of technology, which has given them more self-confidence. The government is now very interested to learn more about this.

Specifically for curriculum, there is a separate advisory body in Ireland. Their work was delayed because these people had to jump in and help out in the field during the pandemic. A senior cycle reform is now happening.

Input by Mia Douterlungne, Flemish Education Council

In Belgium everything is returning back to normal. 92% of the adult population is vaccinated, which is a very good number. The situation in Brussels is still problematic because of the difference in culture. There are plans for digitalisation and inequality, but there are no recurrent policies. The main points of attention in the debate are the quality of education with for example the question of central exams. This shows that the debate is returning to topics from before the pandemic, and not much is being said about wellbeing or innovation, which have come up as important topics from the pandemic. The Flemish Council is somewhat disappointed with this state of play because the possibilities for bigger shifts are missed. An illustrative example are the cuts that are planned for education, which is incomprehensible. A big part of budget went to recovery, but we are going back to the situation before the pandemic now.

Mia is worried about the shortage of teachers in Belgium and tells us that the numbers have declined even more due to the pandemic. In Belgium the teaching profession appears to be too heavy and unattractive. Tomás informs that Ireland has never seen a decline, not even during the pandemic. Each year, 4500 new teachers are registered. The main challenge right now is to keep the teachers in their position, mostly in post primary level. Teachers tend to fall out there more because of the insufficient salaries. The salaries are insufficient to sustain life in a bigger city.

4. Highlights

School systems are catching up relatively well; schools are running more or less as before and the importance of keeping schools open is accepted in most countries, although sometimes with restrictions or strict protocols. Investments are being made, mainly in the fields of:

- Learning: many countries have changed some aspects of schooling and curriculum, or made a concrete plan for making up for learning losses;

- Mental health: some countries provide professional psychological help for teachers and students;
- Infrastructure: providing schools with the needed equipment is an ongoing process. Schools that were already used to using digital tools to some extent, adjusted more easily to the digital shift that was needed for distance learning.

Assessment of the current situation remains a challenge, but it is good not to put guilt on teachers and pupils for the learning losses. Some countries tried to make inventories of students that needed help most, for instance students in rural areas or with a migration background.

In terms of the curriculum, more attention is paid to digital skills. Digital literacy has become a structural part of education in some curricula. In Portugal for instance, schools that focused on the autonomy of students concerning digitalisation, had less problems with the digital shift. This might be an interesting starting point for other countries to look at.

Most Councils are focusing on strategic advice. Some Councils have been 'extremely influential' during the pandemic, although this is not the case everywhere. In some countries the advice of the Council is asked frequently, in other countries the communication between the Ministry and the Council was intensified. The fundamental right to education is stressed, education is promoted to be an essential service, such as health. The importance of education was made clear once again by the crisis and many countries tried to ensure students and parents were aware of this. In the general population, there is more appreciation for the teachers and the schools; the community is recognising the pivotal role of education. Not to be forgotten: the importance of teachers, and thus also of teacher education. Many countries have made efforts to provide more support for teachers. For instance, in Ireland, teacher learning was accentuated and teachers became teachers of their colleagues on the subject of technology, and in Lithuania, assistance packages have been provided to teachers, students and schools.

