



STATEMENTS on EDUCATION COUNCILS AND THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA

These statements are based on the lessons learnt during the seminar in Sèvres, May 2019. They identify key issues for further debate within EUNEC and within each education council, member of the network.

EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively to the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant DG's. EUNEC also wants to promote action by its members at national/regional level. These statements can contribute to the national advisory opinions of education councils. They should lead to reflection and action by relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training, such as providers of education, teacher trade unions, social partners, students, parents and experts in the field of education and training.

EUNEC supports the vision of the European Education Area

'A vision for 2025 would be a Europe in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent, where spending time in another Member State - to study, to learn, or to work - has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm. A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity' (European Commission 2017).

EUNEC will be celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2020, after 20 years of consultation and EU-level cooperation. It goes without saying that our network, well aware of the added value of international exchange, supports the vision expressed in the European Education Area. We have always focused our discussions and reflections with the international education policy documents as a central reference. This approach has always given us a common ground, in spite of the specific challenges every country or region experiences in the field of education.

The concept of the European Education Area is for EUNEC an opportunity to deepen our discussions, and to clarify our role as education councils.

During the seminar in Sèvres (May 2019), several EUNEC members testified how they experienced the added value of international cooperation in the field of different policy lines, all at the heart of the European Education Area:

- Cooperation in the field of curriculum design (Malta);
- International mobility (Netherlands);
- Recognition of qualifications (Flanders);
- Improved language learning (France);
- Mainstreaming innovation and digital skills in education (Portugal).



The European Education Area: just an umbrella or an ambitious new vision?

The provocative question that was at the center of our debates and reflections is whether this European Education Area is just an umbrella covering already existing policy lines, or a real new education policy, insuring inclusive quality education for all.

Bianca Busuioc, speaking for the European Commission, confirmed that the European Education Area is **indeed an ambitious new policy plan**.

The European Education Area does not start from a white sheet. It stands on the shoulders of important frameworks, started years before. Over the past decade, the European Union has developed a series of 'soft policy' tools to support Member States in the design of national/regional education policies. Since 2000, Member States have been cooperating under the 'Framework for European cooperation in education and training' (ET 2020) which set common objectives and benchmarks. The Commission believes it is now time to build on these foundations and to greatly step up the ambition.

Within the vision of the European Education Area, for the first time, there is the recognition of the importance of **education for further development of society** and as pillar of social security or social protection. Learning is considered as capital for integration in society; this goes beyond the vision of learning with a labour market focus. The perspective is also broadened towards **common values and a shared European identity**.

Another new element is that education is now higher ranked **as a priority on the policy agenda** of the EU Heads of State, and of the Ministers responsible for finances.

Trends towards an open area for education are no longer only at the level of higher education, but also at **other education levels**: lifelong learning, compulsory education, and vocational education and training.

Tensions between the international and the regional/national level

The primary responsibility for education policies lies with the Member States, at national, regional and local levels. According to this **principle of subsidiarity** education 'belongs' to the Member States, from the beginning of the European Union.

However, the European Union has always played a complementary role, over the years. Member States have their national challenges, but they have at the same time **much in common**. Exchanging experiences has led to better policies.

International frameworks could be seen as a threat against the principle of subsidiarity. They could be conceived as a way of interfering, by international organisations in 'our' national/regional education policy.



On the other hand, education policy making in the Member States can benefit from international frameworks:

- International policy lines can be used to justify some of the national/regional positions. The trends at international level are one of the backgrounds.
- International frameworks can offer new points of view, and can help to open up conservative views and inspire to think about innovative solutions.

Balance is needed between the challenges of the national/regional education system, and the international challenges. Member States should not take international frameworks for granted, but they can offer added value to national/regional education policy making, taking into account some critical conditions:

- Need for transparency and convergence between international frameworks. Next to the European Union, other international organisations take initiatives in the field of education. There is sometimes overlap, there are sometimes diverging priorities. National/regional education stakeholders need more transparency in the amount of international education policy initiatives.
- Need for focus. International frameworks now sometimes tend to encompass all that is related to education.
- Need for more and better involvement of stakeholders, in the conception and implementation of the frameworks.
- Need for trust. International frameworks can offer guidance, but at the same time there is need for flexibility at the implementation level.
- Need for awareness that international frameworks, by the way they are developing, are steering. It is about a new way of governing, a new mode of power: those who develop the frameworks, those who monitor, steer the process. PISA, for instance, framed the discussion on education to an important extent.

Higher Education has a strong tradition of international cooperation. The EHEA, the European Higher Education Area, is a known and successful concept. Challenges are of course different in compulsory education and in lifelong learning: the principle of subsidiarity plays more, and there is a wider divergence in terms of structure of the systems. However, recent experiences within **higher education can be inspiring** for other levels. There is, for instance, the case of automatic recognition of degrees within the Benelux. This is an example of international cooperation that is very relevant in the light of the developments towards a European Education Area. And there are, even more recently, the new European Universities, an experiment that deserves decent evaluation: does it deliver, in higher education? And can such experiences be a source of inspiration for international cooperation at other education levels?

How to overcome the tensions? The pivotal role of education councils.

The European Education Area is an initiative that comes from the level of the European Union. It presents a vision for 2025: a Europe in which learning, studying and doing



research would not be hampered by borders. But in order to make it reality, Member states will have to jump in.

Education systems are large and complex, this is even more the case at the international level. The time gap between policy conception and implementation is big. There will be constant discussions on how to best implement. This is why there is need for time and space between what the international frameworks observe and how they are implemented at national/regional level. The frameworks have to land, to settle. This is where EUNEC and the member councils have a crucial role to play.

Networks such as EUNEC¹ are good examples of how to **involve stakeholders** in education policy making. According to OECD (as stated in the presentation by Tracey Burns for EUNEC, 2016), one of the important elements of effective governance of complex education systems is that it works through building capacity, stakeholder involvement and open dialogue.

Educations councils² are **boundary workers**, linking stakeholders, policy makers, international education policy, and society. Education councils can play an important role as a **mediator** between the international level and the level of the Member States, between the level of the policy and the level of the implementation.

Deliberation is a key element in education policy making. We need places with time and space for **localized deliberation**, where education stakeholders can really disagree about the future of education, and talk about that disagreement. When it comes to education, these are the critical questions: How do we relate to new generations? What schools do we prefer? How do we define good education? How do we fund good education? How do we deal with freedom and equity in education? Different values are at stake. Even if the debate is not leading to consensus, it is relevant to accept dissent in opinions, and to make that dissent visible.

Education councils can be those meaningful places for deliberation, **going beyond the tensions** between the global level and the local implementation level, and allowing the **international frameworks to settle, to land**. Visions are needed, but at a certain moment, things have to work, at school, in the classroom.

EUNEC, gathering education councils and other advisory bodies in the field of education, is the perfect place to exchange experiences on that role.

In order to fulfil this role, EUNEC insists on the need of structured support by the European Commission. EUNEC has, in the past, been funded under Key Action 3, Support for Policy Reform, Civil Society Cooperation in the field of education and training. Since 2015, this funding disappeared, together with the recognition, due to a change in the eligibility criteria. EUNEC insists on reviewing the criteria, so that our network can fully play its role as a mediator in the implementation of international frameworks.

¹ www.eunec.eu

² 'An education council is a (semi-)permanent body. It provides advice on educational policy. Its role is embedded in the policymaking process. It acts independently from any single interest. It combines a range of different perspectives: education partners, society, political affiliations, academic perspectives.' (M. Brans, J. Van Damme, J. Gaskell, 2013).