EUNEC statements on 'Governance in Education'

These statements are based on the lessons learnt during the seminar on governance in education in Amsterdam, and 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.

Government versus governance

Education and training as a vital public service

Education and training have always been vital sectors in society because of their role in socialization and social cohesion, because of the economic added value they bring by qualifying citizens, and because of their role towards personal development and well-being. Education and training also contribute to the development and innovation of the knowledge base and competences.

Although in some European countries, there is an important supply of education by civil society organisations, the education and training sector is in many countries seen as a public or semi-public service. This has implications in the field of public financing and subsidizing, quality requirements and autonomy, governance and multiple responsibilities and the tension between central decision making versus more decentral models of decision making.

The government model is under pressure

The government model, where decisions are taken at a centralized level, is now under pressure, for different reasons. Societies in general, and education systems in particular, are becoming more and more complex: traditional models of steering and conflict solutions don't work anymore. Societies are at the same time becoming more and more individualized. Technological evolutions lead to new models of educational delivery. Above all this, there is also a high pressure on government finances.

The traditional image of policy making appears inadequate, because policy is not linear, does not occur in stages. Policy is deeply influenced by 'events', by disruptions. Policy is at the same time the result of multiple actors. Moreover, is it very difficult to measure

the effects of policy lines, as these effects are often indirect and difficult to identify. The traditional model of decision making seems to have reached its limits.

From government towards governance

Based on dissatisfaction with traditional problem-solving methods and decision-making models, there has been, during the last decades, an evolution from a government model towards a governance model. This is a fundamental change in the way of thinking about shaping political and decision-making processes in society.

The role of the government is no longer to steer directly policy processes, but rather to coordinate and facilitate policy processes and responsiveness of other actors to emerging challenges. This governance model refers to the growing mixing and interdependence of public and private actors, to decentralized and horizontal relationships between actors at different administrative levels, depending on each other for the making and implementation of policy.

The complexity of educational governance

Educational governance is particularly complex and multifaceted. Education systems are now characterized by multi-level governance where the links between multiple actors operating at different levels are to a certain extent fluid and open to negotiation. Innovation in education is a hampering procession of Echternach. Often, it appears that a good decision, a good plan is not sufficient for real change and innovation. A lot of factors can play a disturbing role. Sometimes, goals are updated or completely changing half way a process. Sometimes, schools are re-inventing the innovation.

There is need to deal with this complexity. Education councils play an important role in bringing the actors together and in trying to work towards a common understanding of complex governance issues.

Key elements for effective governance

The OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) runs the 'Governing Complex Education Systems'[1] project. This project looks at the challenges that governments face in steering complex education systems. What models of governance are effective in complex education systems? And what knowledge system is necessary to support the effective governance of complex education systems?

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[1] https://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/governingcomplexeducationsystemsgces.htm

The key elements for effective governance below are identified based on these GCES-findings and on the input by experts and participants at the EUNEC conference in Amsterdam.

Effective governance works through stakeholder involvement, open dialogue and building capacity

Stakeholder involvement has to be understood in a much broader sense than it has been until now. At this particular point, education councils and teaching councils play a crucial role, offering an adequate structure for dialogue involving all stakeholders.

Involvement of stakeholders can only be effective if it contributes to a common understanding and to the development of a strategic vision. Strategic thinking is a challenge in education as well as in many other public sectors. The capacity of education as a system to think strategically has to be enhanced.

Effective governance is based on accountability and trust and offers space for experimentation

Education systems face an increased emphasis on accountability of performances: need for measurable indicators, focus on evaluation and quality assurance, and demand for transparency. However, there is an inherent tension between accountability and systemic innovation, in that tightly controlled accountability mechanisms seek to minimize risk and error, both of which are fundamental elements for the innovation process.

Modern education systems must be able to build learning from failure into their functioning, both to improve pedagogy and practice and the governing of the system as a whole. Innovation in education requires careful risk-taking and the accompanying possibility of failure.

Risk-taking can be accomplished through policy experimentation. There is however, a tension between evaluating the effects of sometimes narrow experiments, and translating the results into the broader stakeholder network, at system level.

Trust, as a learnable skill and attitude[2], is a key word: trust in education governance, trust in schools and teachers, and trust in the pedagogical relationship.

Effective governance focuses on processes, not on structures.

There is no 'right' system of governance. There are examples of centralized systems that perform excellently; there are examples of decentralized systems that are very weak, and vice versa. And even in decentralized systems, the national or state level remains very important in triggering and steering education reform. Rather than to focus on

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[2] Presentation by Alvaro Almeida dos Santos at the EUNEC seminar, Amsterdam, 31 May 2016

structures (which are highly contextualized), it is more fruitful to focus on processes (which are likely to be more universal).

Effective governance requires a whole of system approach, aligning roles and balancing tensions.

It is crucial to find the right combination of mutually reinforcing dynamics that are designed to strengthen both accountability and trust. In complex systems, nothing can be done in isolation.

Effective governance harnesses evidence and research to inform policy and reform.

In complex systems, the local or regional level is expected to become change managers. Countries are struggling with the ways to build this kind of capacity. Providing centralized and decentralized decision makers and practitioners with relevant, high quality knowledge is imperative to improve the quality of decision-making and practices.

An often-overlooked area is the capacity to handle data, both for local governments and in schools. The amount of data collected from research and from school and system evaluations should not only be used for accountability purposes, but also for improvement and innovation[3]. In the governance model, the improvement decisions belong to the central as well as to the local level; stakeholders have to have access to the existing data, and have the ability to interpret them. They have to be able to develop the confidence and skills to analyze and evaluate the relevance of evidence whatever its provenance.

Education councils offer a platform to stakeholders and policy makers to discuss and work towards a common understanding of 'evidence' and to exchange experiences on what works in education.

Multiple accountability

Accountability is one of the key principles of effective education governance.

The last decades there has been a shift from traditional vertical mobility towards horizontal accountability. Vertical accountability is top-down and hierarchical; it enforces compliance with laws and regulations and holds school accountable for the use of resources in relation to the quality of education they provide. Horizontal accountability is directed at how schools and teachers conduct their profession (professional school

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[3] Presentation by Serban Iosifescu at the EUNEC seminar, Amsterdam, 31 May 2016

accountability) and at how schools and teachers inform and involve multiple stakeholders and are accountable to them (multiple school accountability).[4]

Multiple accountability means involving pupils, parents, other education/care/welfare institutions, community, labour market.. and asking feedback on the three following questions:

- ¬ Is the system or the school doing the right things?
- ¬ Is the system or the school doing these things well?
- ¬ How to improve and adapt?

In order to make multiple school accountability work, the following steps have to be taken:

- ¬ Identify the stakeholders;
- ¬ Build stakeholders' capacity;
- ¬ Build schools' capacity.

What does this mean for education councils?

The key elements for effective education governance acknowledge the role of education councils as crucial for systemic innovation in education.

Education councils can put governance at the agenda

Educations councils can start the dialogue and the exchange of views related to the governance theme. In their recommendations, it is important to pay also attention to the relation between what is recommended and the current governance structure.

Education councils can play a role in strengthening stakeholders

Education councils are the platforms par excellence where stakeholders can enter into dialogue and build capacity, share common approaches and knowledge. The extent to which this is the case, depends of course of the national/regional constellation of the council and its mission and position.

Education councils can play a role in research brokerage, translating evidence into the stakeholders' language and translating (overwhelming) data and information into policy recommendations and policy design.

Stakeholder management is not an easy task. There might be tensions between stakeholders, the strong stakeholders (the 'professionals') might dominate the weaker

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[4] Presentation by Edith Hooge at the EUNEC seminar, Amsterdam, 31 May 2016

('lay') stakeholders. These are delicate processes. If they are not well managed, stakeholders will feel as not taken seriously, and will not engage.

Nature of recommendations

Education councils will have to consider an even stronger emphasis on strategic recommendations, given the fact that strategic thinking is a key element for effective governance.

The PDCA-cycle needs to be reflected in the advisory agenda. General concepts and global development are constantly evolving. Education councils constantly need to evaluate the results of their actions, to interpret what happens and to judge and decide on further actions.