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Author(s)	Katya Dunajeva (PPMI)
Advisor(s)	Juliette Torabian, Hanna Siarova, Radvile Bankauskaitė
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¹ **Type:** Use one of the following codes (in consistence with the Description of the Action):

R: Document, report (excluding the periodic and final reports)
 DEM: Demonstrator, pilot, prototype, plan designs
 DEC: Websites, patents filing, press and media activities, videos, etc.
 OTHER: Software, technical diagram, etc.

² **Dissemination level:** Use one of the following codes (in consistence with the Description of the Action)

PU: Public, fully open, e.g. web
 CO: Confidential, restricted under conditions set out in the Model Grant Agreement
 CI: Classified, information as referred to in Commission Decision 2001/844/EC

Table 1: Participating Institutions

Country [Abbreviation]	Project partner(s)
Finland [FI]	Helsingin Yliopisto (UH)
Germany [DE]	Universität Mannheim (UMA) Universität Trier (UT)
Hungary [HU]	TÁRKI Társadalomkutatási Intézet Zrt. (TARKI)
Ireland [IE]	The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)
Lithuania [LT]	Viešosios politikos ir vadybos institutas / Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI)
Luxembourg [LU]	Université du Luxembourg (UL) Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER)
Norway [NO]	Høgskulen på Vestlandet (HVL) Universitetet i Bergen (UiB)
Spain [ES]	Universidad Complutense Madrid (UCM)
Switzerland [CH]	Universität Bern (UBERN)

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1 Background

This policy brief has been developed within the framework of the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004392 (PIONEERED). The main objective of RIA PIONEERED is to determine research-informed policy measures and identify pioneering policies and practices to mitigate inequalities in access to, and the uptake and completion of, education – both in formal and informal educational settings. To this end, researchers from nine participating countries have conducted an analysis of education policy. This analysis focuses on how the meanings of core concepts such as educational inequality or vulnerable students have over time in policy discourse, and which aspects of educational inequality have been tackled most successfully over the last decade (a table with definitions of these concepts is provided below). Researchers relied primarily on desktop research, and in some cases conducted interviews with policy makers.

Table 2: Definitions of concepts

Concept	Definition
Life-course approach	A long-term perspective that integrates different levels of the origins of educational inequalities from childhood to adulthood, and focuses on how to foster equality in education over the course of a person’s life.
Intersectionality	Specific inequalities at certain intersections of axes of inequality (e.g. male migrant students).
Vulnerable students	Those groups who do not have the same opportunities (e.g. in terms of education) as other groups in society; vulnerable students tend to be perceived as being “at risk” of early school leaving and future unemployment.
Formal education*	“Structured education system that runs from primary (and in some countries from nursery) school to university, and includes specialised programmes for vocational, technical and professional training.”
Informal education*	“Lifelong learning process, whereby each individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her own environment and from daily experience.”
Non-formal education*	“Planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum.”
Educational inequalities	Educational inequalities accumulate over the educational trajectory and tend to be particularly pronounced at intersections of vulnerabilities.

*Definitions of the Council of Europe (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/definitions>)

Educational inequalities relate to systematic disadvantages for some social groups and the systematic privileges of other social groups with regard to aspects of education, such as access to educational institutions, learning, achievement (competencies) and attainment (grades, certificates), covering entire educational trajectories. Equitable education is at the core of fair and inclusive societies. A recent UNESCO report shows that the extent of global inequalities in education has not only remained high, but has also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.³ The report identified numerous groups of students who tend to suffer discrimination in relation participation in and experiences of education.⁴ In a similar vein, the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) emphasises the powerful influence of children’s birth circumstances in shaping their educational opportunities.⁵ Undeniably, educational inequalities further reduce future quality of life and social mobility for some children.

Educational inequalities are among the most pressing challenges, both globally and across Europe. The European Commission’s 2020 Education and Training Monitor warned of

³ UNESCO (2020). “New UNESCO Report shows extent of global inequalities in education and calls for greater inclusion as schools re-open”. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/GEM-Report-2020>

⁴ These are: gender, age, location, poverty, disability, ethnicity, indigeneity, language, religion, migration or displacement status, sexual orientation or gender identity expression, incarceration.

⁵ The World Inequality Database on Education: <https://www.education-inequalities.org>

increasing inequalities in education.⁶ Inequalities remain high, both between social categories and among EU Member States. The digital transition, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, have only deepened these inequalities, exacerbating the exclusion, marginalisation and poverty of vulnerable students. A 2021 study by the IZA Institute came to similar conclusions, finding that throughout Europe, educational inequalities between and within countries are increasing substantially, partly due to the pandemic.⁷

These persistent educational inequalities continue to have adverse effects on social cohesion, u market participation, prosperity and social mobility. One of the foremost goals of education policy is thus to mitigate these inequalities, in order to improve individual life chances and economic opportunities, as well as contributing to social justice and sustainability. This policy brief provides an overview of key policy challenges in relation to equitable education, focusing in particular on policy formulation. It discusses selected policy measures at both EU and national levels, and highlights several examples of pioneering national policies from project countries.

2 EU objectives and national contexts: key policy challenges for equitable education

Key messages

In the midst of the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 around the world, learning and teaching processes within Europe have been subject to shifts that have undermined equitable access, uptake and opportunities. In addition, the continent has experienced a gradual rise in nationalist, xenophobic and far-right ideas and groups during recent years, in parallel to rising concerns over youth unemployment, European culture and social cohesion, as well as sustainable energy and consumption.

Hence, education systems are faced with questions (albeit to differing degrees) with regard to ‘educated identity’, as well as equitability, affordability, sustainability, and the relevance of education processes within national, regional and international contexts.

The EU needs to renew its approach towards a resilient and flexible social contract that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development and socio-ecological justice through human-centred and equitable education systems. Meaningful policy efforts have already been made; however, policy debates and questions remain as to how to make education systems more equitable, sustainable and humane.

2.1 Equitable education: target groups in selected EU countries

In most policy documents, the framing of educational inequalities deliberately avoids mentioning specific forms of inequality, reasons of segregation or axes of inequality in

⁶ ‘Education and Training Monitor Report 2020: European countries did not meet the ET2020 targets in education’ (2020). Available at: <https://www.csee-etuice.org/en/news/education-policy/4141-education-and-training-monitor-report-2020-european-countries-did-not-meet-the-et2020-targets-in-education>

⁷ Blaskó, Z., da Costa, P. and Schnepf, S.V. (2021). IZA DP No. 14298: ‘Learning Loss and Educational Inequalities in Europe: Mapping the Potential Consequences of the COVID-19 Crisis’. Available at: <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/14298/learning-loss-and-educational-inequalities-in-europe-mapping-the-potential-consequences-of-the-covid-19-crisis>

education. Instead, general concepts such as ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘education for all’ are used. In some countries this has been due to cultural and political principles (e.g., the ‘Finnish equal education’ ethos or Germany’s long-standing refusal to acknowledge itself as a country of immigration). As a result, in most countries, broadly defined categories such as “students with special needs” and “socially excluded students” have emerged as collective terms to refer to any student with the potential to experience unequal access, achievement or attainment in education. As such, responsibility for identifying different vulnerabilities and designating appropriate strategies to address them has been moved to lower levels (often to municipalities or individual schools). This poses challenges under certain circumstances, namely: 1) if schools have little or no autonomy; and 2) if certain categories of vulnerability are foregrounded or backgrounded by the use of these umbrella terms.

A lack of precision in defining those sub-groups who are vulnerable to educational inequalities creates difficulties in their identification, as well as in the analysis of life-course and intersectional vulnerabilities. For example, despite scientific evidence on gender-based educational gaps, education policies in some countries tend to ignore gender-related characteristics as determinants of unequal access to education. (A notable exception to this is Switzerland, which has various gender-related education policies with regard to STEM.) In addition, closer attention needs to be paid to the interaction of various axes of inequalities (intersectionality) and the role of inequalities throughout the academic path and beyond (life-course approach), as well as to the barriers students may face when transitioning between education levels.

Some indications of change are apparent, however – particularly with the entry of the life-course approach into education policy in some countries. Evidence from various European countries includes the re-integration of those who have already dropped out of education (e.g., in LU) and the prioritisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as the foundation for future educational achievements (e.g., in LT, DE, NO, CH). The life-course approach is thus most visible in ECEC policies, in those countries where ECEC is part of the formal education system. In some countries, however, ECEC is not part of the formal education system (e.g., IE) while in others, reforms are aimed at integrating and standardising ECEC (e.g. LU). Importantly, the concept of well-being has entered the policy discourse at the level of early childhood education, but fades away in subsequent stages of education. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has alerted policy makers to the importance of student well-being at all stages, which should not be overlooked in education policies.

In addition to a lack of attention in some countries to the life-course approach, intersectionality is also missing from policy discourses. This undermines understandings of the interrelationships between different types of disadvantages among students. Indeed, academic findings persistently highlight that intersectionality – with its focus on interrelated disadvantages – is key to understanding inequalities in the education system (WP2). Despite this, it is largely omitted from policy discussions. Country-specific research best illustrates how inequalities result from a combination of disadvantages along multiple axes and change over time: in Germany, for example, the most disadvantaged group of students has moved from being “daughters of Catholic workers from the countryside” in the 1960s, to “young male migrants in metropolitan areas” today.

2.2 Equitable education: key policy challenges

Level and field of intervention

Analysis of education policy reveals that the level of intervention with regard to educational inequalities is usually determined the extent to which education systems are centralised, and underlying assumptions with regard to the drivers of such inequalities. Where the educational landscape is highly centralised, there tends to be criticism of a lack of local-

level autonomy; in cases where education policy is decentralised, the challenge arises of a lack of harmonisation. Switzerland represents one of the more complex cases, in which the balance between autonomy at canton level and harmonisation is one of the driving forces behind policy formulation at the level of compulsory schooling. When seeking to understand why interventions occur at a certain level, it is important to consider the various rationalisations of educational inequalities applied in different countries. In the case of Hungary, there is an assumption that micro-level factors, rather than macro-level, are to blame for differences in educational outcomes, hence mitigating inequalities is conceptualised in terms of “catching up”, and is directed at certain individuals or groups.

So far, policy discourses and texts have devoted insufficient attention to the role of non-formal education in addressing educational inequalities. Although more academic research is needed, existing studies reveal that non-formal settings and projects do have an impact on inclusion and equality in formal settings. Consequently, non-formal education may become a field of intervention, despite being so far seldom explored by policy makers. National-level policy documents often mention formal education exclusively, or treat non-formal education as a separate field from education. Meanwhile, non-formal education often acts as a complementary form of education, especially with regard to nurturing talent, mitigating inequalities or providing extended education (e.g., in LT, ES, CH). Notable exceptions exist, and indicate change: in Finland, informal and non-formal education are discussed in the context of formal education, while Germany has attempted to create interlocking systems of formal, non-formal and informal education (‘local educational landscapes’). Importantly, despite academic findings, there is little recognition that the same forms of educational inequalities seen in formal education may also be apparent in non-formal and informal settings (WP2).

Political and economic environments

Political and economic agendas have a profound effect on the shaping of education policy. In countries such as Norway and Finland, education is founded on values of democracy, respect for human rights and the recognition of social diversity, echoing the country’s culture and political values. Conversely, Hungary’s illiberal turn has undermined inclusiveness in education, and scientific evidence has been replaced by moral (conservative) and political justifications in educational policy discourse. In Luxembourg, the national discourse has seen a recent surge in emphasis on the importance of the multilingual character of the education system (German, French and Luxembourgish), despite international and national reports detailing the association between multilingualism and educational inequalities in the country. Spain represents another case, in which each change of government has been followed by a major reform of schools, indicating that education policy has closely followed political preferences at a given time.

Likewise, the economic context is also an important factor in formulating educational policy. For instance, with scarce natural resources, Finland considers investment in the education (human resources) of its population as critical to the country's prosperity. However, in Finland, as in nearly all countries, wider tensions exist between the capitalist labour market and the egalitarian ideals of inclusion and diversity. A neoliberal economic approach may contribute towards a sole focus in education policy on ensuring a smooth school-work transition and employability (e.g., in DE, FI, HU, NO). Importantly, this neoliberal perspective has direct consequences for the way educational inequalities are conceptualised and mitigated, in some cases reducing strategies to meritocratic approaches – for example, by alleviating educational inequalities through scholarships. Another indicator is whether a country prioritises a knowledge-based economy or work-based economy.

Education policy is embedded in the political and economic landscape of a country, which contributes to distinctions in terms of the goals that policy makers consider to be key to

the education of students. Such goals include the comprehensive development and nurturing of youth, the preparation of students for their future educational path, well-being, personal growth, civic and democratic education, or successful entry into the labour market. An interrelated divergence can be seen between Member States in terms of the content of education, with countries such as Hungary moving towards patriotic and nationalist education that focuses on conservative values, while other countries endorse multiculturalism and diversity, stressing the apolitical nature of education.

Segregation and integration

In every country, education policy discourse faces the question of segregation or separate education for certain groups, with debate over when (and whether) certain groups should be educated separately, and when inclusive education is constructive. In Ireland, single-sex schools have a deeply rooted historical tradition, and remain an important part of the Irish educational landscape, particularly at secondary level. In terms of students with disabilities, there are ongoing debates in almost all countries as to whether students with special needs ought to be educated in special classes and schools, or should be included in inclusive settings that are accepting of diversity. In these policy debates, special schools and classes are contrastingly characterised on the one hand as maintaining ‘peer-group’ and ‘safe’ places for children and young people with disabilities, and on the other hand, as inherently antithetical to inclusive education.

In many countries, students with migration backgrounds are immediately seen as disadvantaged, turning schools into sites of integration (e.g., DE, CH). Countries with significant numbers of linguistic minorities (e.g., LT, LU) face the question of whether education is a tool for integration or assimilation (and hence should be delivered in the national language), or whether minority students must have the right to equal education in their own mother tongue. Which languages are selected as the main medium of education is thus a contentious issue in several countries. These issues raise the question of whether, in order to achieve educational equality, one must prioritise inclusion and non-discrimination or the fight against inequalities; however, they omit an important academic finding that education systems also reproduce existing social inequalities, leading to a vicious cycle rather than fully mitigating existing inequalities.

3 Policy measures

Key messages

The EU has set equitable education as a clear goal. Testament to this are the two strategic framework agreements for European cooperation in education and training (ET2010 and ET2020), which cover inclusive education defined as “including the increasing diversity of learners”, together with the promotion of equality, non-discrimination and the civic competences, among their six priority goals.⁸

Achieving this target has proved increasingly challenging, especially in the context of fast-changing demographics, advances in technology, environmental and social responsibilities, the pandemic and shifting political and economic trends, both across the continent and around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the need to bridge digital divides to ensure equitable access to and uptake of education. In addition, education systems are

⁸ ‘EU cooperation in education and training (ET 2020).’ Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Aef0016>

also currently grappling with political, cultural, social, economic and technological challenges. Key policy discussions should, therefore, focus on social cohesion and active citizenship, creativity and innovation, well-being and sustainability, as well as inclusive education.

Indicative of these focuses is the Erasmus+ programme for 2021-2027, which emphasises social inclusion, intercultural understanding, the promotion of young people's participation in democratic life, the resilience of education and training systems, as well as green and digital transitions. In addition, the programme also promotes professional development opportunities for teachers and supports their digital competencies. Similar programmes are needed in the future.

3.1 European policy context

From a historical perspective, European policy in the area of education has focused on close cooperation between the Member States to ensure high-quality, inclusive education for all European citizens. To this end, the strategic cooperation frameworks 'Education and Training 2010' (ET2010)⁹ and 'Education and Training 2020' (ET2020)¹⁰ set out common goals in the field of education, and pursued the objective of ensuring equity in education. More specifically, these frameworks set out to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems, as well as facilitating access to education and training. To facilitate access, priority has been given to lifelong learning, improvements in the efficiency of education, the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, as well as creativity and innovation.

The European Commission's priorities for 2019-2024 – namely, the green transition, digital transition, people-centred and inclusive economic growth, the more pronounced role of the EU in the global arena, the promotion of the European way of life, EU core values and European democracy¹¹ – are increasingly reflected in contemporary European education policy.

The European Commission's Strategic Plan 2020-2024 for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture,¹² which guides the current activities of DG EAC and education policy in the EU in general, highlights the ability of high-quality education to empower European citizens and help them develop greater resilience to crises and adaptability towards the rapidly changing world. Hence, the Strategic Plan emphasises the need to ensure that no one is left behind and that everyone should have access to quality education (as per UN Sustainable Development Goal 4). To achieve this, coordination in education policy and adherence within societies to democratic values are especially important.

Consequently, the post-2020 Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and Beyond (2021-2030) reinforces the previously set targets, demonstrating continued commitment to inclusivity:

Education and training have a vital role to play (...) at a time when it is imperative that its society and economy become more cohesive, inclusive, digital, sustainable, green

⁹ 'Education & Training 2010. The success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms – Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe.' Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52004XG0430%2801%29>

¹⁰ 'Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020').' Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528(01)&from=EN)

¹¹ '6 Commission priorities for 2019-24.' Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024_en

¹² 'Strategic Plan 2020-2024.' Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/eac_sp_2020_2024_en.pdf

*and resilient, and for citizens to find personal fulfilment and well-being, to be prepared to adapt and perform in a changing labour market and to engage in active and responsible citizenship.*¹³

In other words, **the strategic framework envisions inclusive high-quality education systems that promote learning mobility, foster diversity, and promote cooperation in Europe and beyond.**¹⁴

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has constituted one of the most significant challenges to inclusive and accessible education in Europe and worldwide. As a response, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027¹⁵ was adopted to help ensure that Europe's educational systems are adequately prepared for the digital age. The Digital Education Action Plan has two priorities: fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem, and enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation of education. The first strategic objective highlights the importance of inclusivity in high-quality digital education and the accessibility of user-friendly and secure digital content, while the second objective focuses on empowering people of all ages through digital skills to increase their resilience and participation in democratic life. Hence, building on and expanding the priorities of the Action Plan 2018-2020,¹⁶ the current Digital Education Action Plan aims to comprehensively improve digital literacy skills at all levels of education.

The overview of current EU-level education policies shows a strong commitment to the social dimension of education and increasing focus on equity in education systems, targeting educational inequalities, including those aggravated by the recent crises and ongoing societal changes. In addition, education policies explicitly focus on ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital and green transitions, with attention being paid to the most vulnerable learners.

3.2 Pioneering national policies

Some notable country examples demonstrate various aspects of pioneering initiatives to mitigate educational inequalities (see boxes below). The Swiss case demonstrates the importance of academic knowledge in informing policy making, and the ways in which schools can perform the functions of both education and integration simultaneously. The example of Luxembourg reveals how a life-course approach can be included in policy formulation with the objective of reducing inequalities across different levels of education. The Spanish case provides a strong illustration of the critical role that non-state actors play in providing educational opportunities to vulnerable learners, while being attentive to intersectional inequalities and a life-course approach. This example reveals the importance of EU level policies in guiding national policy making.

¹³ Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) 2021/C 66/01, OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1–21. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01)&from=EN)

¹⁴ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01)&from=EN)

¹⁵ European Commission (2020). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Digital Education Action Plan 20201-2027 Resetting education and training for the digital age*. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0624&from=EN>

¹⁶ European Commission (2018). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee on the Region on the Digital Education Action Plan*. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0022&from=EN>

Case Study 1: Switzerland

Integration efforts not only target individual students, but also schools that serve a disadvantaged student intake. One notable and widely recognised policy in this regard is the programme QUIIMS (*Qualität in multikulturellen Schulen, Quality in multicultural schools*) in the Swiss canton of Zürich. This programme began as a pilot project in 1996; since 2006, it has been part of the Elementary School Act (Art. 26 & 62 VSG). QUIIMS was initiated on the basis of scientific findings and official statistics suggesting that students with a disadvantaged background (e.g. a foreign language, low socio-economic status, immigration background) face a situation of particular disadvantage when they attend a school with large numbers of students that share a similarly disadvantaged background. To mitigate the negative effects of this, elementary and lower secondary schools with at least 40% of students speaking a foreign language at home receive additional funding and teacher training, and are eligible for adaptations to the school curriculum.¹

Source: Switzerland country report (WP3) and Becker, R. and Schoch, J. (2018). *Soziale Selektivität - Empfehlungen des Schweizerischen Wissenschaftsrates SWR [Social selectivity - Recommendations of the Swiss Science Council SWR]*, p. 62. Bern: Schweizerischer Wissenschaftsrat, Politische Analyse No. 3.

Case Study 2: Luxembourg

A 2009 reform in Luxembourg provided for additional lessons for children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds. Each commune was given the responsibility of providing extra-curricular support lessons based on the socio-economic index, size of class, and the needs of students at primary level. Likewise, a Youth Guarantee (2014) was implemented to provide youth at secondary level and beyond (16-24) with individual tailored programmes to facilitate their integration into the labour market. In addition, the provision of free transport for all students, financial aid to attend tertiary education, a voucher system at ECCE level, free books and discount vouchers for buying school material, are all witness to a holistic life-course approach to policy formulation. The overall aim of educational policies has been in line with two main goals (out of 6) in the Luxembourg 2030 Agenda¹:

- a) *Ensure social inclusion and education for all in order to enable a very large section of the population to participate in society;*
- b) *Diversify economy in order to avoid the negative effects of a major shock in one sector*

Source: Luxembourg country report (WP3) and Luxembourg 2030 Agenda (<https://www.tradeandinvest.lu/news/2030-agenda-sustainable-development/>)

Case Study 3: Spain

Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad [‘Second Chance Schools’] is a network of special schools managed by non-profit entities (certified by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training), aimed at increasing the training and employability of young people between 16 and 29 years of age. The initiative was based on the principles contained in the White Paper on education and training, adopted by the European Commission in 1995. Second Chance Schools focus on formal education and provide schooling to unemployed young people who have dropped out of the education system at an early age, most of them during compulsory secondary school. The pedagogical model for these schools is based on individualised attention to students and on a flexible and vocational school offer. The schools are characterised by offering longer itineraries than in the regular system, as well as addressing the needs of students in a comprehensive manner (beyond academics) and offering company work placements of a longer duration than those in standard vocational training. Transitions between stages are central to the initiative, with many courses explicitly preparing students for further studies (especially formal vocational training).

Source: Spain country report (WP3) and Tarabini, A. (2018). Las escuelas de nuevas oportunidades como espacios de dignificación de los jóvenes [Schools of new opportunities as spaces for the dignification of young people]. Ámbitos de Psicopedagogía y Orientación, 48, 52-65.

4 Policy considerations

Policy makers should continuously remain **attentive to changing forms of vulnerabilities among students, and be responsive to their needs through the formulation of policies**. Analysis of educational policy documents reveals an interplay between engrained values of historical and cultural significance and the need to adapt (and respond to) societal transformations. While education policy reflects historical and cultural legacies such as multiculturalism or egalitarianism, a clear need exists to revise education policies to meet new challenges such as increasing diversity in society due to intensified mobility between countries, as well as socio-economic disparities, gender inequalities and other dynamics.

For example, in the policy discourse in Spain, one can discern a transformation in the meaning of vulnerability, moving from pedagogical considerations and a lack of resources, to a more diverse understanding that incorporates other factors such as household structure, the dynamics of cultural estrangement, and ethnic or migrant backgrounds. Policy documents in many countries are also now recognising that educational achievement, or lack thereof, is contextualised in students’ family backgrounds. In such cases, policies have been extended to parents and the households in which vulnerable students live.

International agreements, as well as comparative and national assessments, which act as external triggers, are critical in revealing gaps in access and equality in education, and should be carried out regularly. The power of external triggers in reshaping education policy should not be underestimated. In all of the countries analysed, international initiatives and discourses regarding equitable education played a significant role in transforming the focus of education policy. This effect is most remarkable in countries with a strong history of segregation (e.g., DE) and in the case of former socialist countries (LT, and HU until 2010), which have demonstrated a decisive turn away from a state segregationist, deficit-focused approach towards inclusive education. In certain countries concern over comparisons of national results from international large-scale student assessment studies (e.g. Germany and Norway’s ‘PISA shock’ since 2000) have sparked alarm over high levels of inequality, spurring policy debates and encouraging policy action. In Spain, such assessments contributed

to a turn away from ‘education equity’ as a guiding value of education policy, to a focus on ‘excellence and competence’.

Finally, education policy should be mindful of **non-state actors, which have become increasingly important players in educational provision, (re)setting educational agendas, and thus defining educational inequalities and ways to mitigate them.** Despite the state-centric language of policy documents, in most countries non-state actors – including religious groups, private foundations, or non-profit associations – are demonstrating their commitment to providing education and, in many instances, mitigating educational inequalities in cooperation with schools. With the educational landscape becoming increasingly open to various non-state actors, the role of the state as the ‘corrector of educational inequalities’ has come under scrutiny.

Overall, the concept of educational inequalities has evolved over time and its meaning has changed. Various factors have triggered this evolution, including cultural and historical developments, international agreements and external shocks (e.g., league tables of PISA results). With this evolution has come a growing awareness of the diverse challenges students face in accessing education. Increasing appeals to mitigate various types of vulnerability in education policy documents highlight numerous remaining deficiencies with regard to which groups are targeted, as well as whether such policies are actually enforced. The implementation of policies aimed at inclusivity and wider access to education could be greatly assisted by various non-state actors that provide key services and support to vulnerable students; however, at present there is little or no coordination and harmonisation of such efforts.

5 Summary of findings

In line with EU priorities, all European states have universally assumed responsibility in guaranteeing equitable access to education, albeit with significant differences in how education policy is used to achieve that goal, how educational inequality is defined, and who the target groups ought to be. In each of the countries under investigation, educational policy formulations outlined a universal right to education framed in terms of state obligations. Indeed, the guarantee of ‘equalised education’ (e.g. FI) and ‘inclusive education’ (e.g. IE) have become profound guiding principles in several national education acts. However, the case of Hungary demonstrates that such ideas may be included in strategic documents in order to satisfy international audiences, yet in practice policies are largely unresponsive to the goals of equity in access to education and inclusivity.

Analysis also shows that in many European countries, notable progress has been made in improving access to education. Over time, new strategies have been adopted, often resulting in changes in the discourses surrounding educational inequality. Educational inequality must be seen as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, manifesting in various forms, emerging at different points throughout the educational trajectory, and driven by multiple factors (WP2). Consequently, pioneering policy initiatives tend to take students’ diverse needs and circumstances into consideration in designing approaches to mitigate inequalities in the most comprehensive manner, while also fostering collaboration across fields and levels and between various actors.

As a result, political willingness to incorporate the accumulated scientific evidence into policy making should be encouraged in order to achieve more informed, efficient and equitable policy making. Meanwhile, non-state players and non-formal educational practices should be recognised within education policy as increasingly important players in the educational landscape, and which could become potential tools to mitigate educational inequalities. Lastly, it is important to recognise that while each educational policy context is

shaped decisively by historical, cultural, political and economic contexts, EU-level policies and discourse also play a major role in (re)shaping the development of education policy.