

INTERSECTING PATHWAYS: Inclusive Education for Active Citizenship

**SOLIDAR FOUNDATION
POSITION PAPER**



Co-funded by
the European Union

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1. Introduction

Education takes central stage in the development of a truly inclusive and just society. In various countries, ongoing social and economic disparities and exclusion can result in disengagement, social fragmentation, and potential conflicts. Additionally, limited access to quality education is frequently linked to societal inequalities ([UNESCO, 2012](#)).

The main strategic framework for education policies at the EU level, the EEA or [European Education Area](#) addressed this by identifying the improvement of the quality and equity in Education and Training as one of its five foci. The European Commission's progress report on the EEA, and the accompanying Education and Training Monitors, put further emphasis on the urgency of this dimension of education policies by demonstrating that Member

States need to step up their focus on equity and inclusion in education and training, as major challenges continue to exist. SOLIDAR Foundation takes the momentum that inclusive education is experiencing, as an opportunity to reiterate its position towards the topic.

In an ever-growing multicultural and diverse Europe and in the wider context of increasing complexity at the global level, inclusion becomes a cornerstone of a just and democratic society. Considering the crucial role education plays in teaching fundamental values and promoting social inclusion to strengthen social cohesion and democratic participation ([European Commission, 2022](#)) inclusive education becomes paramount in safeguarding social justice as well as encouraging active democratic participation.

Therefore, SOLIDAR Foundation affirms the following:

- Learners must be put at the centre; thus, it is essential to adapt the processes to each learner's needs.
- The whole community approach must be promoted and adopted, enabling learners, teachers, families and communities to participate in school-decision-making processes and educational activities in and outside the classroom.
- For efficient inclusive education, diverse teaching and training bodies must be ensured, to enable a universal approach and for inclusion to be understood and adopted at large.
- Acknowledge the long-term societal benefits stemming from diverse environments by unlearning prejudice and embracing diversity and inclusion. Diversity should be viewed as an asset to society.

→ Inclusive education must be recognised and practiced in all types of education, including non-formal and informal learning, and in a lifelong and lifewide approach.

→ Inclusive education must be a political priority, closely monitored and followed up by effective implementation and supported by adequate funding.

This position paper will explore the topic of inclusive education as a fundamental part of a democratic society. It does so by touching on the conceptualisation of inclusive education and the challenges it faces, by examining key policies related to inclusion and inclusive education at the EU level in order to gain a clearer understanding of the European Union's approach to inclusive education, and to identify areas where SOLIDAR Foundation believes improvements could be made, and finally, by showing what SOLIDAR's vision of inclusive education looks like in practice.



2. Conceptualisation and Challenges of Inclusive Education

Conceptualisation

In UNESCO's Guidelines for inclusion, **inclusive education** is defined as *“a process of addressing and responding to the **diversity of needs** of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and **reducing exclusion** within and from education. [...] Inclusion is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the **diversity of learners**. It aims towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel comfortable with **diversity** and to see it as a challenge and **enrichment of the learning environment**, rather than a problem”* (UNESCO, 2005:13). Its objective is to give each learner the best education that society can provide according to their own goals and capabilities, by removing barriers that prevent their presence, participation and achievement.

In this definition the concept of **diversity** plays a central role. Diversity is considered as relating to differences in people's characteristics, such as sex, gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion and mental and physical abilities (UNESCO,

2017). More specifically, in the field of inclusive education, diversity is about understanding each other and by doing so surpasses the more limited notion of tolerance (European Commission, 2018:14).

Exclusion in education occurs for a variety of reasons and takes different forms. It can occur due to systemic discrimination based on one or more characteristics mentioned in the diversity section above, but it also refers to inequalities related to access, participation, and learning processes and outcomes. Exclusion within education can both result from and contribute to social exclusion, yet education also has the potential to reduce societal inequalities and exclusion.

Challenges of Inclusive Education

The essential role of education in fostering active and participatory roles in both immediate and broader social contexts is often overlooked. Without such participation, addressing emerging social demands and overcoming contemporary challenges posed by unstable political, social, and economic conditions become impossible. Learners need to be included in educational spaces and subsequently in both local and global communities. This community membership is a crucial aspect of social engagement and citizenship, where an 'active or global citizen' is recognised as a member of the broader community. Hence the importance of

promoting inclusion in education, to ensure that all learners have the same opportunities to actively participate in their society. To address the challenges of inclusive education, we must understand the full scope of the situation. This multi-faceted issue is a systemic problem that is not just confined to what happens in the classroom but requires systemic solutions.

The politics of educational exclusion are embedded in the efforts to **homogenise the educational environments** (Tarabini et al., 2017), creating then a standard that divides learners into 'good' and 'bad', according to their academical outcomes and behaviour, pressuring them into fitting into a specific model. Policies or lack of them, such as lack of mechanisms to prevent school leaving or re-engage those who left, the absence of adequate teacher training and support, the failure to implement policies to combat school segregation, and the market-driven regulation of schooling have been identified as contributing factors to educational exclusion (Ibid).

While national and regional regulations frame school practices, schools have a degree of autonomy in implementing these policies. The organisation of students, curriculum choices, and pedagogical and evaluation methods are crucial in identifying processes of educational exclusion or inclusion. Moreover, the ability of schools to adapt to their local context and understand the external challenges faced by students is essential for comprehending their educational paths. In the classroom, teachers' biases, labels, and low expectations can visibly exclude students. By disregarding their needs or blaming them for poor behaviour or grades, teachers create an exclusive environment.

However, teachers and trainers often face complex situations, such as high student-to-classroom ratios or high concentration of students with severe socioeconomic challenges. They typically receive minimal support or even recognition for their efforts; they can be at instances understaffed, underpaid, demotivated and lack the training and resources to address the social and emotional aspects of learning beyond the cognitive dimension. It is therefore important to invest in teachers' continuous professional development and to provide them with professional support.

At individual level, exclusion can be linked with the personal characteristics of the learner and its interaction with the environment. Minimal material conditions are needed for educational practices to be successful, which concern the socio-economic level of the learner, but many other factors also come into play, such as relationships with the environment (family, friends, teachers, community) and the learner's subjective disposition towards learning (Bonal and Tarabini, 2014). Thus, social class is often combined with other factors such as ethnicity, which can create a set of low expectations that make the learners feel alienated from school, rejected by a system that focuses on normalisation and integration. There are other factors, such as migrant status, that can lead to linguistic, curricular, social and cultural barriers in the process in adapting to the new environment. Gender expectations include stereotypes that can lead to exclusion from educational settings or subjects, such as the expectations of boys being more disruptive or girls having lower grades in science (Stentiford et al., 2024). Curricula not addressing aspects of sexual or gender identity or not building a safe space can exclude many learners (IGLYO, OBESSU, 2014), while schools not being prepared to




assist students with disabilities might have the same result.

As well as the causes, exclusion can take many forms. While basic material conditions are necessary for accessing education, exclusion also includes being deprived of meaningful learning experiences due to unmet learning needs, discrimination, or bullying ([UNESCO, 2012](#)). It can also occur when non-formal learning is not recognised for entry into formal education, or when a learner's education is undervalued, such as attending a school with low social status.

Exclusion from education leads to several adverse consequences for learners, impacting their academic performance and potentially their prospects. It also can be harming to their physical and mental health, well-being and self-esteem. Inclusion, on the other hand, can create a stronger sense of belonging which positively affect the learner's relationships with others, in the classroom, in the school,

and in the broader community context in and outside their learning environments. School belongingness is a strong predictor of youth mental health state and well-being ([Arslan, 2019](#)). Research amply demonstrates that those included in school are more motivated, engaged and committed to their learning journey (Osterman, 2000), resulting in an improvement in academic achievement, social and emotional development, self-esteem and peer acceptance (UNESCO, 2020). Creating a positive classroom environment that promotes inclusion, motivation, collaboration, safety, belonging, supportive relationships, and personalised learning through a holistic, school-wide approach focused on student well-being is essential ([European Commission, 2021](#)).

At the collective level, research has found that inclusive education, when implemented successfully, can ensure the provision of quality education, improve learners' outcomes, and promote long-term social inclusion ([Kefallinou](#)



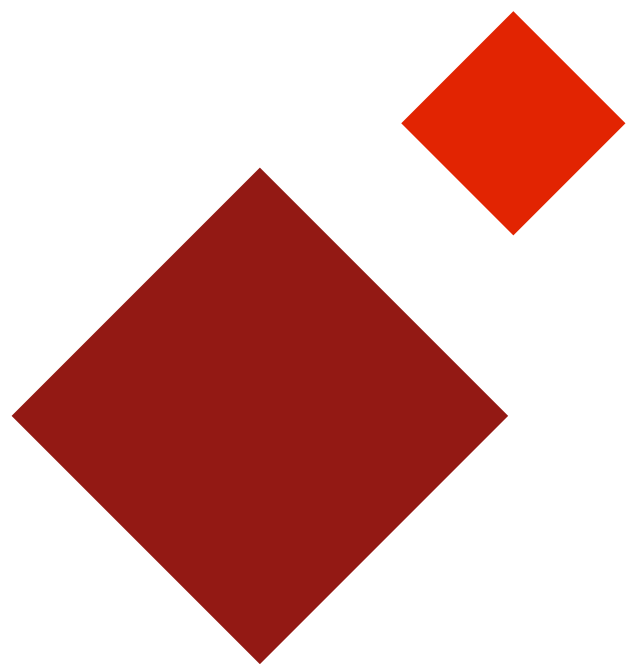
[et al., 2020](#)). It is also known that inclusive education policies facilitate further education, employment opportunities and economic and social development. Furthermore, we often find arguments in favour of inclusion from a cost-effective perspective. Although it has been proven that inclusive education brings economic gains ([Mezzanotte, 2022](#)), we must go beyond this economic-driven perspective and keep the right to education at the core: inclusive education is essential for creating fair and inclusive societies, reflecting core values of social justice. It helps build communities where diversity is celebrated and plays a crucial role in developing education systems in democracies that are based on fairness and equity.

However, the current discourse on participation in education is focused on equipping students with skills for the labour market, especially disadvantaged groups, to address labour shortages. This perspective identifies the education sector as primarily responsible for preparing these groups for labour market inclusion. This narrow view overlooks the broader significance of education. Beyond just preparing individuals for employment, education enhances civic participation and strengthens social cohesion: civic engagement can only be fully experienced and appreciated if individuals have built up enough civic competences through education ([Becchetti et al., 2016](#)).

A key aspect of fostering a sense of belonging and community is valuing learners' voices and perspectives. When learners are involved in decision-making processes — such as through classroom discussions, student councils, or consultations—they gain a stronger sense of connectedness and ownership in their educational environment, ([European Commission, 2015](#)) under the guidance of trained teachers. Empowering

learners with agency enhances their critical thinking, conflict resolution, and motivation, enabling them to lead fulfilling, socially active lives. This fosters genuine engagement in communities and society, ensuring their learning extends beyond school performance and market participation to truly meet their needs and interests ([Lifelong Learning Platform, 2023](#)).

Creating a sense of community is not only vital for the success and inclusion of all, but is also a precedent for civic participation: if learners participate in their own educational journey, in collaboration with other stakeholders and from a rights-based approach, they will be more likely to apply what they have learned in their educational environment to their life as citizens, putting into practice the skills that will make learners well-rounded, informed and active in their society. Learners, learning providers, staff, educational leaders, families, social services, communities, civil society and institutions need spaces of dialogue and shared values to find ways to make the learning environments a better place for all with a focus on inclusion, belonging, and connectedness ([Carrington et al., 2023](#)).



3. An enabling policy landscape: Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning

This section takes a look at some key policies around inclusion and inclusive education at the EU level to better understand how the European Union approaches inclusive education and where SOLIDAR Foundation believes it could do better. Below is a collection of relevant and recent policies aimed at making EU education systems more inclusive.

Inclusive education is at the EU's core as the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union indicates in Articles 8 and 10 that the activities in the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities and combat discrimination, which are in line with the aims of inclusive education ([European Union, 2010](#)). Complementarily, the European Pillar of Social Rights frames Inclusive education, training and lifelong learning as the first guiding principle to building a Social Europe, focused on people and people's wellbeing. In this sense, it underscores that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society ([European Commission, 2021](#)). These policies illustrate that the EU recognises

the pivotal role inclusive education plays in fostering more just societies and its role in enabling people to actively participate in it.

3.1. Inclusive Education in the European Education Area

Education policy at the EU level is currently driven by the strategy outlined in the European Education Area (EEA). The EEA is a vision shared by the Member States and endorsed in 2017, which was followed up by the [European Commission Communication 2020 on achieving the EEA by 2025](#). To this end, one dimension of the Area consists of *Inclusion and gender equality*, aiming to decouple educational attainment from social, economic and cultural status as well as having in general an inclusive approach to and in education. The policy concretised in 2021 with a Council Resolution, which not only creates two cycles for achieving the EEA, 2021-2025 and 2026-2030, but also **acknowledges education and training's vital role in shaping the European society to become more inclusive and cohesive** and for people's personal fulfilment and wellbeing

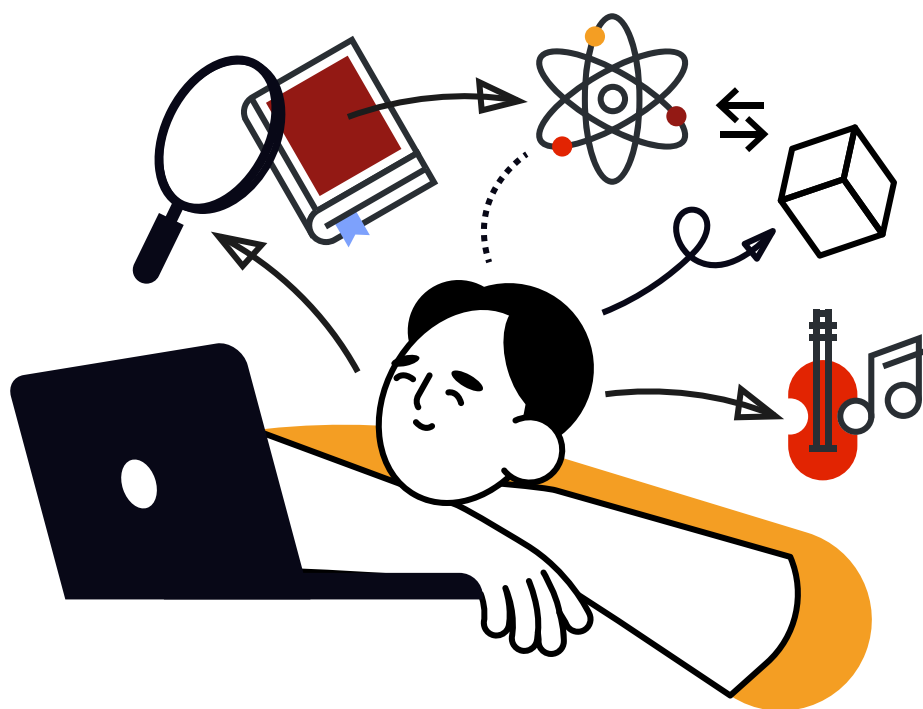
conducive to **societal engagement and active citizenship**. The Council Resolution also establishes strategic priorities to guide the development of EEA in the 2021-2030 framework. The first one consists of “improving quality, equity and inclusion and success for all in education and training”. This is advanced as a solution to the challenge of early leave from education, mainly among young people and adults from disadvantaged socio-economic communities. Therefore, ensuring quality and inclusive education for all comes as a solution to reduce social, economic and cultural disparities.

The Resolution puts forward another asset of inclusive education, namely that it entails developing gender sensitivity in the learning process as it is challenging and dissolving gender stereotypes. This focus on gender is part of a broader, intersectional approach to inclusive education, which is crucial for addressing all facets of inequality and discrimination effectively (Council of the EU, 2021). Supporting this approach, the Eurydice Report ***Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe*** underscores the

necessity of a holistic, intersectional perspective in educational strategies to ensure comprehensive sensitivity to diversity and a sustained effort in fighting prejudice.

Pathways to School Success

A series of policies have been adopted to ensure the realisation of EEA’s strategic priorities. One of them is the Pathways to School Success, concretised in **a Council Recommendation**. The Recommendation is centred on school education and aims to tackle the challenge of schools failing to provide basic education to everyone, which is indicated by low PISA scores and the high number of early school leavers. Essentially, the Recommendation takes into consideration and addresses the fact that socio-economic and cultural background are the strongest determinants of pupils’ education. The position taken in this paper is that diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds are enriching in a learning setting in which diversity is embraced as a core value, rather than having a negative connotation for learning outcomes. The Recommendation also states the importance of emotional, social and



physical wellbeing to succeed in education and life, and calls for a broader, more inclusive and systemic approach to school success. This approach is key for ensuring the development of necessary competences to thrive in education and life, leading to meaningful experiences, engagement, wider participation in the community and a transition to stable adulthood and active citizenship.

Naturally, SOLIDAR Foundation welcomes this approach that highlights the need for and benefits of inclusive education in formal learning settings. However, while the Pathways for School Success calls for a whole-school approach, SOLIDAR calls for a whole-community approach that enables an all-embracing approach, benefiting society at large. This approach should not be restricted to formal education, but also be present in non-formal and informal education. They represent particularly relevant spaces of inclusion that embrace a wider set of actors, such as local community actors, civil society organisations, etc. Non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) often complement what formal education fails to achieve, notably among underserved communities. For instance, the growing trend of early school leaving is equated with the insufficiency of formal education to address the needs of the learners that are at risk of social exclusion and therefore become disincentivised to continue pursuing formal education. In this regard, non-formal education practices create a space for inclusive learning and engage people from all backgrounds, offering a chance to engage in particular to those coming from marginalised communities. This paper encourages the exchange of practices and the cooperation between formal and NFIL opportunities for all to achieve the best results in inclusive education. Hence, SOLIDAR Foundation considers that **inclusive education must be recognised and practiced in all types**

of education, including non-formal and informal learning and in a lifelong and life wide approach.

Finally, while the Recommendation is centred around data on academic achievement, SOLIDAR Foundation would like to see the wellbeing of learners being an indicator for success, and the scope of the report to be extended to pupils and children that, for any reason, are not taking part in formal education.

The Pathways to School Success is generally supported by the EU network of NGOs active in Education and Training, the **Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL)**. However, the organisation condemns the policy for its failure to acknowledge the challenges posed by the decreased investment in education and training in the past decade. On this point, SOLIDAR Foundation joins the LLLP in a common statement that calls for increased public investment, which is connected to securing equity for all learners. Adequate funding is also paramount for ensuring the support and wellbeing of teachers, as diversity among them must be complemented by support in daily challenges, such as overwork and stress which stem from insufficient support, as well as by efforts to ensure the attractiveness of the profession. Therefore, educational institutions must be adequately staffed and supported, while it must be ensured that the support is aligned with the needs of the learners.

In order to implement inclusive education approaches, it is essential to allocate resources, including time, funding, training for learning providers, resources to test new teaching methods that adapt to the needs of the learner, and spaces for communication between actors. It is imperative that **inclusion in education becomes a political priority**, and that the necessary resources and

stakeholder input are provided. This is particularly crucial for the most disadvantaged learning environments, which often have the fewest resources but the greatest need for inclusive education.

However, there can be no systematic change without a whole-of-government approach, both across sectors and across different territorial levels to ensure coherence and cohesion. Broadening perspectives, priorities beyond academic success or entry into the labour market, such as well-being, health or active participation, are beginning to be considered as priorities ([Lifelong Learning Platform, 2023](#)). This inclusive, democratic governance should also actively engage all institution stakeholders and representatives of the local community to work towards common goals ([Council of Europe, 2019](#)), particularly considering the role of the third sector in filling gaps in education and reaching out to groups at risk of exclusion, many times through non-formal education ([SOLIDAR Foundation, 2023](#)).

Other Strategies

The Policy Framework at the EU level on the matter of inclusive education also comprises Council Recommendation 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching, as well as the [Council Recommendation 2021 on blended learning approaches](#), which encourages flexible education systems. Furthermore, in 2020 and 2021, the European Commission adopted several EU equality strategies: [the 2020-2025 EU gender equality strategy](#), [the 2020-2025 EU anti-racism action plan](#) and the [2021-2027 action plan on integration and inclusion](#). Inclusive education is pinpointed as a priority dimension in these strategic documents as *“education and training is the foundation for successful participation in society and one*

of the most powerful tools for building more inclusive societies”.

SOLIDAR Foundation welcomes this acknowledgement at the institutional level through recommendations and policy initiatives but encourages more guidance and actions to effectively implement them. These should include constant assessment of the existing policies, to enable analysis of their effectiveness and find ways to improve them and their implementation.



Diversity and inclusion are topics of relevance at the EU level, and their promotion and status have been reviewed in the [Eurydice Report: Promoting diversity and inclusion in schools in Europe \(2023\)](#). The report highlights **equality as a core value of the EU** and deconstructs its meaning in two categories: legal and non-legal. While legally, equality means that all people should be treated the same on the basis of equality of opportunity, non-legally it implies treating people fairly, meaning the provision of equitable opportunities and access for the achievement of fair outcomes. For example, in schools, learners with specific needs would be offered the specific support they need to achieve the outcomes that everyone would (Eurydice, 2023).

This categorisation is relevant to SOLIDAR as it does not only advocate for the equality of opportunity, but rather acknowledges diversity and the importance of addressing needs as they exist, and that tackling inequity plays a central role in advancing inclusion. Indeed, the report underscores the interconnectedness between diversity and inclusion on one side, and inequity and discrimination on the other, as the latter are the main hurdles for the enabling of the former. The paper pinpoints, through evidence, the fact that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and learners facing discrimination underachieve in school, and that underachievement is due to discrimination and lack of structural and non-structural support for inclusion, demonstrating the need of addressing these issues to promote inclusion in educational settings.



The Eurydice report further touches upon the dimension of teaching, supporting having a diverse teaching body, consisting of educators and school staff. The benefits associated with a diverse teacher workforce are represented by the provision of unique perspectives based on teacher's life experiences, cultures and background, that can enhance the learning experience. Moreover, a diverse teaching body would enable learners to identify with them, paramount for the effectiveness of

the learning process. Besides substantive representation, qualitative representation is also relevant. In this respect, the report encourages ITE (Initial Teacher Education) and CPD (Continuous Professional Development) on the dynamics of diversity and how to address issues of discrimination and disadvantage. Finally, the report reveals that there are too few programmes that promote teachers' capacity to collaborate with other teachers, professionals and families. In fact, this kind of programme would be greatly valued for the whole community approach that this paper advocates for. Therefore, teachers, learners, families and communities would be enabled to participate in school-decision-making processes and educational activities in and outside the classroom. There could also be more programmes that promote teaching on multicultural and multilingual settings, as well as on the increasing awareness of bias and stereotypes.

Acknowledging and adapting policies and practices to the diversity of learners and of their needs, along with the inclusion of the learning community in decision-making, are important steps but only a steppingstone to enable inclusion as outlined above. We should also **ensure diverse teaching and training bodies, to enable a universal approach and for inclusion to be understood and adopted at large.**

4. Inclusive education in action

What does SOLIDAR's vision of inclusive education look like in practice? Based on the SOLIDAR network's practices, six pointers were identified as critical to making education truly inclusive: (1) Learners must be put at the centre, (2) a whole community approach, (3) diverse teaching and training bodies, (4) diversity as an asset to society, (5) inclusive education must be recognised in all types of education, (6) inclusive education as a political priority. To make this more tangible, this section illustrates successful inclusive education practices which SOLIDAR and/or its member and partner organizations are part of.

4.1. Learners must be put at the centre

As mentioned in UNESCO's *Guidelines for inclusion* (see Conceptualisation), inclusive education is all about responding to the diversity of learners and how education systems and other learning environments can be transformed to do so. To make learning in formal and non-formal and informal educational settings accessible to everyone, SOLIDAR believes that **the learner must be at the centre, entailing that learners with specific needs must be offered tailored support**. Three good practices in this sense are offered by the SprINg project, the International Federation of Workers' Education (IFWEA), and the LEAD project.

SprINg (Sustainable Integration Practices) is a EU-funded project which focused on the integration of recently arrived migrants in the

context of the large-scale arrivals of refugees and other migrants since 2014. It aimed to develop a toolbox to improve the innovation, effectiveness and sustainability of the work done by Europe's integration stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. The project showcases that in the case of refugee and newly arrived learners, schools have a role to play in being safe places where learners' emotional and social well-being is fostered, as feelings of security and belonging the first and foremost enablers of learning. It is crucial to provide personalized support that addresses the unique needs of different groups and individuals; for example, refugee students may require trauma-specific mental health care, while undocumented children may encounter additional obstacles.

Another example of learner centred approach to make education more inclusive is the one of the **International Federation of Workers' Education Associations** (IFWEA) which offers equal learning opportunities while aiming and strives to leave no one behind. A great example of one of their activities is the **Online Labour Academy** which provides lifelong learning opportunities to workers educators around the world while ensuring an inclusive online learning environment with equal active participation considering language differences and varying levels of digital literacy.

Last but not least, there is the Erasmus+ funded LEAD (**LEarning Disorders no more**) project which ran from 2020 until 2022, of which SOLIDAR partner the Lifelong

Learning Platform was part of. LEAD aimed at increasing social inclusion with school education and at decreasing early school leaving by empowering students with the right competences about adaptive technologies. This was done with the aid of an innovative platform called **MY SKILLS** which is adapted to learners' needs.

4.2. The whole community approach must be promoted and adopted

Diversity needs to be practiced by the active involvement of all stakeholders of the learning community as only then – when all the different educational levels collaborate – a sustainable and comprehensive approach to inclusion can be realised. Therefore, **the whole community approach** must be promoted and adopted, enabling learners, teachers, families and communities to participate in school-decision-making processes and educational activities in and outside the classroom. The four cases below showcase how the whole community approach can be incorporated both in formal and non-formal educational settings and create inclusive learning environments.

For instance, at the centre of the Algorithm for New Ecological Approaches to Inclusion (ECO-IN) project lies the ecological approach to inclusive education (Mitchell 2016). The ecological model considers the education system as a spiral: each “circle” or “system” is crucial for the development of each person. This perspective challenges traditional definitions and categorizations by promoting a vision of inclusive education that addresses the diverse needs of students at all levels, in any setting or phase of life. Through an ecological approach and based on scientific evidence, ECO-IN promotes an active participation of teachers, school heads, policymakers, parents and families. It aspires

to improve inclusive education policies and practices from primary to lower secondary school, through the active involvement of all the main educational stakeholders – such as, teachers, school heads, educational staff (in and out school), parents and public authorities – by providing them with specific training and supporting actions to concretely act as a teamwork combatting segregation and radicalisation thus enabling more qualitative and quantitative measures to implement, monitor, and assess inclusiveness at school.

In the framework of the **Spring** project, **a webinar on the integration of newcomers in and through education** took place. One of the main takeaways of the discussion was that **for inclusion to work, everyone needs to be at the table**. Inclusive education is a co-designed journey, bringing together all the education community, within but also outside of schools. Teachers, headmasters, non-educational school staff, extracurricular activities professionals, students, parents, civil society organisations, non-formal and informal education providers, education policymakers, education researchers: all these actors need to speak and work together. An inclusive approach to education is a holistic one, looking at newcomers' lives beyond school. Moreover, in the specific case of undocumented learners, more than safe places where (undocumented) learners can access education without fearing the risk of being reported, schools can be a place where access to social or health services is provided, or actively facilitated.

The AAI (**Aulas Abiertas Interculturales**) project, coordinated by SOLIDAR member **La Liga Española de la Educación y la Cultura Popular** aims to generate spaces that raise awareness among the school community at education institutions to foster active participation in the wider society by

promoting coexistence and socialization in a framework of intercultural education.

An example of a practice taking place in a non-formal education setting is '**CEET Network - Culture, Education, Empowerment, Territory**' which is a project promoted by SOLIDAR Member **ARCI** and co-financed by the social enterprise 'Con i bambini' through the Fund for the fight against juvenile educational poverty. The project aims to enhance and implement the educational work that is carried out daily by dozens of Arci clubs in the fight against educational poverty of minors and families, within a community composed of the inhabitants of the areas involved, schools, the network of social, cultural and sports promotion associations and local institutions.



4.3. For efficient inclusive education, diverse teaching and training bodies must be ensured

The importance of diverse educational staff to ensure inclusive education cannot be underestimated. As mentioned above, the advantages of having a diverse teacher workforce include offering unique perspectives derived from teachers' life experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, which can enrich the learning experience. Additionally, a diverse teaching staff would allow learners to relate to them, which is crucial for the effectiveness of

the learning process. Besides having diverse educational staff, education institutions should also give all staff levels the opportunity to take courses on the topics of diversity and inclusion to give them a better understanding of the topic.

At the **Spring** project **webinar on the integration of newcomers in and through education**, panelist Mialy Dermish, Executive Director of **the SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education**, underlined that teachers need a sustained, self-reflected community of practice in place at their school to exchange, coach and lead on inclusion. This means that educational staff need the time to participate in workshops and trainings which are embedded in an overarching framework within education institutions.

In the **SMILE project's** frame, a set of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses were designed to train Higher Education staff on diversity and inclusion matters. The set includes an introductory short course on Diversity and Inclusion and three longer courses, one on each SMILE pillar. These courses are suitable for academic and non-academic HEI staff. The objective of the courses is to make staff more aware and knowledgeable about the barriers that some students (and maybe also some staff) face and how to help them. All the courses have been tested with real groups of HEI staff and are self-contained and ready to use.

4.4. Diversity as an asset to society: Acknowledge the long-term societal benefits stemming from diverse environments by unlearning prejudice and embracing diversity and inclusion

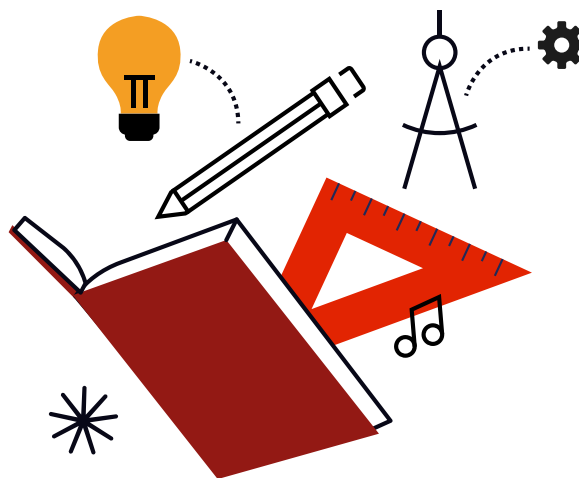
Societies are diverse, offering rich learning opportunities. However, the possibilities of

this diversity are sometimes overshadowed by economic and political concerns. Consequently, there tends to be a greater focus on the challenges that diversity may present, rather than on recognizing the immense potential it holds for personal development and societal transformation. By shifting our perspective to embrace the richness of diversity, we can unlock a world of possibilities for positive change and collective advancement.

SMILE for instance, aimed to reverse this trend. Underpinning the SMILE project is an understanding of **diversity as an asset to, rather than a burden on society**. The project champions diversity in all its forms but has focused its work on three main diversity areas: individuals with migrant backgrounds, women in leadership, and individuals with low socio-economic status. However, the results of the project can be transferred to other diversity groups and maintain their relevance across various contexts. As part of the project, a set of **principles and recommendations** have been designed aimed at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), policy makers and civil society. These fed into an **action plan** which aims to create more vibrant, diverse, and socially just societies.

The project **A Todo Color**, coordinated by SOLIDAR Foundation's member **La Liga Española de la Educación y la Cultura Popular** is another example of this approach. At the origin of the project lies La Liga's conviction that **it is through inclusion that diversity becomes a true asset for society**. La Liga is dedicated to ensuring the universal right to education in Spain. Their team works outside and within schools to train staff on respecting diversity and promoting inclusion for individuals with various backgrounds and abilities. La Liga's role is also to teach how to deal with differences, with a tailor-made approach, heeding specific needs of individual

learners or groups is geared at including newcomers in Spanish society and combatting racist hate speech towards migrants.



4.5. Inclusive education must be recognised in all types of education, including non-formal, informal learning and in a lifelong and lifewide approach.

Inclusion is a cornerstone principle of education. Only when this importance is recognised in all types of education, including non-formal and informal learning, inclusive education practices, and approached with a lifelong and lifewide approach inclusive education practices will be the most successful. The ALL IN project **ALL IN project (Adult Education and Inclusion: New cooperative approaches)**, coordinated by **Akademie Klausenhof**, illustrates how it is possible to pave the way for fostering inclusive non-formal education systems by focusing on the inclusion of adult learners with disabilities. The project did so by analysing and transferring models of good practice in line with the objectives of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and by having cooperation between individuals with disabilities, relevant institutions and networks, and project partners as central to the project.

ALL IN underlines the significant societal and personal implications of including this group of learners, as equal education opportunities for people with disabilities offers them the chance to strengthen their capabilities, enhance their quality of life and overall achieve personal growth, while at a societal level, such an inclusive education system fosters a more inclusive and tolerant society.

DIVERSITY (Including Migrants through Organisational Development and Programme Planning in Adult Education), coordinated by **Niedersächsischer Bund für freie Erwachsenenbildung e.V.**, is another project that strives for inclusion which encompasses not just one type of education. The project aimed to accompany the EU adult education systems in the mentality shift from focusing on migrants as distinct target groups and preparing them for integration into the society around them, towards including migrants into the providers' regular programs as an equal target group to actively and directly foster diversity and inclusion in adult education and in society. The project did this by inter alia mapping migrational diversity in adult education providers and by developing a modularised training curriculum that enables managers and planners in adult education organisations to re-focus both their organisational structures and their course programmes to recognise and include migrants as a regular target group of their educational activities.

Another great example is **SAFE Spaces for Learning (SAFE)** coordinated by **Escola Profissional Amar Terra Verde (EPATV) Portugal**. This project strived for social inclusion and change by improving and extending the supply of high-quality learning opportunities for adults, through the creation of a **comprehensive guide** for creating and maintaining safe spaces for learning, including extended research on safe space mentality in

the life systems of people, meaning family, community and international identity. SAFE connects the topic of safe space to all learning environments, thus including formal and non-formal and informal education settings.

4.6. Inclusive education must be a political priority, closely monitored and followed up by effective implementation and supported by adequate funding.

Inclusion in education must be a political priority with the necessary allocated funding. Though as mentioned above, there has been a great acknowledgement at the EU level of the importance of inclusive education for society, the implementation of policy initiatives and recommendations has been lacking. Over the years, Europe has seen a decreased investment in education and training in general. The issue of funding cannot be overlooked when developing recommendations and practices concerning inclusive education as less funding for education in general diminishes the possibilities to make our education systems more inclusive. This funding should be public and sustainable, as well as targeted.

The **Policy Recommendations and Action Plan** produced in the frame of SMILE, point to the need to promote diversity and inclusion by having policy makers at both national and EU levels to create legislation that is diversity and inclusion oriented transversally. Moreover, just like ECO-IN, SMILE also underlines the relevance of monitoring progress and needs of inclusive education policies through data collection.



5. Conclusion

Civil Society Organisations, researchers, practitioners in different learning systems: all have been sounding the alarm about the urgency of responding adequately to the increasing inability of education systems to be agencies for inclusion. Education is the first and fundamental means for disadvantaged learners to have access to equal opportunities and a means for social mobility and emancipation. If learning environments fail to be inclusive, inequalities are doomed to worsen over the course of one's life, carrying important collective consequences for social cohesion and the ability of democratic values to inform our societies.

SOLIDAR Foundation members and their partners witness these risks on a daily basis, engaging learners with vulnerable backgrounds and providing opportunities to overcome structural inequalities through learning. They do so through a variety of practices and methodologies, of which the most innovative ones are described in this position paper, to contribute to the EU's efforts to improve inclusion and equity in learning environments. The EU has made significant progress in recent years, with various policy initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive education, and it is now crucial to go beyond proposals to fully implement these policies in practice.

But how can inclusion become a reality? With this paper, we contribute to this debate by highlighting several key components that are essential to achieving this goal, emphasising the importance of accessibility, equity, and support for diverse learning needs, and how this diversity should be seen as an enrichment of learning environments and society. These

components can be fostered in different ways depending on the context in which they are implemented, but one enabling element for all of them to be impactful is a governance that is as inclusive as the result that they pursue. The practices and policy recommendations included in this position paper show that when a diversity of stakeholders have a say from the design to the implementation and monitoring of initiatives aimed at valuing diversity and enhancing inclusion, the impact is bigger.

Nevertheless, impact can only be achieved if inclusion is prioritised by all levels of policy and government. Local authorities, regional governments, national entities and the transnational level of policymaking must be guided by a shared purpose and approach to promote inclusion. By providing adequate resources and adopting a holistic approach. The European Education Area provides an excellent framework for coordinating these efforts, and this paper aims to support its objectives.

The case studies presented above serve as valuable examples, illustrating successful implementations of inclusive education strategies. They are intended to inspire both policymakers and practitioners to take actionable steps toward integrating inclusive education into their frameworks, ultimately fostering an educational environment where all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, can thrive and contribute fully to society as active citizens.

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Graphic Design: Dagmar Bleyová

SOLIDAR organises its work for lifelong and lifewide learning for democratic participation through the SOLIDAR Foundation. The purpose of the Foundation is to advance our common policy and advocacy work while addressing internal learning needs in what we consider a learning hub for the network.

Through our member and partner organisations, SOLIDAR Foundation engages communities in EU decision making processes, empowers people through lifelong learning, and voices their concerns to the EU institutions by carrying out active lobbying, projects of collective action, policy monitoring, research and awareness-raising.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

