



CONCLUSIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 'INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A WAY TO PROMOTE SOCIAL COHESION' 11–12 MARCH 2010, MADRID

In May 2009, the Council of the European Union, as part of the strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training (ET2020), set out strategic objectives, which stressed the importance of inclusive education in tackling educational disadvantage. The Council noted that education should combat all forms of discrimination and equip all young people to interact positively with their peers from diverse backgrounds.

The international conference, which involved approximately 300 delegates from around 40 countries, aimed to provide an opportunity for reflection on ways to integrate the principles of quality, efficiency and equity at all levels of education. In particular, it focused on ways to include the most disadvantaged learners, to avoid social exclusion.

The conference objectives were to:

- Reflect on education as one of the essential aspects for social inclusion within the framework of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion;
- Reflect on policies for educational inclusion and share best practice, with special reference to students with special educational support and compensation needs;
- Facilitate the sharing of experiences between EU Member States and Latin American countries in the area of inclusive education;
- Draft a document of key messages for inclusive education to be presented to national and European authorities.

The conference programme and background information can be accessed from:
<http://www.educacion.es/eu2010/agenda/educacion-inclusiva.html>

Conclusions

Inclusive education is a universal right. It requires policy measures that aim to provide an education of quality to all citizens. Inclusive education also implies that all required resources (financial, human, educational, technical and technological) will be provided to all educational centres, to enable them to respond to and secure the educational success of all learners, whatever their personal, economic, social, cultural, geographic or ethnic background. Special attention should be paid to gender, taking into account the specific discrimination suffered by girls and women with disabilities.

Inclusive education needs to ensure quality, equity and excellence, according to principles such as equal opportunities, non-discrimination and universal access. All these principles are complementary and inseparable.

This Conference, which has involved representatives from the different Autonomous communities in Spain, from European countries, from Latin America and from the voluntary sector, is in accordance with one of the four objectives of the Spanish Presidency in the field of education: to have an impact on educational policies promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. This objective seeks to respond to different challenges: early school leaving and learners with a need for additional educational support.

Important progress has been made in education at theoretical, policy and practical levels that will support the move towards inclusive education. In particular, mention needs to be made of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, especially Article 24 on education.





Nevertheless, inclusive education is still an aim to be achieved. Important challenges need to be overcome in order to reach the expected objectives of quality, equity, inclusion, respect for diversity and effective participation in society for all. The Conference paid special attention to progress as well as challenges at three educational levels: secondary, vocational and higher education.

The following proposals, raised at the conference need to be highlighted:

- Inclusive education, that places the person at the centre, is beneficial for all learners with or without special needs due to disability or any other circumstance. Inclusive education will prepare learners to live and work in a plural society.
- Political will and determination from all partners involved is needed to promote profound systemic changes. This requires the vision, the knowledge, the skills and the legal framework to be brought together in order to implement an inclusive education of quality with equity and excellence in mainstream settings at all levels of education. The entire society needs to be involved and participate in this educational change.
- There is a need to support co-ordinated policies among all sectors involved as well as to support the exchange of good practices.
- There is a need to set up adequate mechanisms to collect and analyse the required information in order to monitor policies as well as good practices through indicators. These indicators will allow the factors that contribute to exclusion and those that facilitate inclusion to be identified.
- To support change in educational settings and progress towards implementing the right to education for all, the following are required: flexible educational systems; diversity seen as a value; elimination of all barriers (physical, study programmes and materials, attitudes, equipment and specialist aids, social activities, communication, access to sign language and other tools to improve oral communication); support to teachers and schools; team work; leadership in schools; harmonious conditions among learners; and co-operation between parents, professionals and voluntary sector.
- There is a need to: facilitate the transition between different levels of education and the move into employment; to facilitate inclusive education from the beginning of schooling and place special emphasis on early identification and intervention.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to teachers' education (initial and in-service training) at all levels of education. Teachers' education needs to prepare them to respond to the diverse needs of learners and this is a key factor for the success of inclusive education.
- Young people do not want to be treated like children; they want to be able to make their own decisions. They all have the right to access a curriculum that will prepare them to become full citizens.
- One of the key factors regarding vocational education relates to the need to build a close relationship between training and the open labour market as well as to provide practical training in enterprise.
- Inclusion within higher education needs to be seen as a priority as it is within the compulsory education system. Access to higher education needs to be improved in order to increase the representation of students with disabilities and those from vulnerable groups. Support services are needed, in particular from professionals acting as 'intermediaries' between the students and their tutors.
- Finally, all measures implemented in the frame of inclusive education will be of benefit for all learners.

