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# Take Action for Inclusive Education

Delegates' Reflections and Proposals

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**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

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# **TAKE ACTION FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

**Delegates' Reflections and Proposals**

**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) is an independent and self-governing organisation, supported by Agency member countries and the European Institutions (Commission and Parliament).



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**Figure 1. Agency member country flags**



## FOREWORD

The member countries of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) agreed to hold a European Hearing in 2015.

This was the fourth time that the Agency organised such an event. Two of the previous Hearings took place at the European Parliament in Brussels (2003 and 2011), while the other was held at the Portuguese Parliament in co-operation with the Portuguese Ministry of Education and the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2007).

The 2015 event was organised in close co-operation with the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the Luxembourg Ministry of Education, Children and Youth.

Seventy-two young people, both with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities, were invited to reflect upon and discuss how inclusive education was implemented in their educational settings. The results of their discussions have produced good examples for actions regarding inclusive education.

Some 250 participants and stakeholders from 28 Agency member countries, as well as policy-makers and representatives from European and international institutions, attended the event.

The Agency has prepared this report on the basis of the young people's discussions and the results presented in the plenary session.

For the Agency, it has been a pleasure and an honour to organise this event. We would especially like to thank the 72 young delegates, as well as their families, teachers and support staff, the ministries of education, the representatives from European and international organisations and, finally, the Luxembourg Ministry of Education, Children and Youth for their participation and commitment. Without all of them, it would not have been possible to organise such an important event.

Per Ch Gunnvall  
Chair

Cor J.W. Meijer  
Director



## INTRODUCTION

On 16 October 2015, the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union hosted the Agency's fourth Hearing, entitled 'Inclusive Education – Take Action!'. Seventy-two young people from across Europe, both with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities, had the opportunity to discuss how their schools and communities ensure inclusive education for them.

In his opening speech, Claude Meisch, Luxembourg's Minister of Education, Children and Youth, referred to the publication of the *Charter of Luxembourg* in 1996, as a result of European co-operation in the field of school integration. He expressed his satisfaction that, almost 20 years on from the *Charter*, Luxembourg was co-ordinating the *Luxembourg Recommendations* resulting from the 2015 Hearing, which he would go on to present to his colleagues at the Council of Ministers of Education on 23 November 2015. Mr Meisch encouraged the young delegates to take the opportunity to express themselves freely, and to present the inclusive measures they benefit from in their schools and the aspects that need to be improved. He also outlined the main developments and improvements towards inclusion in Luxembourg's education system.

In her presentation, Ms Marianne Vouel, Director of the Special Education Department at the Luxembourg Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, explicitly stated that professionals and policy-makers share the same concerns as the learners and that they are striving to improve the quality of education. Emphasis should be placed on learners with more complex needs, because they also deserve to be visible. She highlighted that everyone is different and everyone has different needs. One major challenge for education systems is to be aware of and respond to diversity.

(The full text of the Luxembourg officials' presentations is available on the Hearing website: <https://www.european-agency.org/events/takeaction>.)

The event aimed to empower learners and ensure their involvement in shaping education policies. The idea was for the 15/16-year-old learners, from 28 Agency member countries, to present how inclusive education is implemented in their schools and to help identify progress in inclusive education since the first Hearing in 2003.

This Hearing followed on from the results of the Agency's three previous Hearings, which were held in Brussels (2003 and 2011; <https://www.european-agency.org/events/young-views-on-inclusive-education-european-hearing-2011-brussels>) and in Lisbon (2007; <https://www.european-agency.org/events/young-voices-meeting-diversity-in-education>). Over 240 young people, representing





secondary, vocational and higher education, participated in the three previous Hearings.

In preparation for the event, the 72 young participants received a document with the main outcomes of the three previous Hearings, as well as some questions for reflection and discussion in their respective schools.

The questions for discussion referred to ways in which their schools support them in their education, examples of how teachers and classmates take their needs into account, accessibility, class organisation and suggestions for ways to overcome remaining barriers to inclusion.

During the Hearing, the young learners, divided into six workshops, had the opportunity to further discuss these key issues and questions, share their own personal experiences and also convey their peers' messages.

The main outcomes of the workshop discussions were presented in the plenary session, in the form of key messages, and were the basis for formulating the *Luxembourg Recommendations*.



**Figure 2. Young delegates and other representatives at the European Hearing**



## YOUNG DELEGATES' REFLECTIONS AND PROPOSALS

The outcomes of the 2015 Hearing are in line with and build upon the outcomes of the three previous Hearings organised by the Agency in 2003, 2007 and 2011. The outcomes from these previous Hearings reported progress regarding inclusive education in the different European countries.

The Agency has developed a body of knowledge based on the main outcomes of the young learners' discussions at the three previous Hearings. This has also led to some principles to consider when implementing inclusive education. These include:

- **Guiding principles on rights related to:**
  - *Respect*: the right to be respected, to be fully involved in all decisions concerning you and not to be discriminated against.
  - *Quality and equity in education*: the right to receive a quality education, equality of opportunity in education, and to receive appropriate support to enable full access and participation in educational activities and in schools with your local peer group.
  - *Social and working life*: the right to live independently, to have a family, to have an adapted house, to follow further studies (university), to get a job and not to be separated from people without disabilities in all areas of your life.
- **Key principle on benefits of inclusive education:**
  - You acquire more social skills, you learn to live together with your peers, you learn to be stronger and more independent – fighting discrimination and stereotypes –, you learn how to manage in the real world, and you are better prepared to find a job later on. It is the first step to being a full member of society. Inclusive education is beneficial for all – a new world opens up and diversity is positive.

At the 2015 Hearing, young people expressed their overall satisfaction with their education. However, they also highlighted existing weaknesses in their education and presented some concrete proposals. The education situation reported by the young people, as well as their proposals, have been compiled and summarised and form the basis of the *Luxembourg Recommendations*. The recommendations aim to support the implementation of inclusive education as the best option where the necessary conditions exist. The recommendations are grouped around five important messages that the young people expressed during their discussions and presentation of results.



## Key messages and recommendations

### 1. *Everything about us, with us*

The first message – *Everything about us, with us* – concerns young learners’ direct involvement in all decision-making concerning them:

- The voices of young people, as well as their families, should be heard and taken into account in any decision-making that directly or indirectly concerns them.
- Young people should be asked what their needs are.
- Youth organisations should be involved systematically.

The young people clearly expressed that they and their families need to be actively involved and need to be listened to before decisions are made, taking into account their real needs and wishes. Similarly, they advocate for the positive role played by the systematic involvement of different organisations of young people and of people with disabilities. They see these organisations as being key in supporting them. Their schools’ learners’ councils or learners’ parliaments have a different role. The young people’s participation and involvement in these councils is perceived as an important way to be fully involved in school life, and is strongly encouraged.

### *Delegates’ examples*

#### Learners’ and families’ involvement:

*When new strategies are made, there is a need to include the young people (with special educational needs) in policy-making on every level, from the government down to the everyday practice. Take the individual need into account (Amund and Helene, Norway).*

*It is very important that parents are involved in decisions concerning their children (Jack, United Kingdom – Northern Ireland; Kristina, Slovakia).*

#### Learners’ councils:

*I feel included in the class. I am a member of the student council and I have been elected by my classmates. I have a support teacher who supports me (Andrea, Malta).*

*We have a pupils’ council in the school with a focus on co-operation with pupils with special needs. Children who are part of the school council take an especially active part (Agné and Kornelijus, Lithuania).*

*I appreciate the student council in which I can give my opinion on plans (Blake, Ireland).*

*Saul was selected to be the 'head boy' (high position in the learners' council) by the votes of the children in the school (Alexander and Saul, United Kingdom – England).*

### Organisations' involvement:

*In my country, we have a national association. Through this organisation we solve a few of the problems. Subtitling, which is very important for people with hearing impairment. The organisation takes movies and subtitles them (Javier, Spain).*

*In my country, there is a very good organisation. For instance, it has classes for pupils with handicaps who cannot follow a normal class. And they get tuition in the organisation. We also have another organisation called 'the home for blind' and it really improves the lives of people who are blind (Céline and Florence, Luxembourg).*

*In my country, there is an association for people who can't see well or are blind. This association gives me the opportunity to read on my computer. Through my iPad or computer, I read information (Lorenzo and Matteo, Italy).*

*In my country, there are special associations to help the disabled children. They promote the solutions for the problems and co-operate closely with the Ministry of Education (Georgia and Minas, Cyprus; Stefanos and Georgios, Greece).*

*In my country, there is a society for dyslexia. They have a special website to inform people about strengths and weaknesses of dyslexia (Erazem and Primož, Slovenia).*

*I believe that we should call on politicians and try to give as much support as possible to these organisations. They play a positive role in our lives. They help us defend our rights. They help us raise awareness in society (Adrià, moderator, Spain).*

## **2. Barrier-free schools**

The second message – *Barrier-free schools* – relates to the elimination of all physical and technical barriers:



- Many barriers have already been overcome in schools, but all barriers should be removed in order to be physically able to reach local educational centres, easily access them and move around inside them.
- Educational buildings undergoing reconstruction or modernisation must respect accessibility principles, such as creating multi-functional and/or quiet spaces in schools, as well as increasing the availability of flexible educational equipment.
- Suitable technical aids and educational materials should be made available in accordance with individual needs.

The young people discussed four issues. First of all, reaching educational centres can still be a challenge. Using public transport is the preferred option, but this means that it needs to be adapted. Special transport is perceived as an alternative only when there is no other option. According to the young people, a lack of convenient transport seems to be one factor, among others, preventing learners from attending their local school.

Secondly, the young people reported that access to schools has improved. They expressed clear satisfaction with their schools' adaptability and accessibility, both formally – through the installation of ramps, lifts and adapted toilets – and 'creatively' – when schools and (mainly) classmates are willing to help in case of difficulties (when the lift is out of order, for example). Some improvements are needed to facilitate access to emergency exits, to different rooms such as the gym and cafeteria, or access to lifts when a key is required to open them. It is important to ensure the personal security and safety of all learners.

Thirdly, moving around within the school is being improved and facilitated. The young people reported the existence of wide corridors and the presence of Braille signs in required places. Quiet places and multi-functional spaces in schools are perceived as a facilitator for all learners, and these should be implemented more often. The delegates indicated that lessons take place in classrooms that all classmates can access.

Finally, adapted technical aids and materials are increasingly available and constitute a requisite for inclusion.

The young learners highlighted that there are no universal solutions, which is why it is very important to ask about and respect individual needs. Schools must be flexible and able to improvise with alternatives. The facilities at the school should cover all learners' needs.



## Delegates' examples

### Accessibility on the way to school:

*School buses have to be accessible. All students need to be able to participate in all activities, like sports... (Blake, Ireland).*

*Adapted transport for students with physical disability, but the blind students use the public transport like all other students (Reinis and Georgs, Latvia; Lillý, Iceland; Elisabeth, Estonia).*

*We also have the option of taking a taxi, but there is a limited budget, so we can only use it a certain number of times (Elisabeth, Estonia).*

### Accessibility in school:

*The school is accessible for students with physical disabilities and wheelchair users, e.g. ramps, elevators, accessible toilets, etc. (Matteo, Italy; Georgios, Greece; Lillý and Hrefna, Iceland; Rolf and Casper, Denmark; Dénes and Borbála, Hungary; Tom and Paul, Germany; Miguel Ângelo, Portugal; Kristina and Tova, Sweden).*

*We have elevators in our high school, but there are also many stairs. Four floors, and you need to have a key to use the elevator, which makes it very complicated. The school has promised to improve the situation (Eelis, Finland).*

*Physical barriers need to be taken into account when plans are drawn up for reconstruction of a school. Enough money has to be allocated from the budget (Robert, United Kingdom – Northern Ireland).*

*My school tries to find funding to remove remaining barriers, but it is hard (Natalia and Marcin, Poland).*

*Because my school was reconstructed two years ago, the conditions are very good. There is still a lot of noise though because of other students, which might be a physical barrier for me (David, Portugal).*

*There is a lift, but you cannot access the building if you are a wheelchair user (Jakob, Austria).*

*We have a lift, but doors are hard to open (Paul, Germany).*

*In my school, there are lights in the hallways that flash when you go to class. There are ramps and bars for people with mobility problems or in wheelchairs.*

*Teachers have been educated about how to work with people with learning difficulties. There is also logopedy to help us, so that we can study in the same way as our peers (Javier, Spain).*

*An accompanying person is helping me in the classroom. The lift has been adapted since there are two wheelchair users in the school. There are some risks in case of fire in the school. One day, there was a fire drill and I had to go downstairs and I was carried by some other students and I was really afraid (Lucas, Belgium – Flemish speaking community).*

#### Accessibility in class:

*The school is using Braille for blind students. Learning materials are made available in Braille (Tova, Sweden; Reinis and Georgs, Latvia; Emili and Elisabeth, Estonia).*

*I have auditory limitation. So, I have headphones that I can connect to hear better. The teachers are motivated to learn about the different disabilities, to help us overcome the problems (Lucía, Spain).*

*Heavy bags with books can be a physical burden as well. E-books, laptops and tablets are the way to go (Dénes, Hungary).*

### **3. Breaking down stereotypes**

The third message – *Breaking down stereotypes* – is all about the concept of ‘normality’. If we accept that everybody is different, then who is ‘normal’?

- Providing teachers, school staff, young people, families and support services with reliable information on learners’ different needs is key for fostering mutual respect and tolerance.
- Diversity must be perceived as a positive fact; a shared value must be ‘to see disability as normal’.
- Everybody is different and everybody must be accepted. Tolerance is based on understanding one another.
- The educational community needs to be more aware of, and more tolerant towards, people with disabilities.

Good information is required – about anti-discrimination and anti-bullying, for example – to ensure this important idea is accepted. Relevant information needs to be addressed to teachers, school staff – including management –, classmates, families and any services involved in the school, in order to change attitudes.



The best result will be mutual respect and tolerance. Diversity is not a challenge, but a positive and normal situation; disability is not abnormal; tolerance is based on understanding each other. The young people highlighted that attitudes need to change, so that they are considered for what they CAN do and not for their disability.



**Figure 3. Young delegates (Jack Love, United Kingdom – Northern Ireland; Blake O’Gorman, Ireland; Nakita Hallissey, Ireland; and Robert Gault, United Kingdom – Northern Ireland) voice their opinions**

### *Delegates’ examples*


#### Raising awareness:

*Anti-discrimination and anti-bullying training would help. We should be considered for what we do and not for what we look like (Lucie, Czech Republic).*

*Pupils are unsure how to deal with handicaps. I feel very attacked and sad when I feel observed intensely (Johannes, Germany).*

*It is easy to be against people that you don’t understand. You should explain*





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*how it is to be blind, so you give people the chance to understand you (Emelie, Sweden).*

*More respect and understanding from teachers is needed. Students with special needs should not feel like outcasts. All children must be made to feel part of the group (Jack, United Kingdom – Northern Ireland).*

*There are teachers who believe that if we are deaf or have a disability, we are less important than the other students. They should be educated. Be aware that we are just the same as anyone else (Céline, Florence and Lara, Luxembourg).*

*I believe that society needs to accept everyone, the way they are. Not only with their disability. But also with their gender, with their race, with their hobbies. I believe we are at a quite good level of tolerance. Nonetheless, there is still some work to do. The best instrument to fight against discrimination is tolerance. We need to raise awareness about the differences between us (Adrià, moderator, Spain).*

*Organising campaigns against bullying. Try to communicate and keep connections with pupils with special educational needs; inviting them to social events and activities (Agné and Kornelijus, Lithuania).*

*We need to raise the awareness of students with disabilities: other students don't know what to say and are afraid of insulting the children with disabilities. Teachers need more training, and schools need more support from the authorities (Elisabeth, Estonia).*


*Communication is the key. Communication about what has been done well. Experience sharing. Special councils to achieve inclusion. Peer helpers, volunteers in classes. Teachers should listen to the students and be peers (Derrick and Mark, United Kingdom – Scotland; Saul and Alexander, United Kingdom – England).*

Positive experiences:

*Sometimes 'tolerance lessons' are organised. My school emphasises equal treatment (Natalia, Poland).*

*My classmates joke about my blindness and it helps and makes people more relaxed. Why do people bully? They don't mean to do it on purpose; I have to learn to not take it seriously (Tova, Sweden).*

*The attitude of the teacher helps a lot (Isaac, Malta).*



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*At the beginning, I didn't really understand people with disabilities. But with this conference, I understand better how people with disabilities are feeling and the difficulties they have experienced (Lara, Luxembourg).*

*No bullying; a good school to be in (Pinja, Finland).*

*We do a project where all students are blindfolded to better understand blind students' situation. We have also tried to use walking sticks to let each student try each other's disabilities (Emili, Estonia; Eelis, Finland; Reinis, Latvia).*

*From a young age, we learn that not everybody has the same background. We therefore do not think about differences in the classroom (Lillý, Iceland).*

#### **4. Diversity is the mix, inclusion is what makes the mix work**

The fourth message centres upon a slogan used by some young people – *Diversity is the mix, inclusion is what makes the mix work*:

- Everyone should focus on what *can* be done, not on what cannot be done.
- Education must be fully accessible, respecting the needs of all learners as the basis for quality education for all.
- Co-operation among teachers and other professionals, as well as the provision of good training opportunities, are fundamental.
- Provision of the necessary human and/or technical support by teachers and classmates is crucial.

The young people highlighted the positive effect of implementation of educational measures, such as individual education plans, adapted programmes, the use of technical aids, support provided by support teachers or assistants, work in small groups, as well as the flexible organisation of examinations (written or oral examinations with, for example, extra time provided, etc.). They highlighted that having more time makes tests less stressful for them.

The young people's main request was for teachers and other staff to always focus on what can be done, rather than what cannot be done, and to help and support them. Paying attention to the needs of all learners involves reinforcing strengths and capacities, instead of focusing on weaknesses. They also indicated that they have learned that they have the right to get help, if needed. Fully accessible education is the basis for a quality education for all. The young people were aware that teachers, as well as their classmates, play a key part in supporting them. Teachers and classmates need more information and training, at different levels



depending on their respective roles. The result will be better support and understanding of learning needs.

The young people also highlighted the need for better co-operation among teachers, not just to provide the required support, but also to ensure better transition phases throughout their education.

### *Delegates' examples*

#### Suggestions for teachers:

*Teachers have to focus on my strengths and not on my weaknesses (Michaela, Czech Republic).*

*Teachers try to explain things clearly and provide help when it is needed, to learn together in pairs or in groups (Jakob and Til, Austria; Kristina, Sweden).*

#### Personal experiences:

*I feel my school wanted to integrate me, while some other schools did not. The special needs teacher helped a lot (João, moderator, Portugal).*

*There are both positive and negative experiences with teachers and classmates. They can isolate you or assist you. Feeling 'interesting' to them has a negative impact on my studies (Robert, United Kingdom – Northern Ireland).*

*It is difficult to say what I need, but I have to learn to ask and get it (Johannes, Germany).*

*All teachers and classmates help and are supportive, which is why I like to go to school (Borbála, Hungary; Miguel Ângelo, Portugal).*


*I would like to say that we have a great time in our school, with our fellow students as well as with our teachers (Georgia, Cyprus).*

*My school takes very good care of me and it is well adapted (Primož, Slovenia).*

#### Support measures:

*We have support teachers (Jakob, Austria; Michaela, Czech Republic; Tom, Germany; Kristina, Sweden; Matteo, Italy; Dénes, Hungary).*

*Teachers wait and give extra time if needed to those who ask for it. There is a special room to take time out, to relax (Nakita, Ireland; Andrea and Isaac, Malta).*



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*Different materials are provided by the teachers according to the needs of students. Extra time is provided if necessary (Dénes, Hungary; Maros, Slovakia).*

*I have an assistant in the class who is helping me to understand and who explains the lessons (Mathilde and Thelma, France; Jade and Lucas, Belgium – Flemish speaking community).*

*Oral exams are organised instead of written exams (Jade and Lucas, Belgium – Flemish speaking community).*

*The school has a special Braille printer, so that all tests are printed in Braille (Georgs, Latvia).*

*There are possibilities of splitting the room to create more silent zones (Casper, Denmark).*

*25–30 students in the class, which might be slightly too big for my needs. Sometimes the interpreter doesn't catch a point, but my friends explain what is happening (Eelis, Finland).*

#### Raising awareness:

*I think that handicap sometimes is a little bit neglected. We talk about handicap without knowing the suffering this word hides. We have to put ourselves in their shoes. People should realise and help handicapped people to live a better life (Lorenzo, Italy).*

*The message I would like to send is that when non-disabled people realise that they are surrounded by disabled people, they want to take care of them, as if it was their brother or sister (Matteo, Italy).*

*Better understanding leads to less bullying. Togetherness prevents bullying (Lillý, Iceland; Elisabeth, Estonia).*

*We should not generalise: if I express a need, it does not mean that for all blind people it works like this (Tova, Sweden).*



**Figure 4. Interview with Darnell With from the Netherlands**

### **5. *Becoming full citizens***

The fifth message – *Becoming full citizens* – relates to the impact of inclusive education in being fully included in society:

- It is essential to be included in mainstream schools, in order to be included in society.
- The aim is that all are able to find their place in society.

The young people considered that all learners need to learn together in order to live together. They stated that this is the first step in the process towards social inclusion. The younger learners are when they get together, the better for learning about mutual tolerance and respecting differences. They learn from an early age to communicate, to welcome and share different experiences and to recognise strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses. They learn at school to be considered for what they can do and not for their disability or how they look. This entails not only their inclusion in educational programmes, but also their involvement in all leisure activities. The young people indicated that learning together in school will enable them to find their place and be included in society.



## *Delegates' examples*

*It is crucial for us to be included in mainstream schools in order to be included in society (Andrea and Isaac, Malta; Nathan and Loïse, Switzerland; Mathilde and Thelma, France; Adriana and Mandy, Belgium – French speaking community; Darnell and Vincent, Netherlands; Jade and Lucas, Belgium – Flemish speaking community).*

*Everybody should have a chance to take part in all the classes and the teachers should help to make this possible, so it will be a lot easier when we enter the labour market (Amund and Helene, Norway).*

*I think we have to study together. Because in society, we also are together. If we share the education together, we already learn how to live together. As it is something that we acquire for our life. Thanks to these resources, we learn how to be autonomous. The idea is that everyone finds their place in society (Adrià, moderator, Spain).*

*Everybody has to communicate and take part and share experiences with other people (Paul, Germany).*



## FINAL COMMENTS

The results of the Hearing and the *Luxembourg Recommendations* are in line with and complementary to relevant official European and international documents in the field of special needs and inclusive education.

The five messages illustrate the young people's description of their education, as well as their suggestions for improvement. The messages describe – in a very concrete and practical way – some concepts raised in many studies on inclusive education. The young people highlighted inclusive education as a human rights issue and placed key concepts, such as normality, tolerance, respect and citizenship, at the centre of their discussions. They were also describing what universal design means for them, and why peer tutoring/support, co-operative learning and individualised programmes have a positive effect on their education.

The young learners explicitly stated that their voices should be taken into consideration in any decision-making concerning them. In order to achieve real inclusion, real action should be taken, in co-operation with all parties involved. Teachers and school leaders should work together to ensure inclusion; classmates should help each other; teacher training should ensure that teachers know how to facilitate the best education for all and support each other; support teachers should help and not do the work in place of the learner; and all parties should focus on solving situations and not acting as though there are problems.

The delegates highlighted that, while they do worry about practical details, their main concerns relate to attitudes and to overcoming prejudice.

They recognised that, in most cases, teachers and classmates are tolerant and understand their disability, as long as they are given time to understand the situation – exceptions are very rare.

Emphasis should be placed on raising awareness about disability, so that people are informed about the needs and strengths of people with disabilities. It is important not to generalise. Just because something works for one person with a disability does not mean that all learners with a disability are the same.

Finally, inclusion not only refers to people with a disability, but also to the inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds. Some young participants indicated that they had suffered double discrimination because of having a disability and being from a different cultural group to their peers or having an immigrant background.

The *Luxembourg Recommendations* were presented to the Council of Ministers during the 'Education, Youth, Culture and Sports' meeting on 23 November 2015, and to the Education Committee on 2–3 December 2015, for their consideration and as a basis for possible further action.



**Figure 5. European Hearing participants**





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