



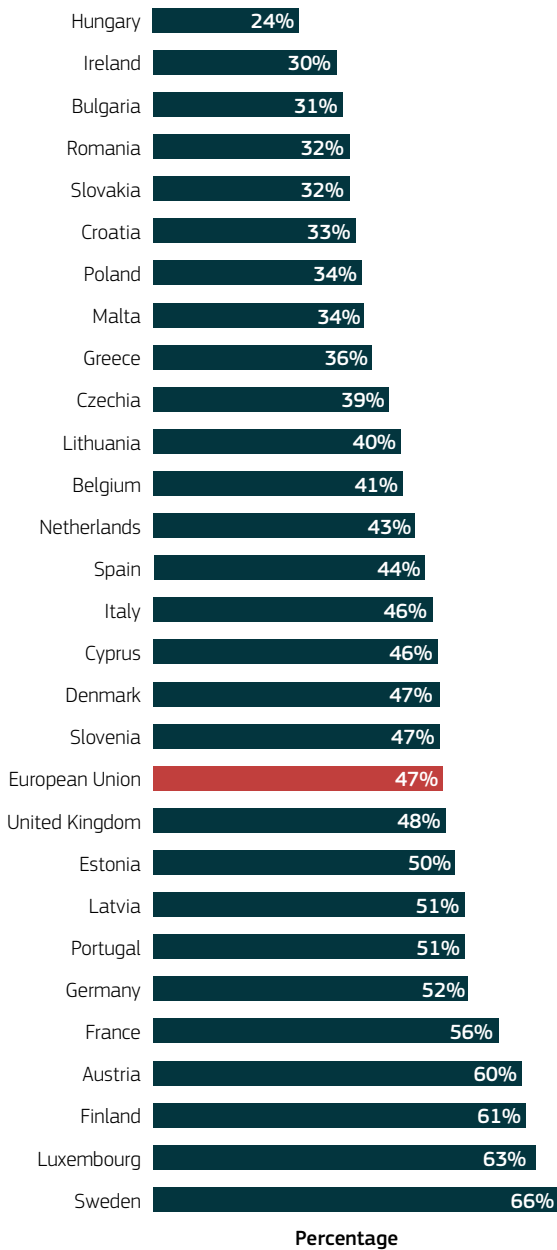
# Access to quality education for children with special educational needs



This policy memo provides an overview of the policy and practice of EU Member States in offering children with special educational needs (SEN) access to education. It sets out the policy framework, the main approaches taken by Member States, and identifies five key challenges for policy-makers and practitioners. While acknowledging there are significant gaps in the evidence base, we also seek to highlight examples of practices from across the EU.

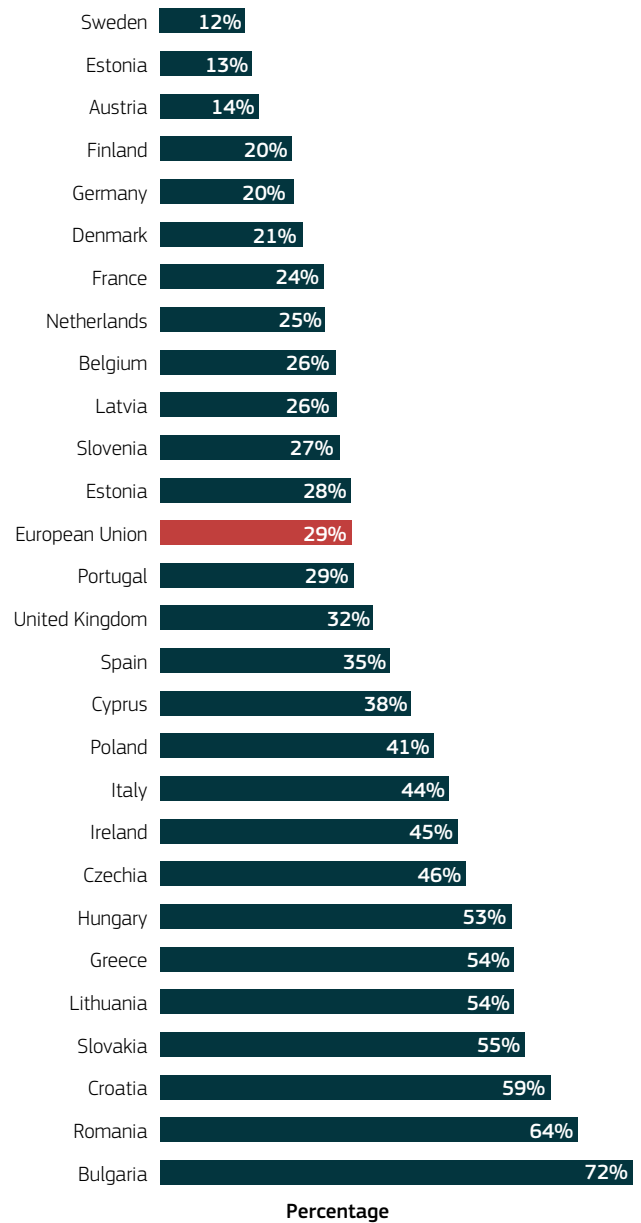
Access to quality schooling remains a central concern for many parents of children with SEN and the options available differ widely across Member States. According to a report prepared for the European Commission by the Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training (NESSE), children with SEN are less likely to obtain high-level academic qualifications, and thus face greater difficulties entering and remaining in the labour market.<sup>1</sup>

**FIGURE 1: EMPLOYMENT RATE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: Eurostat (2011).

**FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES NEITHER IN EMPLOYMENT OR EDUCATION AND TRAINING**



Source: Eurostat (2011).

## Definitions

- **Special educational needs (SEN):** There is no commonly agreed definition in use across the EU, but most definitions encompass a broad spectrum of conditions that include physical, mental, cognitive and educational impairments.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this memo, we define children with SEN as children whose learning difficulties hinder their ability to benefit from the general education system without support or accommodation to their needs.<sup>3</sup>
- **Inclusive education:** The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) has defined inclusive education as ‘the provision of high-quality education in schools that value the rights, equality, access and participation of all learners’<sup>4</sup> EASNIE’s operational definition of an ‘inclusive setting’ encompasses all education where the pupil with SEN follows education in mainstream classes alongside their peers for the largest part – 80 per cent or more – of the school week.
- **Official decision of SEN:** EASNIE defines an official decision of SEN that recognises a pupil to be eligible for additional educational support based on:<sup>5</sup>
  - an assessment procedure involving a multi-disciplinary team, including members from within and external to the school;
  - a legal document describing the support the pupil is entitled to;
  - a formal, regular review process of the decision.

## The EU policy framework: strong support for inclusion

The inclusion of children with SEN into mainstream education has received growing support and international traction over the past 20 years. The Salamanca Statement, which resulted from a UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994, was the first international document to call for the recognition of the right to inclusive education. Since then, the principle that regular schools should accommodate every child, with their personal abilities and learning needs, has been reiterated in numerous international policy documents.<sup>6</sup>

The European policy context reflects this general trend to move away from segregated special schooling. As part of the European Disability Strategy, the European Commission encourages Member States to offer inclusive, high-quality education.<sup>7</sup> It has appointed EASNIE to collect data to provide policy-makers with material to support the implementation of inclusive education. The agency, established in 1996, aims to act as a platform for collaboration for ministries of education and stakeholders at national and European levels.

### BOX 1: KEY POLICY DOCUMENTS AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

- United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989 – Article 23: *assistance to ensure access to education for disabled children, although contingent on ‘available resources’*
- UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 1994 – *called on support for inclusive education*
- EU Council resolution on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training, 2003 (2003/C 134/04) – *called on support for the integration of children and young people with SEN in society through appropriate education and training*
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), 2006 – Article 24: *made legally binding the concept of inclusive education*
- European Commission (EC) communication on Improving competences for the 21st Century: an Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools, 2008 (COM/2008/0425 final) – *identified the need for new policies to achieve inclusion in mainstream education*
- EC Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (ET 2020), 2009 – *objective to promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship*
- EU Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training, 2010 – *importance of personalised, inclusive approaches to ensure quality education for all*
- EC communication on a European Disability Strategy 2010–2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe, 2010 (COM(2010) 636 final) – *‘education and training’ is recognised as a priority area*
- EC and EU Council Joint Report on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), 2015 (2015/C 417/04) – *highlights imperative actions to develop inclusive education systems*
- UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2015 – Goal 4: *‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’*

## Policy and practice varies significantly across Member States

The majority of EU Member States use, or are moving towards, an inclusive education model, although some countries remain where inclusive education is the exception rather than the rule. The landscape is diverse, however, due to different national definitions of special needs and different school system traditions.

**FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH SEN WITHIN THE WHOLE SCHOOL POPULATION BY COUNTRY**

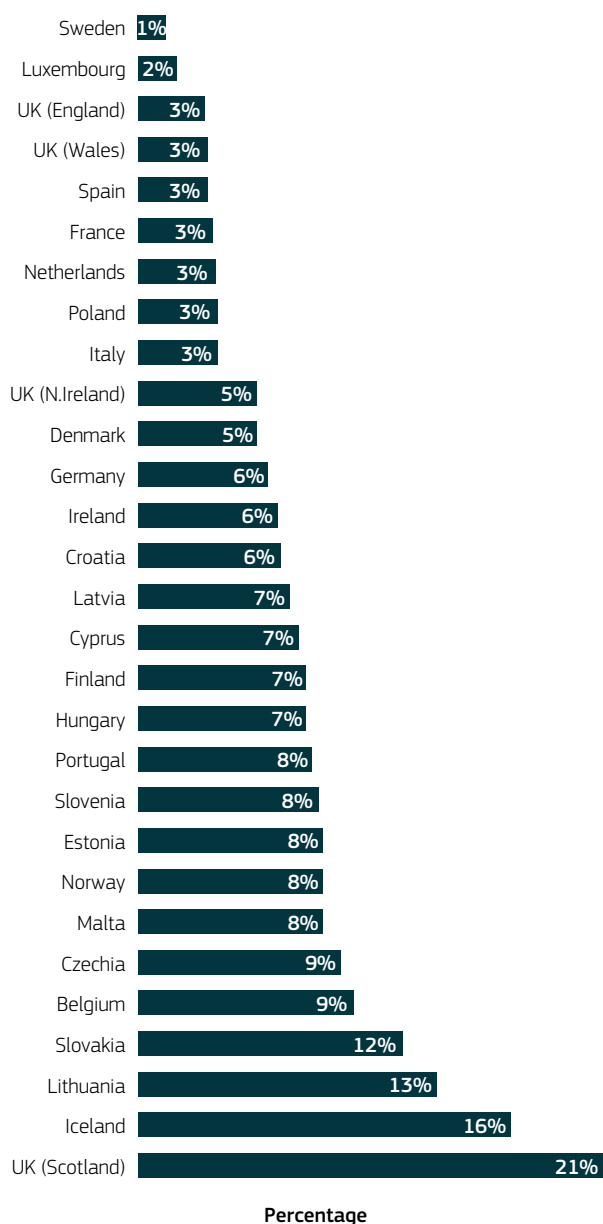


Figure 3 shows pupils with an official decision of SEN as a percentage of all pupils enrolled in formal educational settings

Source: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018. European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education: 2016 Dataset Cross-Country Report.

These different approaches to SEN can be broadly clustered into three models:<sup>8</sup>

- 1. Inclusion of all in mainstream education:** for countries like Italy, Norway or Scotland, the rates of inclusive education for children with SEN are above 90 per cent.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that inclusive settings do not necessarily equate to good practice or a high-quality educational experience if the quality of the support that children with SEN receive within these settings is low.
- 2. Separate education of most children with SEN in special schools:** countries with a tradition of selective school systems, like the Flemish community of Belgium, tend to have a separate system of schools for children with SEN (although recent reforms aim to support the integration of pupils in the general education system).<sup>10</sup> However, countries like Germany or the Netherlands are moving away from this tradition more towards a hybrid system.<sup>11</sup>
- 3. Hybrid approaches:** options range from special classes or part-time arrangements to inter-school cooperation, depending on the country. This trend covers a broad range of practices in countries like France or the United Kingdom. Having special classes within mainstream schools is a frequent practice: in Denmark and Finland, about 50 per cent of children with SEN appear to be educated in special classes.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting that data collected by EASNIE are based on the number of pupils with an official decision of SEN. This means that one should be cautious about making direct comparisons between countries. In the Netherlands, for example, pupils with SEN enrolled in mainstream education are no longer registered as having an official decision of SEN.<sup>13</sup>

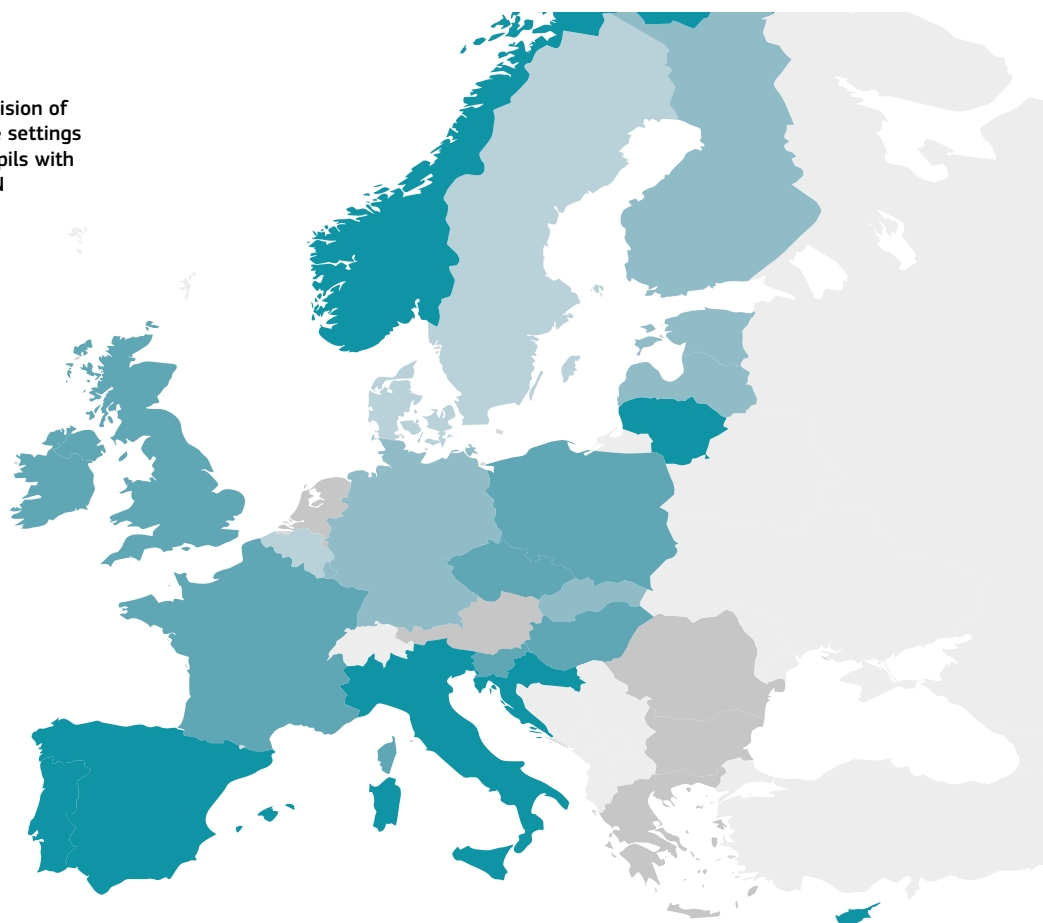
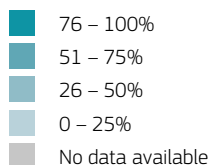


### LOCAL UNITS FOR EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION (ULIS)

In France, a system of integrated classes for children with important learning difficulties is part of the government's strategy towards a more inclusive education system. These are called 'local units for educational inclusion' (ULIS). ULIS are present in both primary and secondary schools, although with some variations, and can be divided into seven types (as mentioned in Box 2). Through this scheme, learners in a ULIS are linked to a mainstream class corresponding roughly to their age group and occasionally join them, according to their needs. Each ULIS has a coordinator in charge of teaching when learners are grouped into the ULIS as well as advising the educational community. The current government in France has expressed the goal to open 250 additional ULIS in upper secondary schools by 2022.<sup>14</sup>

**FIGURE 4: VARIATION IN THE PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WITH SEN EDUCATED IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS ACROSS MEMBERS STATES**

Pupils with an official decision of SEN educated in inclusive settings as a percentage of all pupils with an official decision of SEN



UK data: England (59%), Northern Ireland (60%), Scotland (93%) and Wales (47%)

Source: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018. European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education: 2016 Dataset Cross-Country Report.

### The challenges for access to quality schooling for children with SEN

Nonetheless, there continue to be challenges for policy-makers and practitioners across Europe in enabling access for children with SEN to schooling which meets their needs:

- There is **no universal – or European – definition for SEN**. Some countries group children with SEN into multiple categories, while others use a general definition of disability.<sup>15</sup> At the national level, **identification of SEN is not automatic and can be challenging**. Many disabilities or learning difficulties might not be diagnosed at birth, or only develop at a later stage in a child’s life. This means that official figures of SEN may underestimate the number of children with SEN.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, identification procedures and the process of making an official decision of SEN vary between countries. In the Netherlands, for example, an official decision of SEN is only issued to children with needs that cannot be met in the mainstream system. See Box 2 for examples illustrating different categorisations.

#### BOX 2: CLASSIFICATIONS OF SEN<sup>17</sup>

Various frameworks are used to identify children with SEN. These may be developed in order to facilitate cross-border comparison. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) devised a cross-national framework to collect data on children with SEN in 2000. This framework classifies SEN into three categories: disabilities or impairments with organic origins; behavioural or emotional disorders and learning difficulties that do not have organic origins or origins linked to the child’s background; and difficulties arising from socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. Different frameworks might be developed at national level to enable the administration of tailored support. For example, France uses seven categories, including separate categorisations for cognitive, language, pervasive developmental and motor function disorders. The categories also include hearing and visual disorders, as well as the association of multiple disorders.



- There is a **very wide spectrum of SEN** covering many types of impairment and learning difficulties. Acknowledging the variety of needs should help policy-makers and practitioners alike define which needs can or cannot be addressed within inclusive settings, and identify the range of adaptations that might be relevant to each learner.



### THE EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING SERVICE

In Norway, a municipal guidance service (known as PPT) supports the development of children, young people and adults who experience learning difficulties. The service advises kindergartens and schools on how to provide the best support to learners who need additional help. In order to do this, PPT evaluates the needs of children suspected to need special accommodation; once PPT issues a decision of SEN, they advise on the special provisions required for each individual. Moreover, PPT's website provides detailed information for children, parents and practitioners on their rights, specific definitions and relevant actors.<sup>18</sup>

- The **costs of offering different schooling options** may be an important consideration: inclusive education may appear expensive to mainstream schools in light of the arrangements necessary for some pupils, although this should be balanced against the ultimate cost-effectiveness of maintaining a dual schooling system in light of the additional administrative, management and resource costs this would entail. Indeed, the UN has reported that 80 to 90 per cent of children with SEN could be integrated into mainstream classrooms with basic measures to support them.<sup>19</sup>
- Additional **financial resources** may be needed by educational institutions to provide effective in-school support for children with SEN. There are a number of forms of adaptation for pupils with SEN that may require additional funding. These include school infrastructure such as wheelchair access, quiet spaces or sensory rooms. They also include higher staffing levels to provide the appropriate level of care, multi-disciplinary support through cooperation with other professionals, and adequately trained classroom assistants. Funding may be delivered as per capita or resource-based models. According to a 2012 report by UNICEF, per capita funding can act as an incentive for schools to accept children with disabilities, but could also introduce a risk of perverse incentives by encouraging the labelling of children with SEN to attract more funding while not focusing on their specific needs.<sup>20</sup>



### FUNDING EDUCATION ALLIANCES IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, various models of funding have been tested in attempts to make the education system more inclusive. In 2003, the Netherlands introduced a per capita funding model: children meeting specific criteria received a learner-bound budget. According to EASNIE, this so-called 'backpack' policy caused the number of children with an official decision of SEN in the country to rise as a result of the incentive for funding, without progress towards inclusion.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, the government introduced the Education Act for Students with Special Needs (Passend Onderwijs), following the principle that all children should attend mainstream schools when possible. In order to achieve this, regional partnerships were established between special schools and mainstream schools. Funding for extra support to children with SEN is awarded through these education alliances, in which schools work together to provide adequate education to all children in the region. This new policy, which introduced decentralised resource-based funding, is increasing collaboration between all types of schools –with an increasing number of children in special schools attending mainstream school part-time.

- Adequate **teacher education and training** may be required to meet the specific needs of children. Equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge to teach a diverse classroom is a key factor in bridging the gap between the vision of inclusive education and actual practices on the ground.<sup>22</sup> In a 2016 report, the OECD recognised this as an issue that needs to be addressed on a system level through legislation and funding schemes supporting the professional development of teachers in this area.<sup>23</sup>



### INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION FOR INCLUSION (ITE4I)

In Ireland, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) funded a project to evaluate a new programme for teacher students. This new programme, implemented in 2012, is based on EASNIE's Profile of Inclusive Teachers.<sup>24</sup> In the programme, inclusive education and differentiation are mandatory topics for all aspiring teachers. Inclusive content is incorporated in various ways such as specific modules, diffused content in general courses as well as placements. The evaluation will run until the end of 2018 with the support of Manchester Metropolitan University, University College London and University College Cork. According to the NSCE, it is 'one of the first system-wide, longitudinal studies of initial teacher education for inclusive teaching in Europe.'<sup>25</sup>

## In summary

With the adoption of the European Disability Strategy and the establishment of EASNIE, the EU has established a policy framework in support of inclusive education. However, there is considerable variation in the policies and practices in this area across different Member States. This reflects in part the historical differences between national education systems, with some Member States having to travel further than others to achieve a system of inclusive education that caters for the needs of pupils with SEN.

The variability of practices and education traditions across Member States suggests there would be value in collaboration and sharing of best practices between nations to develop the evidence base of which educational practices are most effective in increasing educational attainment, well-being and social integration for children and young people with SEN.

## Endnotes

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