TEN PILLARS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

BACKGROUND PAPER

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INTRODUCTION – WHY PILLARS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Continuation of the Key Principles work

The 30th anniversary of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) offers a timely opportunity not only to acknowledge past achievements but to reassess the forces shaping the future of education.

EASNIE has long articulated a shared vision for its member countries: that every learner has the right to high-quality education throughout their lives, grounded in equity, participation and inclusion (EASNIE, 2022a). Highlighting fundamental issues for education systems, the Key Principles series (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003; 2009; 2011; EASNIE, 2021) reflects the gradual shift in EASNIE's work over the past 30 years: away from a narrow focus on learners' special educational needs and special needs education as specific provision, towards extending and improving the quality of support for learning that is generally available to all learners. This focus reflects EASNIE's increasing emphasis on being an active agent for change in policy and practice in inclusive education. Building on this foundation, the development of the Ten Pillars Shaping the Future of Inclusive Education aims to identify the essential conditions and thematic focus areas that support education systems to realise the shared vision of the Key Principles within a rapidly changing global context.

European Union (EU) policy developments reinforce the need for renewed clarity and direction in education. For example, the European Education Area (European Commission, no date a) and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) emphasise inclusive and equitable education as central objectives, promoting access, diversity and equal opportunities for all learners.

However, differing interpretations of inclusion and equity across countries can generate confusion and undermine coherent policy implementation. As a 2017 guide by the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) outlines, **inclusion** is an on-going process of identifying and removing barriers that restrict learners' presence, participation and achievement, while **equity** concerns fairness – ensuring that every learner's education is valued equally. UNESCO (2020) further calls for updated global instruments to advance the right to education, emphasising lifelong learning, digital inclusion and stronger frameworks for governance, financing and accountability. In addition, it frames education as a shared social commitment – a common good that requires the active engagement of all members of society to protect and sustain it (ibid).

UNESCO highlights several areas that require attention to reinforce the international right to education:

- Defining explicit rights and obligations as well as modalities that will create the conditions to ensure the right to education throughout life;
- Strengthening education delivery and regulation for digital learning and non-state actors to ensure better learner protection;
- Recognizing the right of adults for reskilling and upskilling for life and work;
- Reinforcing the rights of the most vulnerable, particularly those who are displaced due to climate change, conflicts and crises. (2023a, p. 3).

The development of the Ten Pillars is informed by several **critical enablers** identified as essential:

- 'Evidence-based, inclusive, and accountable systems' capable of ensuring equitable access and quality for all learners through robust data, diagnostic tools and monitoring practices – especially those that illuminate intersecting inequalities.
- 'Participatory and inclusive governance … engaging civil society, educators, learners, and communities' to shape responsive and equitable policy.
- Cross-sector collaboration, enabling education systems to remain resilient in the face of crises and to integrate supports across health, social protection, culture and technology.
- 'Sustained political leadership and public advocacy', vital for implementation, targeted resourcing to build system capability and the protection of 'education as a fundamental human right' (UNESCO, 2025a, p. 65).

These critical enablers are consistently highlighted by EASNIE (2021; 2024a), other international sources (for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD, 2023a) and academic analyses (Ainscow, forthcoming; Slee, 2019), all of which point to the importance of coherent governance, evidence-based system development, building workforce and community knowledge and skills, and addressing structural and socio-economic barriers to inclusion.

The urgency for such an approach is clear. Today's education systems face profound, interconnected challenges: rising inequality and poverty, the digital divide, economic instability and job insecurity, increased mental health and well-being issues, and **educational practices that no**

longer match the scale or complexity of contemporary needs. International bodies consistently call for greater emphasis on inclusion, co-operation, solidarity and collective responsibility as guiding principles for navigating this turbulence and promoting sustainability.

Global challenges – from pandemics to energy disruptions, climate emergencies, wars, endemic conflict and population displacement, cyberattacks, disinformation and propaganda – underscore the need for co-ordinated international collaboration. Pooling expertise and resources enables societies to respond more effectively to crises and to uphold shared commitments to human rights, equality and non-discrimination. Yet, despite decades of effort and many positive developments, **progress towards inclusive education remains uneven, slow and fragmented**, leaving the rights of many children and young people unrealised.

Systemic barriers continue to impede inclusive education. These include insufficient funding, limited teacher preparation, attitudinal biases and inequities shaped by intersecting learner identities and established educational structures (Slee & Watkins, 2025; EASNIE, 2022a). Policies often lack specificity, coherence or enforcement, resulting in disparities in access to quality education for vulnerable populations (UNESCO, 2020). Budgetary constraints, competing priorities and limited access to assistive technologies and inclusive learning environments exacerbate inequalities and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage. These challenges have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic and in conflict-affected contexts, highlighting the urgent need for co-ordinated international action (ibid.).

A rapidly changing technological landscape adds another layer of complexity. The widespread influence of social media, generative artificial intelligence (AI) and digital platforms places new cognitive and ethical demands on children and young people. Never have learners been so exposed to information, and misinformation. Schools must therefore cultivate learners who can not only evaluate sources critically but also apply knowledge creatively and constructively to address local and global problems (Connor, Danforth & Gallagher, 2025).

Taken together, these challenges signal a profound 'need to reimagine **why, how, what, where, and when** we learn' (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021, p. 7). The OECD (2012) demonstrates that education systems can achieve both quality and equity, implying that excellence and inclusion are not mutually exclusive; in fact, inclusion can serve as a pathway to excellence (Ainscow, forthcoming). However, to build peaceful, just and sustainable futures for all learners in an increasingly complex and volatile world, education must now undergo deliberate and purposeful transformation.

Rationale and structure of the Pillars

The Ten Pillars presented in this paper are conceived precisely to guide this transformation: to provide a coherent structure that translates EASNIE's long-standing values into future-focused directions for policy, practice and system design. They offer a framework for considering how education systems might evolve to better prepare learners for a future shaped by complexity, diversity and continuous innovation.

Intended for policy-makers and system leaders, the framework draws together insights from EU policy documents and initiatives, work by the OECD, UNESCO and EASNIE and recent peer-reviewed research (mainly from 2020 to 2026), as well as expert input, into a set of shared priorities.

Specifically, it draws on:

- 33 EU policy documents;
- 27 EASNIE publications;
- 34 research papers;
- 28 OECD publications;
- 33 UNESCO publications.

The academic review focused on major themes shaping education systems, using search terms such as: (inclusive) education; reimagining education/trends shaping education; AI and digital learning; leadership for inclusion; sustainability and resilience; future curriculum transformation; global issues in education.

The policy review focused on policy documents and initiatives on education issued by the EU and its institutions, including the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, mainly from 2020 onwards.

The analysis of the evidence highlighted interconnected Pillars that collectively aim to:

- promote equity, inclusion and human rights in education;
- respond to global challenges such as climate change, migration and technological disruption;
- harness digital transformation and AI responsibly for personalised learning;
- foster lifelong learning, well-being and resilience for all learners;
- ensure coherent governance, sustainable investment and cross-sector collaboration to build inclusive systems.

The Pillars address these interconnected dimensions at the learner, school and system levels. Their sequencing is intentional, beginning with the learner and moving outwards through the layers that shape educational experiences and opportunities. This reflects an ecosystem view of education systems (EASNIE, 2017; 2019a), from factors closest to the learner – such as well-being, participation, teaching and curriculum – to wider organisational, cross-sector and governance contexts that influence practice.

However, the Pillars are not sequential: each one sits within and reinforces the others, creating a connected structure rather than a step-by-step progression. Because they overlap and interact, some ideas appear across multiple Pillars, reflecting their interdependent nature. Hence, the framework is intended as a relational, rather than a linear, model. The Pillars are interrelated, and progress in one area is likely to depend on developments in others.

Each Pillar includes a short set of key actions. These identify practical steps that different system actors might consider in advancing work within that domain. In this way, the Pillars aim to offer a point of reference for reflection and future planning, linking broad principles to possible areas for action. Taken together, the sequence of Pillars and associated actions provides a structured pathway for the development of more inclusive, resilient and future-oriented education systems.

Figure 1. The Ten Pillars Shaping the Future of Inclusive Education

PILLAR 1: LEARNER WELL-BEING AND BELONGING

Positioning learner well-being and belonging as a central pillar of the future of inclusive education in Europe is not a matter of expanding the education agenda; it is a recognition of the conditions under which learning itself becomes possible. A substantial body of research has established that well-being is not a desirable by-product of effective schooling but a precondition for meaningful and sustained learning (Kaya & Erdem, 2021; John-Akinola & Nic-Gabhainn, 2014; Berger, Alcalay, Torretti & Milicic, 2010). As Hargreaves and Shirley (2021) argue, children's well-being underpins academic success, particularly for those who are most vulnerable to marginalisation. In contexts of socio-economic disadvantage, displacement, linguistic diversity or disability, well-being becomes the foundation upon which engagement, persistence and achievement are built.

The concept of belonging deepens this argument. Belonging is relational: it concerns whether learners experience and perceive themselves as recognised, valued and safe within educational communities. Without a sense of belonging, participation becomes fragile and learning risks becoming transactional (that is, viewed as an exchange of effort for grades or approval), rather than transformative. Research evidence consistently indicates that learners who feel safe, connected and heard are more likely to demonstrate sustained engagement, improved attendance and stronger educational outcomes (Mitra, 2001; 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, cited in EASNIE, 2022b). Belonging therefore functions not simply as a social good but as an enabling condition for equity and excellence in education.

At the heart of belonging lies participation. Across recent EU policy developments, learners are increasingly recognised not only as recipients of education policy but as active agents within it (Council of the EU, 2018a; 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2023a; 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; European Commission, 2025). EASNIE (2023; 2025a) stresses that meaningful learner participation must be systematic and embedded in governance structures, rather than symbolic or episodic. When learners and families are enabled to contribute to decisions that affect them, schools shift from being institutions that act upon children, to communities that act with them. However, participation is ethically and practically complex. Policy-makers must guard against tokenism, manipulation or attempts to fit children's voices into pre-existing adult-defined frameworks

(EASNIE, 2023; Mangiaracina, Kefallinou, Kyriazopoulou & Watkins, 2021). Intergenerational dynamics and power asymmetries require explicit attention, particularly to ensure that the voices of those most vulnerable to exclusion are not overshadowed (ibid.).

This shift towards agency also requires a broader re-conceptualisation of children and young people. OECD analysis (Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023) highlights the persistence of deficit-oriented views that position children primarily as vulnerable dependents. Moving towards a rights-based and capability-oriented approach entails recognising young people as contributors to democratic life (Fielding, 2011). This idea is extended to inclusive schooling, where young people progressively develop agency, voice and capacities for democratic life through structured participation (Messiou, de los Reyes, Potnis, Dong & Rwang, 2025). Embedding such experiential pathways is essential to move beyond deficit-oriented assumptions and support meaningful, rights-based engagement in schools and communities. However, such a shift cannot occur through rhetoric alone; it requires investment in structures, capacity-building and partnerships with civil society and other social services that enable safe, inclusive and sustained participation.

Well-being also has a material dimension. Physical health, nutrition and food security exert profound effects on cognitive development, attendance and long-term life trajectories. Analyses by UNESCO and the OECD emphasise the reciprocal relationship between nutrition and educational attainment. Malnutrition and obesity are not simply public health issues; they are educational equity issues (UNESCO & the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2025; Burns & Gottschalk, 2020). Schools emerge in this context as critical public infrastructures capable of mitigating risk through meal programmes, curriculum-based nutrition education and collaboration with families and health services. UNESCO (Kwansa, 2025) identifies schools as central platforms for co-ordinated, multi-sectoral action linking education, health and agriculture. Framing well-being as a pillar of inclusive education therefore implies recognising education systems as contributors to broader social resilience.

This systemic understanding is mirrored at EU level. The European Child Guarantee (European Commission, no date b) reinforces the obligation of Member States to ensure effective access to education, healthcare and adequate nutrition for children in need, explicitly encouraging integrated service delivery. Likewise, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) underscores children's right to protection from poverty and to inclusive education and care. Taken together, these instruments position schools not merely as sites of instruction, but as co-ordinating hubs within wider social protection ecosystems.

The growing emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL) reinforces this integrated perspective. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant unmet needs in learner mental health and relational support, revealing how fragile learning continuity becomes when emotional security is compromised (EASNIE, 2022c). UNESCO (2024a) conceptualises SEL as the development of competencies that connect emotional regulation, empathy, ethical awareness and responsible decision-making. Crucially, SEL is not positioned as an 'add-on' to academic learning but as integral to it, linking cognitive, relational and civic dimensions. Evidence suggests that structured SEL approaches can raise academic achievement, reduce drop-out and improve the classroom climate, while also contributing to the prevention of bullying and hate speech. In this sense, SEL supports both individual flourishing and democratic cohesion (Berger et al., 2010; Gnas et al., 2024).

The digital transformation of education adds further complexity to the well-being agenda. The Council conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education (Council of the EU, 2022a) recognise that digital learning environments can either enhance or undermine belonging. While

digital tools may increase flexibility and access, poorly designed platforms, cyberbullying and digital exclusion can erode emotional safety. The digital divide remains a persistent risk, particularly for learners from socio-economically disadvantaged or geographically remote communities. Equipping learners with digital and media literacy skills – including the ability to distinguish fact from opinion – is therefore not only a competence objective but a well-being imperative. It influences learners' confidence, agency and capacity for critical participation in public life.

An intersectional lens further strengthens the argument for well-being as foundational. UNESCO (Benavides & Poisson, 2025) notes that overlapping disadvantages related to gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, rurality or disability compound exclusion in ways that are often invisible within single-category analyses. Well-being cannot be secured through universal measures alone if structural inequities remain unaddressed. The integration of disaggregated data, cross-sector collaboration and sustained political commitment is required to understand and respond to cumulative disadvantage. In this respect, well-being becomes both an outcome and a diagnostic lens through which the inclusiveness of systems can be assessed.

Across EU policy frameworks – from the European Education Area (European Commission, no date a), to the Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (Council of the EU, 2022b) and the EU Youth Strategy (EU, no date) – a consistent theme emerges: academic achievement, democratic participation and well-being are interdependent. Reducing early school leaving, strengthening citizenship education and promoting mental health are not parallel objectives, but mutually reinforcing dimensions of inclusive systems. The Council Conclusions on children's rights (Council of the EU, 2024a) underscore that safe, protective and participatory environments must form the normative foundation of education policy.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that learner well-being and belonging are not peripheral social concerns, but structural determinants of educational quality, equity and resilience. In increasingly diverse, digitally mediated and socially complex European societies, inclusive education cannot be realised through curriculum reform or access measures alone. It requires education systems that cultivate emotional security, recognise identity, enable voice, address material disadvantage and foster relational trust.

Framing well-being and belonging as a pillar for the future of inclusive education therefore signals a paradigm shift: from viewing inclusion primarily as placement or support, to understanding it as the creation of educational communities in which all learners can participate meaningfully, experience recognition and develop the capabilities required for democratic life. Without these foundations, inclusion remains procedural. With them, it becomes transformative.

Key actions

1. **Make well-being and belonging core system goals**, not add-ons.
2. **Embed authentic learner voice** and meaningful participation in education decision-making, with safeguards against tokenism.
3. **Ensure access to mental health support, nutrition programmes and digital literacy** for every learner.

PILLAR 2: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Inclusive education cannot be sustained through school-level reform alone. It depends on the quality of relationships between schools, families and the communities in which they are embedded (EASNIE, 2019b). Positioning family and community participation as a pillar of the future of inclusive education in Europe reflects a recognition that inclusion is relational: it is shaped by trust, shared responsibility and the extent to which educational governance is open, participatory and socially grounded.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, no date c) and the European Child Guarantee (European Commission, no date b) further reinforce this perspective by acknowledging that children's educational experiences are inseparable from broader living conditions. Ensuring access to quality education, nutrition, healthcare and adequate housing requires co-ordinated action across sectors. Schools, in this context, become key nodes within local welfare ecosystems. Active engagement with families and community organisations enables more coherent support for children facing poverty, displacement or social exclusion. Inclusive education therefore operates within a wider social rights framework, and participation becomes a mechanism for aligning educational provision with social protection.

Research and international policy analysis consistently demonstrate that when families and communities are meaningfully involved in educational processes, learner engagement, attendance and outcomes improve – particularly for those at risk of marginalisation (UNESCO, 2025b; Kefallinou, Symeonidou & Meijer, 2020). However, participation must move beyond information-sharing or consultation. It requires structured opportunities for families and community actors to contribute to decision-making, co-design local responses to disadvantage and collaborate in shaping learning environments (EASNIE, 2025b). This shift reflects a broader move from viewing families as recipients of school directives, to recognising them as partners in educational development (Ainscow, forthcoming; Kefallinou et al., 2020). Central to this is strengthening existing capabilities and fostering new knowledge within local communities (Ainscow, forthcoming).

Within the EU policy landscape, this participatory approach is strongly supported. The Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (Council of the EU, 2022b) calls on Member States to implement whole-school approaches that actively engage families and communities in preventing underachievement and early school leaving. The Recommendation reflects long-standing research evidence that educational disadvantage is often rooted in socio-economic and contextual factors and that effective responses require sustained co-operation with families, local services and community organisations (Kerr & Dyson, 2014).

Similarly, the 2021-2030 Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (Publications Office of the EU, 2023) emphasises inclusion, equity and active citizenship as interconnected objectives. Strengthening family-school partnerships and community engagement is understood as essential to achieving these goals. Participation is not framed merely as supportive of learning outcomes, but as central to fostering democratic culture and social cohesion.

The concept of '**community or learning hubs**' provides a practical articulation of this approach. UNESCO (2025c) highlights the potential of these hubs to address disparities in access, integrate services and strengthen community engagement. Rather than treating schools solely as sites of formal instruction, the hub model positions them as shared community spaces where educational, social and cultural functions intersect. In disadvantaged urban areas or remote rural regions – including many territories supported through EU cohesion policy – such models can reduce fragmentation in service provision and enhance accessibility for families who might otherwise face structural barriers.

The International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021) argues that schools should be preserved as dedicated educational spaces while being reinvented to contribute to more just and equitable futures (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2022a). In the European context, this resonates with cohesion and territorial development agendas that seek to strengthen local infrastructures and reduce regional disparities. Schools can function as anchor institutions: stable, trusted and publicly accountable spaces that foster inclusion and belonging.

For participation to be meaningful, however, it must be inclusive in design. Patterns of parental engagement vary significantly according to socio-economic status, migration background, language and previous experience of schooling. Standardised models of involvement may inadvertently favour families with greater cultural or social capital. EU equality and inclusion key actions and anti-discrimination commitments (European Commission, 2026; no date d) therefore imply the need for culturally-responsive and flexible approaches to engagement. This may include multilingual communication, outreach through community mediators, collaboration with local associations and recognition of diverse forms of parental contribution.

Community participation also strengthens democratic resilience. The EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) (EU, no date) and related Council Conclusions (Council of the EU, 2019) underline the importance of learning to participate in democratic life from an early age. When schools open governance processes to families and community actors, they model participatory democracy in practice. They become spaces where dialogue across generations and backgrounds is possible, reinforcing shared values while respecting diversity.

Reconsidering schools' physical and organisational design is part of this transformation. Ball and Collet-Sabé (2025) argue that while conventional schools often function as closed, bureaucratic institutions that constrain learning, they can instead be reimagined as open, flexible spaces that support community engagement and co-produced learning. Along those lines, UNESCO suggests

that school architectures, timetables and uses of space can be redesigned to support greater openness and community use (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). In the European context, investments in educational infrastructure – often supported through cohesion funds – provide opportunities to create accessible, inclusive and sustainable public spaces that serve broader community functions beyond school hours. Such environments symbolically and practically position schools as common goods rather than closed institutions.

Taken together, the European and international evidence indicates that family and community participation is not an auxiliary feature of inclusive education but a structural condition for its success. Educational equity depends on trust between institutions and families, on co-ordinated local support systems and on governance models that allow those affected by decisions to influence them.

As Europe navigates demographic change, social fragmentation and territorial inequality, strengthening these relational foundations becomes increasingly urgent. Inclusive education systems of the future will be defined not only by what happens within classrooms, but by how effectively schools are embedded within and accountable to the communities they serve. Family and community participation, grounded in European principles of social rights, multi-level governance and democratic engagement, therefore stands as a central pillar of inclusive education reform.

Key actions

1. **Strengthen authentic family and community partnership** through shared decision-making and co-design.
2. **Develop inclusive, culturally-responsive engagement approaches** that reach all families.
3. **Position schools as community hubs** that integrate services and foster trust and belonging.

PILLAR 3: LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning is no longer a complementary dimension of education policy; it is a structural principle for designing equitable and future-ready systems (OECD, 2023b). Across Europe, learning is increasingly understood as a continuous trajectory rather than a sequence of isolated stages. This shift reflects demographic change, labour market volatility, longer working lives and growing social diversity. In this context, the coherence of learning pathways throughout the life course is central to both individual opportunity and societal resilience.

A core requirement is the development of co-ordinated and transparent pathways that connect early childhood, school education, vocational routes, higher education and adult learning. Evidence shows that poorly managed transitions – particularly into upper-secondary education – can entrench inequality by prematurely narrowing options for learners, especially those with lower performance or from disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2025a). When systems automatically channel learners into restricted pathways, they risk reinforcing social stratification. By contrast, flexible and permeable pathways enable learners to build on their strengths, revisit choices and adapt trajectories over time. Reducing the rigidity of 'hard' transitions supports continuity, motivation and more sustainable progression into employment and independent living.

The EU has embedded this logic within the vision of the European Education Area (EEA) (European Commission, no date a), where lifelong learning functions as an organising framework across all sectors of education and training. Early childhood education and care (ECEC), vocational education and training (VET), higher education and adult learning are no longer treated as discrete policy domains but as **interconnected components** of a single learning continuum. This integrated approach recognises that fragmentation between sectors disproportionately affects vulnerable learners and undermines social inclusion.

Early childhood provides the foundation of this continuum, as gaps in foundational skills emerge early and, if not addressed, tend to persist throughout schooling. The European Child Guarantee (European Commission, no date b) and the Council Recommendation on ECEC (Council of the EU, 2022c) frame access to high-quality, inclusive early education as both a social right and a long-term investment. Ensuring that children – particularly those at risk of poverty or exclusion – enter school with strong developmental foundations is central to preventing cumulative disadvantage (Council

of the EU, 2025). In this sense, lifelong learning begins at birth and family engagement is an integral part of sustaining equitable pathways from the outset.

As learners move through adolescence and into adulthood, adaptability and learner agency become increasingly significant. OECD analysis (2023c) highlights that education systems risk preparing young people for outdated economic structures while failing to nurture broader capacities, such as creativity, care, critical thinking and meaning-making. Lifelong learning policies therefore aim to create systems that allow individuals to reorient, reskill and redefine their aspirations across changing circumstances. This requires institutional flexibility, sustained workforce development and support structures that enable learners to navigate transitions with confidence.

Within EU policy, vocational education and adult learning are central to this adaptive model. The Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (Council of the EU, 2020) reframes vocational pathways as flexible, high-quality routes accessible to both young people and adults. Similarly, adult learning is embedded within the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, no date c) and the EEA (European Commission, no date a) as a core mechanism for employability, active citizenship and social cohesion. The Council Recommendation on micro-credentials (Council of the EU, 2022d) further strengthens this architecture by facilitating recognition of smaller units of learning, enabling adults to access modular and transferable opportunities without committing to full qualifications. Together, these initiatives reduce structural barriers to participation and make lifelong learning more navigable and inclusive.

Transitions between education, training and employment remain critical points of vulnerability. Effective lifelong learning systems institutionalise cross-sector co-ordination, recognition of prior learning and mobility across pathways, reducing uncertainty for learners and employers alike. EU initiatives on automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad (European Commission, 2023) reflect an ambition to ensure that learning outcomes are transferable and trusted across borders, strengthening both personal agency and labour market integration.

Ultimately, lifelong learning is not solely an economic strategy but a social contract. Grounded in the right to education, as articulated in international human rights frameworks and reaffirmed within EU policy, it extends beyond initial schooling to encompass access to quality learning throughout life, which is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in societal life with increased autonomy levels. By building coherent pathways, supporting transitions, engaging families and ensuring inclusive access at every stage, lifelong learning underpins social mobility, democratic participation and long-term resilience and sustainability. Within the EEA, it serves as a foundational pillar for an education system designed not only to respond to change, but to enable individuals and communities to shape it.

Key actions

1. **Ensure coherent, flexible learning pathways** across all stages of education.
2. **Strengthen adaptability, learner agency and opportunities to reskill** throughout life.
3. **Support smooth transitions through co-ordinated policies** linking education, training, work and family engagement.

PILLAR 4: TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Teacher development and well-being are cornerstones of EU priorities for building equitable and inclusive education systems. The Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (2021–2030) positions 'quality, equity, inclusion and success for all' as its first strategic priority, emphasising the need to prepare, empower and motivate the education workforce as a systemic obligation (Council of the EU, 2021a, p. 66/4). This includes ensuring that teacher professional learning is continuous, practice-relevant and oriented towards inclusion, collaboration and digital innovation. The EU's approach mirrors EASNIE's long-standing view that inclusive education requires all teachers to be prepared to teach all learners and that professional learning must be embedded in everyday practice, not confined to one-off training (EASNIE, 2020; 2021).

The Council of the EU suggests that all statutory teacher education programmes should 'embed inclusion, equity and diversity, understanding underachievement and disengagement, and addressing well-being, mental health and bullying' (2022b, p. 12).

Therefore, educators must develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to foster inclusion, tackle bias and prejudice, support learner motivation and deliver high-quality learning outcomes for diverse groups, in co-operation with other stakeholders (Council of the EU, 2021c).

Across its work, EASNIE has consistently framed teacher professional learning (TPL) as a collective, enquiry-based process grounded in school culture, principles of shared responsibility and reflection (EASNIE, 2022d). TPL is not simply a training activity; it requires structural and cultural conditions that enable teachers to improve their practice over time. Effective TPL depends on protected time, trusting professional cultures, collaboration within and across schools, and leadership that prioritises learning and practitioner enquiry (EASNIE, 2025c). This is assured through coherent policy frameworks that support sustainable TPL cultures, with access to flexible, high-quality continuing professional development and mechanisms for professional dialogue (EASNIE, 2022d).

This approach resonates with broader European guidance on professional learning, including the Council Recommendation on blended learning approaches, which encourages the use of tools such as SELFIE for TEACHERS, alongside whole-school digital planning frameworks that support teachers to reflect on their skills and plan further growth (Council of the EU, 2021d).

EASNIE's recent work on cross-sector collaboration reinforces the need for **connective professionalism**, where teachers work across disciplines, sectors and professional fields (EASNIE, forthcoming). This includes engaging specialists, social services and community partners, reflecting the notion that inclusive education depends on multi-professional co-operation (EASNIE, 2022e). TPL is therefore positioned not only as teacher-focused but as system-focused, strengthening schools' collective capacity to respond to learner diversity. EASNIE's evidence also stresses that TPL is essential for expanding inclusive practice to a wider range of learners – such as multilingual learners, migrant-background learners and neurodivergent learners – ensuring teachers develop asset-based, culturally-responsive approaches supported by research, reflection and collaborative learning.

These European priorities are echoed and deepened by international evidence. UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) (2021) emphasises that inclusive teaching relies on trust, collaboration, learning and attentive listening among educators and learners. UNESCO advances a holistic, 'whole-brain learner-centric' understanding of how cognitive and social-emotional dimensions of learning are interconnected (Duraiappah, Van Atteveldt, Buil, Singh & Wu, 2022, p. 13) and stresses that trauma, poverty and stress shape learning outcomes, requiring sensitive, relationship-centred teaching (ibid.). It argues for the importance of teacher flourishing, calling for strengthened professional status, lifelong learning systems, and attention to teachers' social-emotional development (ibid.).

UNESCO's future-oriented vision highlights the moral dimension of education. It calls for pedagogies to be 'based on ethics of reciprocity and care and recognize interdependencies among individuals, groups and among species' (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021, p. 51), while stressing the need to unlearn 'bias, prejudice, and divisiveness' and develop an understanding of 'how knowledge has been historically constituted and dialogically constructed, rather than just promote its transmission' (ibid., p. 54). Salas-Pilco, Xiao and Oshima (2022) reinforce the need for intercultural awareness, sensitivity and competence, while UNESCO IBE (2023a) highlights the importance of equipping teachers to teach for neurodivergence. A cross-national study by Dignath et al. (2022), drawing on data from 40 countries, further emphasises that teacher beliefs are foundational to inclusive practice and should be developed deliberately through structured, sustained professional learning.

Working conditions and professional cultures also shape teacher well-being. The OECD (2023d) shows that stress associated with classroom discipline – particularly in disadvantaged schools – is a major factor driving reduced job satisfaction and intentions to leave the profession. Stress from workload and shifting requirements also undermines teacher retention (ibid.). The OECD (Young, 2021) highlights the need to support teachers as they adopt digital and hybrid learning models, reinforcing the importance of autonomy, collaboration and trust within schools. These findings illustrate that teacher well-being and professional learning cannot be separated: teachers learn best in environments where they feel valued, supported and able to engage in reflective collaboration.

Taken together, EU frameworks, EASNIE evidence and international research converge on the need for coherent, sustained investment in teachers as the foundation of inclusive education systems.

Strengthening teachers' professional capacity, cultural responsiveness, digital literacy, autonomy and well-being is essential for achieving high-quality, equitable outcomes for all learners. Inclusive teacher development must be a shared, systemic and sustained process, not an individual responsibility.

Key actions

1. Provide continuous professional learning for **inclusive pedagogy, digital literacy and reflective practice**.

2. **Create supportive professional environments** that reduce stress, enhance job satisfaction and strengthen teacher well-being.

3. **Promote culturally-responsive and collaborative teaching** grounded in shared responsibility.

PILLAR 5: INNOVATIONS IN CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

EU policy strongly emphasises the need to modernise curriculum and assessment to ensure relevance, equity and inclusion in rapidly changing societies. The Council Resolution on the European Education Area (2021–2030) (Council of the EU, 2021a) highlights curriculum, assessment and teacher learning as interconnected levers for improving quality, equity and learner success. It calls for education systems to adopt more flexible, future-oriented and competency-based structures that can respond to societal, technological and environmental change. Complementing this, the Council Recommendation on ECEC (Council of the EU, 2022c) urges Member States to design learner-centred curricula based on inclusive and relational pedagogies and to enable diversified and personalised forms of teaching and learning that reflect all learners' strengths, needs and contexts. A further identified need is to strengthen competence in the language(s) of schooling, particularly for refugees and newly-arrived migrants (ibid). These two EU documents together provide a clear direction of travel: curriculum and assessment must promote meaningful participation, support broad learner development and enable learning that is relevant for democratic life, sustainability and the future of work.

EASNIE's work aligns closely with these EU policies. EASNIE consistently frames curriculum as a core mechanism for equity, shaping how teachers enable participation and success for all learners. It emphasises the need for coherent curriculum frameworks that embed inclusive principles across content, pedagogy and assessment, and that move away from categorical or deficit-based approaches that persist in many legislative and policy contexts (Kefallinou & Donnelly, 2016). This is reinforced by research calling for inclusive pedagogy, where curriculum and instruction are designed from the outset to anticipate learner diversity, rather than providing support only after learning barriers have emerged (Florian, 2015; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). As Florian notes:

> by extending ordinary provision to encompass a wider group of diverse learners where opportunities to participate are available to everyone, benefits for everyone are possible (2026, p. 3).

Designing curriculum and assessment through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014) has gained increasing prominence in the literature as a way to create flexible learning pathways and responsiveness to individual strengths and needs. EASNIE (2022e) similarly highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, meaningful involvement of learners and families, and strong alignment between school-level curriculum decisions and national inclusion policy commitments. Such co-design approaches are intended to democratise curriculum processes and strengthen participation. However, Guffey (2023) stresses that, if applied without care, these approaches can unintentionally pressure participants to conform, favour some voices over others or reduce participation to a procedural exercise. To prevent this, design processes should remain flexible, genuinely responsive to diverse needs, and ensure that all stakeholders have real influence over decisions.

International evidence reinforces this EU and EASNIE framing. UNESCO IBE refers to curriculum as the 'DNA of the education system' (2023b, p. 5), stressing that content selection and educational processes must reflect holistic understandings of learner development. Furthermore, it argues for competency-based curricula that foster equity and inclusion and for assessment practices that value agency and support broader measures of human flourishing (UNESCO IBE, 2023a).

Addressing the global challenge of misinformation, UNESCO underscores the role of interdisciplinary learning and scientific, digital and humanistic literacies in helping learners distinguish truth from falsehood (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). It highlights the need for curricula that incorporate diverse cultural, geographical and historical perspectives, enabling critical reflection on dominant ideas and the power structures behind knowledge production.

Sustainability and social justice are also identified as central curriculum priorities. UNESCO IBE (2023b) notes that curriculum legitimacy depends on responsiveness to each learner as a unique individual and on its ability to democratise learning opportunities. Such an inclusive curriculum recognises learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as central to belonging, engagement and identity. Over a quarter of a billion learners globally 'lack access to education in the language they understand best' (UNESCO, 2025d, p. 15), and treating multilingualism as a deficit can undermine confidence and participation. Learning in a familiar language – particularly in early years – has been shown to improve educational outcomes and strengthen social cohesion, while bilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility and creative problem-solving, supporting innovative approaches in teaching and learning (Marian, 2023). UNESCO calls for systemic change to:

> … move beyond the current binary thinking of 'multilingualism' and the 'language of instruction' which considers multilingualism as a barrier […] to seeing multilingualism as both an asset and resource for learning and being (2024b, p. 7).

UNESCO and the Brazilian Ministry of Education (2024a) emphasise the urgent need for climate-ready curricula, noting that climate-related disasters disrupt the education of nearly 40 million children each year and that half of national curricula still lack references to climate change.

The need for agile learning structures is reinforced in work by UNESCO IBE, which identifies three system-wide priorities: more agile teaching and learning, removal of disciplinary barriers, and strengthening 'the right to learn anywhere, anytime' (2022b, p. 3). This requires schools to rethink instructional time, cycles and formats and to enable personalised progressions tailored to individual learners.

OECD evidence underscores the need for a profound rethinking of curriculum aims as AI systems increasingly perform tasks once considered 'uniquely human', challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge (Fuster Rabella, 2025, p. 32). This shift raises questions about which human capabilities retain lasting value and highlights the importance of values, attitudes and moral purpose in education (OECD, 2021a). Curriculum innovations – including digital, personalised, cross-curricular and competency-based designs supported by UDL – aim to foster empathy, learner voice and flexibility (OECD, 2021b; 2024).

Complementing these reforms, assessment must also evolve: UNESCO IBE (2023a) emphasises assessments that capture a richer palette of human flourishing and give learners agency, while literature highlights the limitations of one-size-fits-all and age-normed assessments that can reinforce exclusion (Kavitha, Basira & Maruthi, 2023; Ydesen & Elfert, 2023; Connor et al., 2025). In response, UNESCO advocates for personalised learning trajectories, dynamic formative assessment, dispersion and variance measures, and strategies to reverse the harms of high-stakes testing (Duraiappah et al., 2022; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021; UNESCO, 2025a).

Assessment for Learning strategies operationalise these inclusive assessment reforms by making learning visible, participatory and actionable. Sharing learning intentions and success criteria, eliciting evidence, ranking samples of learner work and using all-learner response systems allow teachers to recognise diverse abilities and progress (Wiliam, 2011). Feedback that moves learning forward, practice testing and encouraging learners to take ownership of their learning support continuous improvement and autonomy (ibid.).

By incorporating inclusive principles into assessment and accountability frameworks, in line with new knowledge about learning and reflective teacher practice, assessment becomes more than a measure of performance; it grows into a tool to promote equity, agency and meaningful engagement, ensuring that education is inclusive and responsive to all learners (Kefallinou & Donnelly, 2016).

Taken together, EU guidance, EASNIE evidence and global research point to the need for inclusive, future-oriented curriculum and assessment systems that value diverse ways of knowing, respond to societal challenges and ensure that all learners can thrive.

Key actions

1. **Embed inclusion as a core principle** in curriculum and assessment design.
2. **Promote learner-centred assessment** that supports agency and recognises diverse learning.
3. **Develop future-oriented, interdisciplinary curricula** that develop human values, active citizenship, critical thinking and digital literacy.

PILLAR 6: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND AI

Across the EU, digital transformation is understood as fundamental to building equitable, accessible and future-ready education systems. EU policy emphasises the creation of inclusive digital ecosystems that combine equitable infrastructure and connectivity with high-quality digital tools, robust data protection and safe online participation. It further highlights the need to strengthen digital competences, media literacy and ethical, human-centred uses of AI, while supporting flexible, blended learning and co-ordinated governance across sectors. These shared priorities are articulated across several EU policy documents (see: European Commission, 2020a; 2020b; Council of the EU, 2018b; 2021d; 2023b).

EASNIE's work reinforces these EU priorities by framing digital transformation as inseparable from inclusion. It highlights that digitalisation must reduce barriers, not replicate them, ensuring accessible design, ethical data practices and UDL principles across digital tools (EASNIE, 2024b). Previous work on digital inclusion – such as EASNIE's collaboration with UNESCO on information and communication technologies for learners with disabilities (EASNIE & Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies, 2014) and its emphasis on accessible learning environments – provides clear guidance: digital strategies must be aligned with rights-based, learner-centred approaches. This requires stronger teacher preparation, collaborative capacity-building and coherent policy frameworks to ensure digital innovation benefits all learners, particularly those experiencing disadvantage. Across this work, digital transformation is framed as a system-level challenge that encompasses governance, professional learning, accessibility standards and the alignment of technology with inclusive pedagogies (EASNIE, 2024b).

International evidence underscores both the urgency and the complexity of digital transformation in education. Persistent inequalities in digital access and skills continue to disadvantage certain learner groups, while uneven teacher digital self-efficacy further reinforces these gaps (OECD, no date a; Young, 2022). OECD analyses emphasise that digital ecosystems extend beyond infrastructure to include system-level management tools, classroom practices and the humans who give technology educational meaning (OECD, 2023c). Crucially, the issue is not which tools are adopted but how they strengthen core pedagogical principles, professional judgement and learner

well-being (Forsström, Njå, Munthe, Houldsworth & Álvarez-Galván, 2025). Effective implementation therefore depends on equitable infrastructure, high-quality professional learning and organisational cultures that enable teachers to use digital technologies thoughtfully and responsibly.

International evidence also points to the key risks and enabling conditions for effective digital learning. It highlights that digital education must adapt pedagogy rather than reproduce analogue practices, reinforcing the need for sustained teacher learning (OECD, 2025b). Further analyses illustrate how emerging technologies – robotics, simulations, media production tools, extended reality and AI – can enhance personalised feedback, data-informed instruction and inclusion for diverse learners (Forsström, Njå, Munthe, Álvarez-Galván & Houldsworth, 2025). At the same time, the evidence notes significant limitations, including the difficulty of capturing social-emotional dimensions and risks related to privacy, bias and over-automation. Overall, AI tools appear particularly promising in collaborative and self-regulated learning contexts, but only when carefully designed and implemented with strong teacher involvement.

UNESCO brings a complementary perspective grounded in human rights, equity and ethical governance. Recent analyses highlight that AI is reshaping how learners access and create knowledge while, at the same time, one third of the world remains offline, deepening existing inequalities (UNESCO, 2025e). The central educational challenge is therefore preparing learners to navigate an AI-centred world through critical, ethical and culturally-responsive education. Evidence also points to significant risks, including misinformation, cultural homogenisation, loss of linguistic diversity, surveillance and algorithmic discrimination, reinforcing the need for human-centred, rights-based digital ecosystems (UNESCO, 2025f). This requires regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency, accountability and strong protections for vulnerable groups. Complementing this, recent guidance examines how generative AI may threaten core humanistic values, such as agency, inclusion, equity and cultural diversity, and provides design principles to ensure these technologies genuinely support learners and teachers (UNESCO, 2023b).

The research literature reinforces these concerns. Cabero-Almenara and Barroso-Osuna (2025) note that easy-to-use AI tools may reduce learners' cognitive effort and autonomy, leading to weaker critical thinking. Morozov's distinction between augmentation and enhancement – where augmentation may diminish human capability while enhancement expands it (ibid.) – provides a useful lens for policy-making. UNESCO (Labate & Opertti, 2023) situates hybrid learning as a structural shift that requires cross-sector co-operation and rethinking the roles of teachers, learners and learning spaces. The OECD (Hill, 2022) stresses the need for algorithmic awareness and strong verification skills within media literacy education, noting that children often use suboptimal indicators to judge credibility. The OECD identifies four categories of digital risk – content, conduct, contract and contact – that must be addressed comprehensively (no date b). UNESCO warns that technology in education can expose children to privacy and security harms if regulatory measures are insufficient (Global Education Monitoring Report Team & Right to Education Initiative, 2023).

Taken together, EU priorities, EASNIE evidence and international research lead to a clear conclusion: digital transformation and AI can significantly advance inclusion and personalise learning – but only with equitable access, ethical governance, high-quality professional learning and a strong emphasis on digital and media literacy. Digital tools must serve human development, expand agency and enable learners to participate safely, creatively and critically in an increasingly complex digital world – requiring co-ordinated efforts to ensure equitable, ethical and effective use.

Key actions

1. Ensure **equitable access to digital tools** and infrastructure.

2. Promote **strong media literacy and safe digital practices**.

3. Promote **use of AI for personalised learning** and system efficiency, anchored in **ethical guidelines**.

PILLAR 7: CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Across the EU, cross-sector collaboration is recognised as essential for achieving equitable, coherent and learner-centred systems. EU policy calls for stronger links between education, health, social protection, employment and community services, emphasising integrated approaches that ensure early identification, co-ordinated support and holistic provision. These priorities appear across the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (Council of the EU, 2022b), the Communication on the European Education Area (European Commission, 2020b), the Council conclusions on inclusive, learner-centred practices (Council of the EU, 2025) and broader EU guidance on multi-agency co-operation, community-based support and coherent social policies.

EASNIE's work deepens this EU framing by presenting cross-sector collaboration as a core structural condition for high-quality inclusive education. Its Changing Role of Specialist Provision in Supporting Inclusive Education activity demonstrates the value of flexible, multi-professional arrangements enabling schools to draw effectively on health, social and community services (EASNIE, 2022e). A relevant background paper emphasises that system coherence increases when collaboration is embedded across governance levels and that cross-sector structures strengthen teachers' work by reducing fragmentation and improving access to specialist expertise (EASNIE, 2025c). The Collaborative Action for Inclusive Education framework outlines the essential enabling factors for collaboration: shared vision, distributed leadership, professional trust, aligned roles and responsibilities, interagency capacity-building and joint monitoring mechanisms (EASNIE, forthcoming). Overall, EASNIE's evidence shows that inclusive education systems must function as interconnected ecosystems, not isolated sectors.

International evidence strongly supports this view. The OECD (2023a) argues that inclusive education requires a holistic approach, requiring education systems to look beyond policy silos and build partnerships to secure collaboration with, for example, health and social services. It also highlights that fragmented governance, inconsistent accountability structures, unclear mandates and lack of data-sharing frameworks undermine collaboration, particularly for vulnerable learners (OECD, 2025a). At the local level, it notes that schools and other places of learning can act as hubs,

connecting individuals and families with resources and services in the local community (OECD, 2021c).

UNESCO (2025c) likewise emphasises that, as well as learning, hubs have a broader role in delivering childcare, health and well-being services and connecting to more formal multi-sector policy interventions.

This evidence aligns with research showing that the increasing complexity of today's classrooms demands whole-system responses, rather than isolated solutions. As Edwards and Downes argue, 'schools cannot work alone' (2013, p. 9); they require systemic co-ordination at national, municipal and local levels. This includes collaboration between ministries to overcome long-standing 'siloed' models of service delivery (Patana, 2020) and multi-professional partnerships at school level to provide timely and holistic support.

Cross-sector collaboration mobilises shared resources, strengthens coherence and can enhance the teaching profession by expanding professional capacity and reducing isolation (Nilsson Brodén, 2022). However, it is also challenging. Research identifies several persistent barriers, including mismatched goals and priorities, bureaucratic constraints, funding limitations, communication breakdowns and conflicting organisational cultures (Haq, Judijanto & Jasuli, 2025).

Effective cross-sector ecosystems must acknowledge power imbalances and sometimes competing objectives – between sectors, professionals, institutions and communities. Collaboration should be designed to respond to the needs of learners, families and communities, rather than directing them. This requires participatory governance, co-developed goals and mechanisms that elevate voices often excluded from decision-making (EASNIE, 2025c; forthcoming). Successful collaboration therefore requires all parties' strong, sustained commitment to open communication, transparency and collaborative problem-solving, working within flexible but clearly defined frameworks that promote mutual respect and shared responsibility (Haq et al., 2025).

Inclusive cross-sector work must also be grounded in an understanding of intersectionality, recognising that interconnected identities – including socio-economic status, disability, migration background, linguistic diversity, gender and race – shape learners' needs and accommodations (Bešić, 2020; EASNIE, 2022f). When intersectionality is not addressed, inclusion policies risk inadvertently creating new discriminatory processes (Bešić, 2020). Cross-sector efforts between education, health and social services are essential for responding to the needs of diverse learners (Vidal et al., 2024).

Community hubs, extended learning environments and local multi-service centres are promising mechanisms for enabling co-ordinated responses, bringing education, health, social care and community organisations together around learners and their families. Technology also plays a critical enabling role, supporting communication, shared information systems and integrated case management, improving responsiveness to complex individual and family needs.

Taken together, the evidence strongly suggests that cross-sector ecosystems are essential to deliver coherent, equitable and sustainable support for all learners.

Key actions

1. **Integrate education, health, social and community services** to provide co-ordinated, learner-centred support.

2. **Strengthen multi-professional and cross-sector teams** that enable early identification and holistic provision.

3. **Promote shared governance and aligned responsibilities** to ensure coherent, equitable cross-sector ecosystems.

PILLAR 8: INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Across the EU, governance reforms increasingly emphasise coherence, shared responsibility and system-level alignment to ensure equitable and inclusive education. The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, no date c) positions quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning as a core entitlement, signalling that governance structures must guarantee equal opportunities through co-ordinated, cross-sectoral policy action (European Commission, 2017). The Communication on the EEA reinforces this direction, calling for stronger governance capacity, collaboration across sectors and evidence-informed reform to strengthen institutions and improve learning environments (European Commission, 2020b). More recently, the Council Conclusions on children, youth and children's rights stress the need for integrated governance frameworks that connect education with social protection and youth participation through coherent national strategies (Council of the EU, 2024a).

Within this broader context, EASNIE (2021) provides a framework for examining education systems as holistic, interconnected structures, reinforcing EU priorities for co-ordinated and participatory reform. Further work by EASNIE on cross-sector collaboration and governance (2025c) demonstrates that effective systems rely on transparent structures that enable schools, health agencies and welfare services to operate as interconnected networks rather than isolated units.

International evidence further emphasises the need for governance systems capable of managing complexity across multiple levels and actors. As these systems respond to demographic change, inequality and diverse learner needs, governance must become more agile and relational – prioritising co-creation processes and fostering a 'new professionalism' among all stakeholders (EASNIE, 2025c, p. 13).

To ensure system coherence, the OECD (2022a) suggests a comprehensive strategy to align governance structures and balance local responsiveness to national goals (Liebowitz et al., 2018; Burns & Cerna, 2016), including support structures to connect and co-ordinate between different system levels and reinforce public responsibility for inclusive high-quality education for all.

Emerging models highlight a shift towards **polycentric governance**, characterised by distributed authority and multiple centres of decision-making. This approach is rooted in the work of Ostrom and colleagues, who argued that effective governance arises when diverse actors regulate interdependent relationships rather than relying on a single central authority (Ostrom et al., 1961, cited in Ehren et al., 2017, p. 366). Ehren et al. (ibid.) extend this framework into contemporary education systems, showing that polycentric arrangements – supported by transparent, open governance – enable networks of schools and stakeholders to collectively shape education quality. UNESCO's analyses (2020) also reinforce the need for governance that promotes public involvement, shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making.

Leadership plays a crucial bridging role within such governance models. However, recent analysis highlights that leadership has not sufficiently embraced inclusion as a whole-system commitment (Slee & Watkins, 2025). Leadership practices often remain anchored in special needs paradigms, and reforms focus more on administration than on the cultural change required for inclusion. A new knowledge base is therefore needed – one that supports leaders to move beyond deficit assumptions, cultivate inclusive organisational cultures and enact equity-driven system transformation (ibid).

EASNIE (2018a) has provided insights on the forms of leadership that can move systems towards the cultural change required for genuine inclusion: distributed, collaborative leadership strengthens inclusive school cultures, transformational leadership helps create shared vision and commitment, while instructional leadership directly contributes to improved teaching quality and collaborative professional structures. Other analyses point to the need for leadership competencies to orchestrate learning ecosystems, champion equity, manage dynamic complexity and innovation, and develop agency in oneself and others (OECD, 2025c). Leaders can then build staff resilience and promote professional well-being through collaborative structures (Young, 2021).

Leaders must bridge professional, cultural and organisational boundaries to create space for integrated practice – a concept that Schot, Tummers and Noordegraaf (2020) define as boundary-spanning leadership. This approach is vital in systems where responsibilities are shared across multiple actors. Rather than forcing learners to fit into rigid existing systems, leaders should focus on creating personalised learner pathways that support holistic development (Ainscow, 2024).

This inclusive leadership becomes especially critical when schools function as community hubs, integrating education with health, social and psychological services. Evidence suggests that inter-school collaboration strengthens the capacity to address learner diversity and reduces divisions that put learners at risk of exclusion (Ainscow, 2016; Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman & West, 2011). Furthermore, engaging with external practices encourages teachers to challenge assumptions about underachievement and refine their pedagogy (Gerdes, Goei, Huizinga & De Ruyter, 2021). Ultimately, local co-ordination is an essential condition for sustaining these community-based collaborative efforts.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that inclusive governance and leadership can shape environments that promote lifelong learning through high expectations, individual agency and collaborative cultures. This requires distributed, participatory and networked models spanning sectors and communities, grounded in trust, transparency and shared responsibility. Governance for inclusion must support co-ordinated, evidence-informed and future-oriented decision-making at every level of the system.

Key actions

1. **Strengthen distributed, collaborative leadership** that drives equity and shared responsibility across the system.

2. **Build coherent, transparent governance structures** that align policy, practice and accountability for inclusion.

3. **Promote networked collaboration across schools and sectors** so institutions act as connected ecosystems, not isolated units.

PILLAR 9: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND MONITORING

Ensuring quality and sustainability in inclusive education requires monitoring, evaluation and accountability frameworks that support long-term system improvement. At the EU level, current priorities emphasise the need for sustained investment to improve outcomes for all learners, calling on Member States to strengthen national strategies that embed children's rights across education and related policy areas (Council of the EU, 2024a). This structural commitment, exemplified by the European Child Guarantee, supports equal access to high-quality services for children facing disadvantage (Council of the EU, 2021e). Furthermore, aligning national and EU resources ensures that financial investments reinforce long-term structural ambitions rather than isolated initiatives (Council of the EU, 2022b). Collectively, these policies frame sustainable investment as a prerequisite for high-quality, equitable and resilient education systems.

Effective quality assurance and monitoring frameworks are the operational tools that strengthen this perspective. While few countries currently operate integrated quality assurance systems spanning school, local and national levels, a multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach is essential (EASNIE, 2024a). For these systems to be effective, they must satisfy the following key criteria:

- Alignment with international, EU and national commitments
- Structured dialogue across school and system actors
- Adaptability to specific country contexts
- Applicability across all sectors influencing inclusive education (EASNIE, 2025d).

Monitoring at the school level must capture a broad range of qualitative and quantitative information, involving diverse stakeholders to create a holistic view of learner and school performance (EASNIE, 2024a; 2025e). Quality assurance activities should link coherently across levels through clear indicators that guide improvement and support accountability (EASNIE, 2024a).

Ultimately, quality assurance and sustainable investment are interdependent: monitoring systems ensure transparency and accountability, while investment provides the capacity for innovation, equity and system resilience.

International evidence reinforces this framing, noting that the right to education requires evidence-based, inclusive and accountable systems supported by robust data mechanisms capable of identifying intersecting inequalities (Benavides & Poisson, 2025). Transparency across inputs, processes and outcomes is vital for enabling stakeholder engagement and effective evaluation. System transformation further depends on co-ordinated, whole-government action across climate, human rights, gender equality, health, nutrition and technology (UNESCO & Brazilian Ministry of Education, 2024b). Long-term, whole-school and whole-institution strategies consistently prove more transformative than short-term interventions (UNESCO & Brazilian Ministry of Education, 2024c).

These insights are further supported by the link between education for sustainable development and inclusion, which share core values of equity, resilience and solidarity (Rončević & Rieckmann, 2025). Both fields face the shared challenge of balancing diversity with standardisation, requiring international co-operation to align national systems with the Sustainable Development Goals. Monitoring, accountability and investment must therefore shape high-quality education that enables individuals to navigate digital transformation while addressing emerging global challenges like climate change (OECD, 2022b).

From the evidence presented, a consistent picture emerges: quality assurance and sustainable investment are mutually reinforcing pillars of inclusive, future-ready education systems. Robust quality assurance ensures transparency, accountability and continuous improvement; sustainable investment ensures that systems have the capacity, stability and flexibility to innovate, respond to global challenges and uphold every learner's right to quality education.

Key actions

1. **Develop robust, multi-level monitoring and evaluation systems** to ensure transparency and continuous improvement across schools and systems.
2. **Ensure sustained, equitable investment** that supports long-term system resilience and high-quality inclusive education.
3. **Use transparent, data-informed processes** to guide decision-making and align policies with international and EU commitments.

PILLAR 10: FINANCING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Financing and resource allocation are core structural conditions for building and sustaining inclusive education systems. Across EU and international policy, investment is recognised as a critical driver of equity, quality and participation. The Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (Council of the EU, 2022b) stresses the importance of aligning national resources with EU funding streams, such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), Erasmus+ and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to support inclusion and learner well-being, emphasising strategic and coherent use of funds rather than isolated, short-term projects. The European Child Guarantee reinforces the need to prioritise investment for children facing disadvantage to strengthen long-term social cohesion and equal opportunities (Council of the EU, 2021e). These instruments signal a shared expectation that education financing must be sustained, equity-focused and supportive of national reforms.

EASNIE evidence positions financing within a broader conception of system-level development. The Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems (FPIES) Policy Guidance Framework (EASNIE, 2018b) emphasises that funding is not an end but a mechanism for realising inclusive education goals across national, regional and local levels. Financing should enable access to high-quality mainstream provision, support flexible and responsive learning environments and reinforce cross-sector collaboration. The FPIES summary and synthesis reports (EASNIE, 2018c; 2018d) highlight key priorities:

- preventing inequitable and costly exclusionary practices;
- strengthening school development approaches that promote shared responsibility for inclusion;
- investing in innovative learning environments through capacity-building;
- developing transparent, accountable financing systems.

Taken together, these insights point to the centrality of systemic coherence, long-term sustainability and governance that supports inclusive transformation.

Beyond financial allocations, inclusive education systems rely on the strategic deployment of human resources. EASNIE work consistently demonstrates that teachers, school leaders, pedagogical teams and multi-disciplinary professionals are the core drivers of inclusion. The Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education and Inclusive Early Childhood Education activities show that effective inclusive systems depend on multi-professional collaboration supported by staffing models that enable co-teaching, joint planning, early intervention and continual communication between services, rather than deficit-based referral pathways. Evidence from the Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education and Changing Role of Specialist Provision in Supporting Inclusive Education activities underscores that specialist expertise should be embedded within mainstream settings – not isolated in separate structures – to enhance UDL, build whole-school capability and ensure continuity of support. Ensuring sufficient staffing, balanced workloads and equitable distribution of expertise across territories is therefore a key dimension of resource allocation, essential for meeting diverse learner needs and reducing geographical and socio-economic disparities.

International guidance further clarifies how equitable financing should function. UNESCO emphasises that inclusive education requires sustained investment throughout all phases of lifelong learning, including digital learning, vocational pathways, adult literacy and upskilling opportunities. Reducing opportunity costs for marginalised learners through social protection measures is considered essential to enable full participation in lifelong learning (2025a). International law requires a state to finance education to 'the maximum of its available resources', which is now understood to include financial, human, technological, organisational and administrative capacities (ibid., p. 32).

Effective use of resources relies on strong governance. UNESCO highlights that financial governance – rooted in strong institutions, sound management, efficient co-ordination and trust – is essential to ensure that funds reach schools and are used effectively (Benavides & Poisson, 2025). Weak financial management often results in inefficiencies, misaligned budgets or leakage, preventing resources from improving equity or quality. Strengthening public financial management systems, promoting transparency and involving communities in decision-making are therefore essential (UNESCO, 2025a). OECD analysis (2022b) similarly emphasises the need for education ministries to demonstrate value for money, align resourcing with educational priorities and work closely with finance ministries, particularly in contexts of fiscal scrutiny. The OECD further notes that efficiency and equity can be mutually reinforcing when investment focuses on ECEC, teacher quality, preventing school failure and adapting school networks to demographic changes (ibid.).

The 2024 Council Conclusions on strategic partnerships (Council of the EU, 2024d) underscore that partnerships – including, where appropriate, public-private partnerships (PPPs) – can enhance effectiveness and equity by directing investment to priority areas, strengthening links with labour market needs, supporting innovation with emerging technologies and contributing to capacity-building and sustainable infrastructure. However, these Conclusions describe PPPs as one possible form of collaboration, not a universal model. EASNIE evidence and international research show that PPPs require careful regulation in inclusive education. UNESCO explicitly states that 'the role of non-State actors […] must be clearly regulated' to ensure alignment with human rights and to prevent private sector involvement from undermining 'State obligations to provide public, free and quality education' (2025f, p. 84). It cautions that non-state actors' interventions must be regulated to ensure that education remains a public responsibility, with mechanisms to prevent

commercialisation and uphold equity and quality across all providers, whose responsibilities and capacities may vary.

The Global Education Monitoring Report further warns that inadequately regulated PPPs can reduce accountability, reinforce inequalities and narrow the aims of education when commercial interests shape curriculum, assessment or digital platforms (Global Education Monitoring Report Team & South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization, 2023). Similarly, OECD analysis cautions that, without adequate regulation, public funding of private providers may harm the public system and contribute to inequities, and that fragmented governance arrangements can create inefficiencies and undermine transparency (2022c).

Therefore, partnerships must be transparently governed, demonstrably aligned with national priorities and rights-based commitments, and must reinforce – not dilute – the public responsibility for inclusive, high-quality education for all.

Across EU, EASNIE and international guidance, a convergent message emerges: sustainable, equitable and transparent allocation of financial and human resources is essential for building inclusive and resilient education systems. Investment must support innovation, equity and lifelong learning for all, while robust governance ensures effective use of resources and reduces disparities. Clear regulation of non-state actors is necessary to uphold human rights and protect the public good.

Key actions

1. Ensure **sustainable, equitable investment** to support innovation, equity and long-term system capacity.

2. **Allocate resources strategically** to strengthen inclusive practice and meet the needs of learners and communities.

3. **Regulate private-sector involvement** to uphold the public good and safeguard state obligations for inclusive, high-quality education.

LOOKING AHEAD: A SHARED FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

The Ten Pillars presented in this background paper offer a unifying framework for strengthening inclusive education across Europe. Taken together, they move beyond individual country reforms and outline how education systems can operate more coherently, collaboratively and sustainably in the years ahead.

Each Pillar highlights a necessary dimension of system transformation. However, the Pillars' real power lies in how they reinforce one another: placing learners at the centre, enabling families and communities to participate meaningfully, supporting teachers, modernising curriculum and assessment, ensuring ethical digital innovation, aligning services across sectors, and strengthening governance, quality assurance and investment.

This framework reaffirms an essential message: **inclusion can be viewed as the organising principle of high-quality education**. The challenges shaping Europe – social fragmentation, demographic change, climate pressures, technological acceleration – require systems that are resilient, equitable and responsive. The Pillars aim to provide a shared language and structure for countries to navigate these complexities while upholding every learner's rights.

EASNIE's long-standing mission has been to support its member countries in building education systems where all learners are valued, participate meaningfully and succeed. The decades ahead will require even deeper collaboration, stronger evidence-informed policy-making and sustained political commitment. These Pillars provide a strategic foundation for collective work – grounded in equity, human dignity and the conviction that inclusive education strengthens not only schools, but societies as a whole.

At the same time, it is essential to recognise that context matters (Ainscow, forthcoming). Approaches that prove effective in one setting may not yield the same results in another. Careful, context-sensitive implementation is therefore crucial to ensure meaningful and lasting impact.

Drawing on its 30 years of experience, EASNIE continues to position itself as a key partner in supporting countries on their inclusive journeys – for example, in translating this framework into country-specific strategic pathways and action plans, developed through participatory processes with national, regional and local stakeholders.

As it marks its 30th anniversary, EASNIE looks forward not by commemorating the past, but by renewing its commitment to shaping futures where inclusion is lived – in classrooms, communities and systems – every day, everywhere, for every learner.

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