

EASPD Response to European Commission consultation on Achieving the European Education Area

The European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) **welcomes the European Commission’s roadmap on the European Education Area (EEA) and its ambition to enable all learners across Europe to have access to a high-quality, inclusive education by 2025.**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of most schools, training centres and universities across Europe has been a major challenge to the continued education of large numbers of learners. While many schools have adapted quickly and have developed efficient methods of remote schooling, others have fallen behind, leaving many students, particularly those with support needs, **without access to quality education and at risk of exclusion from society.**

If Europe is to successfully **recover from the pandemic**, as well as **build a more resilient society and economy**, it is crucial that access to high-quality education and training opportunities for everyone is prioritised, in line with the objectives set out by the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillar of Social Rights. As a result, EASPD **supports the European Commission’s aim** to “reinforce the commitment to make quality and inclusive education and training available to all” via the EEA. EASPD **also welcomes the Commission’s recognition of the importance of quality early childhood education and care** as the first building blocks for the EEA.

To ensure the successful implementation of the EEA, EASPD recommends that:

- **The EEA recognises the key role support services play in enabling all learners, particularly those from vulnerable groups, to access high-quality, inclusive learning opportunities in mainstream settings**

Many learners require additional support in accessing learning opportunities in mainstream settings. By working closely with educators, schools and training providers, support and social services enable all students, regardless of their support needs or background, to access the same opportunities as their peers and be fully included in society. The important role these services play in enabling all young people to benefit from the best education and training should be acknowledged in the EEA’s initiatives and should facilitate their work further.

- **The European Commission promotes co-production, the continuous involvement of all stakeholders in the design, development and delivery of education initiatives.**

For the successful establishment of the EEA, it is crucial that all stakeholders including educators, learners (including those with additional support needs), support and social services as well as families, are actively involved in the design, development and delivery of education initiatives. Consultations like these are an important first step to co-producing

sustainable EU-level policies and initiatives which meet the needs of all. Further efforts should be made to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way at all stages of the development and implementation process as well as to encourage the use of co-production at a Member-State Level.

- **Address the inclusion of vulnerable groups in education and lifelong learning programmes via a twin track approach**

If the EU wants to deliver on its goals and a EEA that promotes the full inclusion and participation of all, its initiatives should recognise persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups as key target groups that need to be able to benefit from the initiative. In particular, many stakeholders can often hold negative attitudes or misconceptions towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream education settings. By identifying persons with disabilities as a key target group, who should be included in and benefit from the EEA, the European Union can further support the change of attitudes towards the inclusion of these students in mainstream settings.

- **Facilitate the increased data collection and monitoring of the inclusion of learners in education systems across Europe**

Currently there is a lack of hard data or statistics concerning children from vulnerable groups and the reality of inclusive education in different countries. This lack of data prevents a deeper analysis of the state of inclusive education. The collection and monitoring of data is also necessary to provide stakeholders working in inclusive education with the critical information on how they can adjust policies to achieve goals linked to inclusive education, further contributing to the achievement of the goals of the EEA. This lack of specific data needs to be addressed by the EEA if it is to support access to high quality education and training for all. The European Semester could provide a key tool, via which the EU can enable the comprehensive collection of data for inclusive education across a number of target groups and thus better monitor the realisation of high-quality, inclusive education systems across Europe. With the support of this data collection process the European Semester's Country Specific Recommendations can play a further role in promoting reform in line with the EEA's objectives in each Member State.

- **Ensure that the initiatives of the EEA are supported with the appropriate investment and funding**

The EU's budget has long been a key contributor to the development of higher quality learning and training opportunities for all. The EU's next long-term budget must continue to invest in education, if the EEA is to be successful in realising its aims. The proposed doubling of the Erasmus+ budget is welcome step forward, helping the Programme to reach out to even more

young people, enabling them to access new opportunities for cultural and social development as well as promoting economic growth. However, the EU budget holds further opportunities for the European Union to contribute to the establishment of high-quality education and training systems across Europe. One key opportunity is the increased representation of education in the European Semester process. By creating a stronger focus on education and promoting education reform via the Country Specific Recommendations, the Semester process can also facilitate the more effective use of EU funding programmes such as the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund, to support education where it is needed most.

In addition, with COVID-19 having impacted the sector and brought a new reality in which we will live, work and learn, the Next Generation EU repair package must also reach the education sector, to ensure that it can recover from the pandemic and innovate, enabling it prepare the next generation.

- **Create Stronger links between the Child Guarantee and the EEA to achieve their joint objectives**

As acknowledged by the European Commission, quality early childhood education and care is a foundation for better learning results and jobs. The European Union's Child Guarantee is a key tool via which the EU can promote access to free education as well as early childhood education and care for children in Europe who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. As a result, the Child Guarantee can contribute of the achievement of the EEA's main objectives and stronger links should be made between the initiatives, to enable them to complement each other actions to achieve this joint aim. If the Child Guarantee is to be successful however, it must also be properly funded and it is vital that investments are made into ensuring the delivery of community-based, person centred Early Childhood Services, giving everyone the best start in life.

To conclude, EASPD welcomes the European Commission's Roadmap for Achieving the European Education Area and its commitment to bringing down to learning for everyone. To do this they must recognise the key role of support services in making the EEA a reality and facilitate their work; include all stakeholders in the design, development and delivery of these initiatives and ensure the EEA is supported with adequate funding and investment. EASPD looks forward to continuing to support the establishment of a cohesive European Education Area that enables all young people to benefit from the best education and training, and to find employment across Europe.