

Equality in early childhood education highlighted in European study ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Across all EU countries, around three-quarters of experts taking part in the survey believed that there was a strong or very strong need to ensure equal opportunities in early childhood education.

In the assessment of 'equal opportunities' in Early Childhood Education, Sweden and Denmark were found to have the highest need for reform out of 25 countries in Europe, while the UK was placed towards the bottom for reform performance in this area (rank 14/16). Ireland was ranked first for performance and second for reform quality in the assessment of equal opportunities in Early Childhood Education.

The definition of equal opportunities was left to the survey participants' interpretation, and survey answers reflected both on equal access to education and on significant differences in the quality of provision.

The official EU target is for 95 percent of children to attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) by 2020. However, in children below the age of three, ECEC enrolment rates vary tremendously between EU countries.

Co-author of the study Professor Dr Marius Busemeyer of the University of Konstanz co-author of the study, who wrote the introduction to the chapter on equitable education, said, 'Ensuring equitable access to high-quality education is and should be a top priority in attempts to promote social inclusion in Europe. In the long run, ensuring that every individual – from early childhood to adulthood – can maximise his or her educational potential is a matter of both social justice and economic efficiency.'

'Research has shown that the class bias in access to ECEC is stronger in countries with low levels of overall enrolment,' Professor Dr Busemeyer wrote in the paper. 'When levels of enrolment are low, which is often associated with quality problems and/or high levels of fees for child care institutions, ECEC might actually exacerbate existing inequalities rather than mitigate them.'

One anonymous Danish expert quoted in the report said, 'If we are striving after equal opportunities for all, the field of early childhood education needs focus. It's highly difficult to get equal opportunities for all when immigrant children start primary school with no Danish skills and without mandatory mother tongue education.'

The United Kingdom was ranked in last place in the survey's overall assessment of social reforms, while the experts rated the quality of educational reforms in the UK as the lowest in the EU.

The UK came at the bottom of the ranking because it was found to have the worst overall reform quality in comparison to 19 other EU member states, despite relatively good rates of reform activity.

The Social Inclusion Monitor Europe (SIM Europe) project, developed by the non-profit foundation Bertelsmann Stiftung, invited social policy experts from across Europe to participate in the Reform Barometer 2016 survey.

The research aimed to examine how much need there is for reform in individual member states of the EU, what policy reforms had been introduced, and whether they were expected to have a positive or negative effect, by asking experts in different policy fields across Europe.

1,058 academics from across the EU took part by giving scores for policy activity in the 28 EU member states.

They were asked to evaluate reforms in individual countries in six different categories: poverty prevention, equitable education, labour market access, social cohesion and non-discrimination, health, and inter-generational justice.

44 per cent of the experts surveyed identified a need to improve the structural and funding conditions in early childhood education, in comparison with 30 per cent of respondents finding this for other educational sectors.

The survey concluded that Greece, Bulgaria, France, Spain, Italy and the UK have the highest overall need for social policy reforms out of 23 EU member states, in this order.

This indicates that recent social policy reform efforts in the UK were considered by experts to be largely ineffective or had adverse effects, according to survey respondents.

The report identified the UK's greatest challenge in education reform to be ensuring that an individual's socio-economic background was independent from a person's learning success.

The survey respondents gave the UK the lowest scores out of 16 countries with sufficient data for its reform performance in the 'Independence of Learning Success from Socioeconomic Background' category.

The findings showed that Eastern European countries such as Croatia not only took more action than the EU average to improve social inclusion, but also received good marks from the experts for the quality of their reforms.

Croatia, the youngest EU member, leads the report's Reform Barometer 2016 performance ranking (which reflects both reform activity by governments and reform quality), while older EU member states such as France and the UK showed 'reform fatigue', the report stated.

The report noted that while Croatia and the United Kingdom have roughly the same debt-to-GDP ratio (just below 90 per cent), they differ most strongly with respect to reform performance.

Countries with high performance scores include Bulgaria ranked second and Romania sixth in the overall rankings. One of the reforms experts reported for Bulgaria was the introduction of mandatory pre-school education.

The survey was conducted by Bertelsmann Stiftung in cooperation with the European Bureau for Policy Consulting and Social Research Vienna.

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