



European
Commission



Key competences for all: Policy design and implementation for education systems in Europe

Draft recommendations for policy makers

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

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Introduction

Young people need a broad set of competences, including basic skills for their own personal fulfilment and development, to find fulfilling employment and to become engaged citizens and lifelong learners. Globalisation, structural changes in the labour market and the rapid development of new technologies require everyone to develop and update competences throughout life. Young people need to build the resilience and competences to cope with rapid changes—as demonstrated by the changes caused by the ongoing COVID-19 crisis—and to play active roles in shaping positive futures. Increasing the level of key competences is therefore at the heart of the European Education Area –a space where all young people should receive the best education and training, regardless of their background.

This document sets out recommendations for policy makers on the design and implementation of competence-based education reforms and initiatives. The recommendations were developed through a policy learning process involving a group of education policy makers and stakeholders from five European case study countries, facilitated, and supported by a group of experts. The five countries – Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovakia – have diverse education governance structures and have approached design of policies and implementation differently. Taken together, they are broadly representative of different education systems across Europe. The policy learning process has allowed rich opportunities for mutual exchange and learning among the five countries.

Policy recommendations

These recommendations are based on reflections on experiences and “lessons learned” in the design and implementation of competence-based education in the five case study countries. Policy makers in other countries referring to these recommendations may more easily adapt strategies that are more appropriate for their own governance context and the specific challenges they face. Indeed, the complexity of change in the different multi-layer, multi-actor education systems is extremely high.¹ This is particularly important as competence-based approaches are in and of themselves complex, requiring schools to adopt new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and new ways of working and collaboration. These changes may be introduced through multiple, sequenced policy initiatives over time. Careful building of political commitment among key education policy actors and stakeholders and development of implementation capacities over time is required.²

¹ Burns, T. & Köster F. (ed) (2016) *Governing Education in a complex world*, OECD Publishing, Paris; Honig, M. (ed.) (2006), *New directions in education policy implementation: confronting complexity*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY; Thiesens, H., Hooge, E. and Waslander, S. (2016). “Steering dynamics in complex education systems: An Agenda for Empirical Research”, *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp. 463 - 477.

² Halász, G. (2019). Designing and implementing teacher policies using competence frameworks as an integrative policy tool, *European Journal of Education*. Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 323 – 336.

By referring to these recommendations, policy makers in other countries can design strategies adapted to their own governance context and the specific challenges they face.

The recommendations are structured to reflect the policy cycle including:

- policy design and early implementation
- deepening of policies and practices
- formative and summative evaluation to support improvement and understand impacts,
- and planning for the future.

While these guidelines are organised around the broad stages of policy design and implementation, this structure is not intended to suggest a linear model. Successful systems adapt strategies as needed. Strong, open channels of communication across systems are essential.

1.0 Recommendations on policy design and implementation: early stages

The overall aims and strategic direction for education initiatives are set in the earliest stages of policy design and implementation. Values and aspirations for education and student competence development, based on the purposes of school education, are given form, and a “theory of change” is set in motion. In these early stages, it is important to ensure the political commitment of key actors and to involve them in development of a clear logic for policy changes. Policies need to reflect stakeholders’ values and aspirations for education, including aims for students’ competence development, and to also be grounded in evidence. Broad agreement on the purposes of and need for these changes can help to focus dialogue among diverse stakeholder groups.

1.1 Engage stakeholders in the design of policy initiatives

Research has found that effective stakeholder engagement supports accountability, efficiency, and good governance.³ Broad stakeholder engagement is most effective when there is attention to building trust-based relationships, and when the resulting decisions taken at all levels are based on clear and transparent processes.⁴ Structured processes on shared values and aspirations, pedagogy and curricula may also support stakeholders’ shared sense-making and learning.⁵ Capacity for constructive dialogue and debate, structured around a unified vision for education in the country may also need to be built (or re-built) over time.

Engagement of social partners and civil society in the early stages may involve lengthy periods of dialogue and negotiation, but supports implementation, ownership and sustainability of initiatives over the longer term. For several countries, effective

³ Yetano, A., Royo, S., and Acerete, B. (2010). “What Is Driving the Increasing Presence of Citizen Participation Initiatives?” *Environment and Planning, Government and Policy*, Vol. 28, N. 5, pp. 783 – 802.

⁴ European Commission (2019). *Stakeholder Engagement in Quality Assurance Processes: Interim Report by the Education and Training 2020 Working Group Schools* (April). <http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu>

⁵ Gregory, A.J., Atkins, J.P., Midgley, G., Hodgson, A.M. (2020). Stakeholder identification and engagement in problem structuring interventions. *European Journal of Operational Research*. Vol. 283, No. 1, pp. 321 – 340. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejor.2019.10.044>

stakeholder engagement may allow reinvigoration and refocusing of the design and implementation of competence-based education changes that have faltered or faded.

Recommendations on implementation

- Structure stakeholder engagement around a shared vision on the need for and purpose of policy development.
- Ensure that stakeholder selection and engagement processes are transparent.
- Be mindful of the genuine concerns of stakeholders and demonstrate that their feedback is being taken into consideration and making an impact on design and implementation to ensure trust.
- Ensure that student voice is clearly represented in policy design and evaluation processes.
- Plan for timely and coordinated involvement of stakeholders, and in particular, school leaders and teachers.
- Develop a clear framework for engagement, include different methodologies to ensure representative input. Develop processes to manage differences constructively.
- Ensure that the roles and responsibilities of stakeholder groups are clear.
- Encourage and support stakeholder groups to build capacities to communicate and share viewpoints with their constituents.
- Provide guidance on how to set up stakeholder engagement, particularly where the involvement of students, teachers, parents is new or previously has been focused on a few representatives.

1.2 Policies need to bring together aspirations and research evidence to develop a theory of change and clear logic for implementation

Policies need to be based on stakeholders' aspirations for education and informed by research evidence. Evidence needs to include academic studies and policy reviews, as well as the contextualised insights of school leaders, teachers, parents and carers, and students. University-school partnerships may support development of the evidence base. International evidence on what has worked well and what has worked less well in other contexts can also support countries at early stages of design, or re-design, of competence-based initiatives.

The policy design needs to have a clear logic which also considers the nature of change in complex, multi-layer education systems. New initiatives will need to build on existing policies and practices and to be appropriate for the country's education governance system. The right balance of avoiding high levels of prescription, or low levels of support and guidance is important to allow for capacity to build in the system prior to the introduction

of the new policy and throughout its implementation. Over time, countries may shift the balance of central-level steering and local autonomy and flexibility. Continued attention to careful alignment and coherence of measures is needed.

The broader context of change processes needs to be taken into account. School leaders' support for the reform and for teacher development, as well teachers' motivations to shift to competence-based approaches and their efficacy in taking on new approaches need to be considered. Teachers' working conditions, levels of financial support for schools, the political commitment of stakeholders, and levels of trust within systems are all important to the success of initiatives.

Recommendations on implementation

- Plan logistics of change as part of the "logic" of the policy design. These include plans for communication of new policies with school leaders, teachers, parents and carers, students.
- Agree on a clear framework setting out national priorities for student competence development and use this as the foundation for changes to curriculum as well as changes to teaching, learning and assessment.
- Teacher professional development needs should be embedded within the policy design from the outset.
- Ensure that teachers have time to engage in professional learning, including relevant continuing professional development opportunities, and collaboration with peers in school.
- Allow time for teachers to embed competences in different subject areas, to enable a more learner-centred approach to teaching and learning, and to shift emphasis to formative assessment and the introduction of teacher-based summative assessments.

1.3 Pilot new initiatives, gather feedback and adjust plans

Piloting of initiatives, whether in small or larger groups of schools, provides the opportunity to gather early feedback on what is working well and what may need to be adjusted. The logistics of implementation plans should also be refined further at this stage. It is the opportunity to engage a broader group of school leaders and teachers in discussions regarding changes.

Recommendations on implementation

- Ensure that schools have pedagogical resources and expert support on new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment as they pilot new initiatives. Universities, education ministries, education consultants or specialist organisations,

in line with their own specific roles and capacities, can each offer support to schools and teachers as they integrate new approaches and develop new materials.

- Allow time for pilot schools to phase in new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment (a sequence-based approach).
- Plan for evaluation of implementation processes in the pilot schools.
- Provide opportunities for teachers in pilot schools to collaborate, both in their own school and with other schools.
- Refine and clarify processes and pedagogical resources based on school leader and teacher experiences and views.
- Ensure that students and parents are heard early in the policy design process and during implementation and evaluation.
- Plan for broader dissemination and take-up of initiatives and ensure that schools across the system have appropriate advice and support, based on their own readiness for change and implementation capacities.

1.4 Develop effective communication channels – horizontal and vertical

Clear and consistent communication on the purposes and processes of change will be important not only in the early stages of policy design and stakeholder engagement, but throughout the processes of implementation, adaptation and evaluation. This includes vertical communication between central policy levels, and horizontal communication between local governments and schools, within schools and across school networks.

For those who will be implementing changes, it is important to consider how the communication strategy—including communication and engagement with schools and teacher networks—will influence deep changes in teacher efficacy that contribute to the school culture and classroom practice.¹¹

Recommendations on implementation

- Develop clear messages and effective communication channels. Ensure transparency at all stages of design, implementation, and evaluation.
- Ensure communication and outreach to different stakeholder groups is appropriately pitched, avoiding overly technical or specialist language.
- Develop capacities to use social media effectively.
- Encourage and support two-way communication between national authorities/agencies and schools and local authorities.

- Encourage and support communication across school networks, within school-university partnerships, and between schools and local communities.
- Engage with traditional media outlets.

1.5 Plan for formative and summative evaluation of competence-based initiatives as part of the policy design

Plans for evaluation of initiatives need to be built in the early stages of policy design and implementation process⁶ and to be sure that these are coherent with the policy logic and capture essential aims. It can also help evaluators to separate effects of any disruptive events, such as COVID-19, and the impact of the reform itself. Both qualitative and quantitative monitoring data to be gathered at consistent intervals.

Formative evaluation to identify progress and areas for improvement is vital to effective implementation. In addition to monitoring data, regular consultation with school leaders and teachers helps to identify areas where adjustments are needed. Student and parent views need to be included, as well.

Summative evaluations of implementation processes and impact, based on the theory of change set out in the initial policy design, should be planned. Although strategies and initiatives are likely to change from early implementation to time for a formal evaluation, consistent data gathering is important. These more formal evaluations are also the occasion to consider overall processes, and to make more significant policy adjustments.

Recommendations on implementation

- Design evaluation to take into account the complexity of policy design and implementation processes, and to allow sufficient time and flexibility for adaptation.
- Design accountability across multiple stakeholders (including school accountability for implementing new initiatives, and system-level accountability to support schools).
- Identify indicators and milestones for monitoring and evaluation (formative and summative), aligned with theory of change.
- Include both qualitative and quantitative measures of “broad student development” and wellbeing and avoid a “tick box” approach. Ensure that indicators gather contextual information on factors affecting implementation.
- Identify and share effective school self-evaluation and improvement models that allow for deeper reflection on implementation of competence-based approaches, including shifts in school cultures, in line with broad aspirations for education.

⁶ Pont, B., Ibid.

2.0 Recommendation on developing and deepening practice

Developing and deepening new competence-based approaches following early stages of implementation requires time and opportunities to reflect and adjust strategies at both system- and school-levels.

Support for schools as learning organisations may also help them to build their capacity to introduce change and to build on and develop new practices. School leaders play an important role in steering and supporting their schools in this learning process.

Effective feedback/feedforward loops between school and systems levels and across schools promote both system- and school-level learning and improvement. Capacity to interpret data, diagnose the source(s) of poor outcomes, to react to unexpected developments, as well as to adapt approaches over time are all vital to the sustainability of the change.

The element of time also needs to be considered. Careful sequencing allows both systems to develop implementation capacities, and schools and teachers to develop their efficacy as they integrate new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

2.1 Provide support to school leaders

While school leader roles and responsibilities vary across countries, all play a pivotal role in guiding school-level change and need to be supported to strengthen their roles as leaders and facilitators of teaching and learning.

School leaders, including teachers who have taken on leadership roles, need to understand the policy logic, the need for change and improvements to their pedagogies and organisational practices and adapt and develop innovations relevant to their contexts.

Recommendations on implementation

- Ensure that school leaders have financial and human resources to support their staff in the shift to competence-based education.
- Ensure that school leaders have access to professional learning communities and networks to support mutual learning.
- Share models of effective distributed leadership within schools to deepen school-level learning and implementation of competence-based approaches.
- Include school leaders in ongoing consultations on implementation of new initiatives.

2.2 Support teachers' professional learning communities

Opportunities for teachers' collaborative professional learning within schools as learning organisations, as well as between schools in professional learning networks can catalyse change and deepen learning. Policy makers can create the conditions for professional learning through support for schools as learning organisations and through broader school networks.

Recommendations on implementation

- Support the establishment of networks or clusters of schools so that school leaders and their school teams can explore, collaborate, share practices, and learn from each other in a trust-based environment. Ensure that network aims to support the development of competence-based education are clear.
- Provide opportunities for subject-area specialists to collaborate.
- Encourage the inclusion of teacher educators in networks.
- Highlight the importance of teachers' competences to design lessons and create effective learning environments to support competence-based education.
- Highlight the importance of teachers' competences for assessment. Support professional learning on the use of assessment tools and processes for formative and summative assessment.
- Ensure that teachers have time to participate in learning communities. New approaches to school timetabling, financial and human resources may be needed.
- Share models of effective learning communities in schools as learning organisations and across school networks.
- Support schools' organisational development, including through the support of external developers, to embed competence-based approaches within a whole-school approach.

3.0 Recommendations on evaluating progress to support system- and school-level learning and adaptation

Ideally, policy evaluation is part of an overall coherent approach. Plans for formative and summative evaluation, including identification of monitoring indicators, need to be developed as part of the initial policy design. When implementation processes are launched, formative evaluation will be most effective when seen as an integrated part of the implementation processes itself. Longer-term, summative evaluation can provide further insight on the development of implementation capacities over time, the impact of initiatives on school-level and teacher practices and on student competence development.

3.1 Support evaluation focused on school development to enhance competence-based education, with a particular focus on the relationship between external and internal school evaluation

Evaluation focused on school development to enhance competence-based education will be most effective when a climate of trust and a focus on the quality of student learning and wellbeing is fostered. The quality of the relationships between external evaluators and school stakeholders is also important. External evaluation (reviews, inspections, critical friends) reinforces and supports school self-evaluation. Positive relationships with external evaluators can ensure that schools are supported in school self-evaluation, and also benefit from objective external views.

Schools may benefit from broader engagement of parents, students, and other stakeholders in the local community. Ongoing dialogue and communication to ensure that stakeholders have a shared understanding of quality education and priorities for learning are also important.⁷ While school-level stakeholders should take national priorities into account, they should also have the flexibility to set their own priorities and self-evaluation and improvement plans.⁸

Recommendations on implementation

- Provide opportunities for school staff and stakeholders to develop competences to gather and interpret data on the school environment and student learning and wellbeing, aligned with priorities for competence-based teaching, learning and assessment.
- Make expectations for roles and responsibilities of stakeholders engaged in school evaluation clear.
- Support development of a shared understanding on the aims of competence-based initiatives and their evaluation within schools and between schools and external evaluators. This requires the development of trusting relationships.
- Provide extra support for schools with lower implementation capacities and working in more challenging contexts so that they have resources and support needed to develop.
- Evaluate and improve school evaluation processes over time.

⁷ ET2020 Working Group Schools (2019). Stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes: Interim Report. Available online, schooleducationgateway.eu

⁸ Ibid.

3.2 Support effective feedback/forward loops

Learning and adaptation at system- and school-levels depends on effective feedback and feed forward loops between central and school level actors, as well as across networks. Formative approaches to evaluation ensure that evaluation supports the adaptation of policies and implementation strategies as they are being rolled out and supports the idea that stakeholders are being listened to and that their feedback is making a difference to the implementation process. This formative evaluation can provide information that is essential for education systems and schools as they build their implementation capacities. At school level, school staff and other stakeholders may set their own priorities for development and innovation, and regularly evaluate their progress, adapting strategies as needed

Recommendations on implementation

- Plan for regular communication between national authorities and agencies and local officials and school-level stakeholders to ensure that challenges to implementation of competence-based approaches are identified and addressed in a timely manner.
- Create channels for feedback and feedforward loops, including meso-level actors such as professional development providers, the inspectorate and curriculum developers and universities. Opportunities to engage with teachers and school leaders should be explored at all stages of design and implementation.
- Ensure that follow through on feedback is based on adequate diagnoses and is coherent with the logic of the policy design.
- Ensure adaptations and improvements made on the basis of feedback are appropriate and visible.
- Adjust evaluation indicators as needed to take into account any significant changes made to competence-based initiatives. Changes need to be coherent with the overall policy logic.

4.0 Recommendations and guidelines on evaluating progress to support system- and school-level learning and adaptation

Implementation of complex, competence-based initiatives requires ongoing development across systems. Through the process of implementation, needs for further development and adjustments will become apparent.

The COVID-19 crisis and emergency remote learning have revealed areas of fragility and resilience across systems. In particular, socio-economic disparities between learners and their families have been made even more apparent. The need to invest in teachers' and students' digital competences has also been highlighted. At the same time, schools have demonstrated their agility and resilience through their quick and efficient responses to a challenging and dynamic situation. In addition, relationships between schools and central

ministries, as well as between schools and their local communities and families, have benefited from collaboration. In many contexts, trust and communication among key actors have been strengthened. It will be important to use the learning during the crisis as window of opportunity for further change.

4.1 Build on lessons of the COVID-19 disruption

During the crisis, teachers have developed innovative approaches to competence-based teaching to ensure that students are engaged. In several countries, education systems have promoted teacher-based assessments for high-stakes decisions such as graduation and university admission, as it was not possible to administer standardised examinations remotely.

While there are reasons for concern regarding the impact of the pandemic on student wellbeing and potential learning loss, increased transparency of teaching, learning and assessment during COVID-19 has also had some positive impacts. Curricula have been streamlined to focus on essential learning. Levels of increased trust in teachers' judgement may support longer-term changes in teacher-based assessments that are more effectively aligned with competence-based approaches. Moreover, the importance of relationships and engagement in schools and social emotional learning have received increased attention.

COVID-19 has also had an impact on the relationships within communities - between local authorities, school leaders and teachers - as well as across networks. School leaders and teacher have increased autonomy and agency as they have had to adapt to circumstances of the crisis. However, further support is needed to instil strengthened teacher roles and to integrate new approaches to blended learning online and in other learning environments beyond classrooms and schools.

Recommendations on implementation

- Monitor the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on implementation of competence-based initiatives and on student learning and wellbeing.
- Create platforms for continued communication with schools, teachers and families to address student needs in the aftermath of the crisis. Innovative approaches to re-engage students, address student learning loss, and address student wellbeing will be needed.
- Continue to support collaboration between regional and local areas that has developed a result of the pandemic.
- Build on relationships with parents and carers who have played important roles in supporting their children's learning from home.
- Invest resources in meeting needs of disadvantaged learners who may have fallen further behind or completely disengaged from school during emergency remote learning.
- (Re-)consider priorities for learning and wellbeing, and how curricula may be streamlined to focus on essential aims.
- Support teachers to deepen assessment competences, including digital assessment competences, and develop processes to reliable teacher scoring of high-stakes examinations.

4.2 Use a policy learning approach to engage key stakeholders and strengthen policy design implementation capacities

Policy learning processes within and across countries can support reflection on past successes and ongoing challenges in policy design and implementation of competence-based initiatives. Opportunities for open engagement can help to open channels of communication and build trust across all key actors as they initiate or re-invigorate change processes.

The aims of policy learning may evolve. For example, at earlier stages of implementation, mutual learning across countries may support thinking on the logic of the policy design. Participants may also reflect on implementation processes at a later point, when the benefit of time allows greater objectivity and openness on what has worked or has not worked well.

Recommendations on implementation

- Engage with stakeholders (country level) to reflect on what has been learned about effective policy design and implementation, how these have been shaped by broader contexts, and how lessons might be built on.
- Continue to exchange 'good practices' within and across countries to support policy learning.
- Consider how experiences of the past might inspire new and innovative approaches.

Authors and contributors

Core research team

Laurie Day (Ecorys), Quality Assurance Lead
Gabor Halász, Advising Expert
Karsten Frøhlich Hougaard (DTI), Senior Expert
Janet Looney (EIESP), Project Director
Kay Livingston, Advising Expert
Majella O'Shea (EIESP), Project Manager
Kristine Nedergaard Larsen (DTI), Researcher
Barbara Santibañez, Researcher
François Staring (Ecorys), Senior Researcher
Letizia Vicentini (Ecorys), Researcher
Jerzy Wiśniewski, Senior Expert

Case Study Authors

Tine Anderson, Denmark		
Majella	O'Shea,	Ireland
Pedro Luis Silva, Portugal		
Pedro	Teixeira,	Portugal
Juraj Vantuch, Slovakia		
Letizia Vicentini, Netherlands		

