

EU WORKING GROUP ON PATHWAYS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS (2021-2025)

Plenary meeting #7: Targeted support: identifying groups at risk and providing adequate support

Venue: Online meeting via Webex
26 September 2023

Meeting Minutes

The seventh plenary meeting of the EU working group on Pathways to School Success – ‘Targeted support: identifying groups at risk and providing adequate support’ took place online on the 26th of September 2023. This non-public event was exclusively attended by the WG members.

The Working Group meeting began at 14h30 with a welcome address by DG EAC. The WG was pleased to introduce new members, notably from Ukraine. In addition, the WG extended their welcome to the new consultants from ICF/PPMI consortium, following the award of a new contract.

DG EAC reminded everyone that this session serves as an inaugural meeting to discuss strategies for identifying and addressing the needs of learners particularly vulnerable to exclusion. The meeting aimed to **explore the delicate balance between more universal approaches and more targeted ones tailored towards specific groups**. The choice of this topic originated from its identification in an initial survey conducted among WG members.

She finally reminded that the next meeting will be held in person in Brussels on the 26th and 27th of September. The meeting will include a joint session with the Working Group Equality and Values, with a particular attention paid to special educational needs during the discussions.



Diversity and Inclusion – a new Eurydice report

The first presentation was by the Eurydice education policy and systems analyst – a European network that is part of the Commission’s Education and Culture Executive Agency and that provides information on education systems and policies in all countries participating in the EU’s Erasmus+ programme. She introduced a forthcoming Eurydice report (to be published on the 10th of October) focused on **promoting diversity and inclusion in schools in Europe**, which aligns thematically with what the WG will focus on for the next several months.

The inception of this report comes from a request by DG EAC to offer an overview of what are the national policies and measure across Europe that aim to promote diversity and inclusion in schools in Europe. **Their specific task was to look at targeted**

approaches towards learners who are most likely to experience disadvantage and/or discrimination (e.g., migrants, refugees, ethnic minority, LGBTIQ+ students, students with

disabilities, etc.). Those students with diverse personal and social characteristics experience a range of inequities and inequalities when it comes to educational access and participation. Furthermore, segregating, or exclusionary policies, lack of funding, lack of training can reinforce those already pressing issues. Their research scope extended to 39 education systems.

In terms of the report's key findings, it was noted that a significant number of relevant policies and measures exist across Europe, including many recent policy developments. However, there were areas where further efforts could be beneficial.

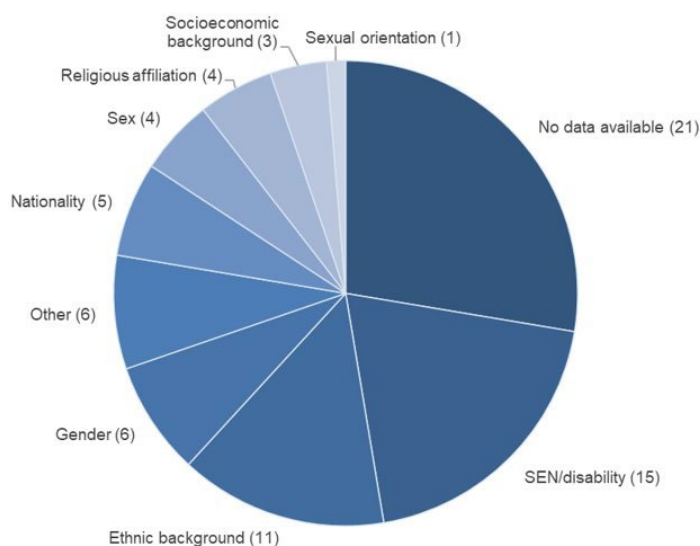


Figure 1. Main grounds of discrimination in schools

Students with special educational needs and disabilities were a major focus in the report, as were migrant and refugee students and ethnic minorities, especially Roma students. While many policies target these groups, **there was a noticeable lack of policies focusing specifically on LGBTIQ+ youth and religious minority students.** Despite various forms of discrimination being acknowledged, fewer policies specifically targeted these groups.

Initial findings were also presented on data collection and monitoring diversity in schools. Most countries reported having a good grasp of the various characteristics of their student population, such as

gender, special educational needs, nationality, and country of birth. However, information like home language and religious background were less frequently documented. She added that there was **limited availability of official data or reports concerning occurrences of discrimination in schools.** Over half of the countries reported lacking access to official data concerning discrimination in schools. This lack of data was attributed to various factors, such as underreporting and legal complexities in identifying what constitutes discrimination. Nevertheless, those countries with data identified special educational needs or disability and ethnic background as the most common grounds for discrimination. S.N. emphasised **the importance of robust data collection to formulate effective policies for promoting diversity and inclusion.**

She then discussed the strategic policy frameworks that exist in Europe, highlighting that all countries have overarching legislation, strategies, or action plans aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion. These strategies often align with related EU policy initiatives, such as the [EU anti-racism action plan](#) and the [LGBTIQ equality strategy](#). The strategic frameworks could generally be divided into universal approaches aiming to improve the entire education system and more targeted approaches focusing on specific student groups. Strategies focusing on Roma students, students with special needs and disabilities, and migrants and refugees were commonly mentioned. **Conversely, strategies related to gender, religious affiliation and sexual orientation were less prevalent.**

Regarding **national curricula**, Euridyce stated that all countries include considerations for diversity and inclusion, and nearly half of them have revised their curricula in the last five years to strengthen these dimensions. She cited recent curriculum revisions in Latvia and Sweden, which address topics like stereotypes, prejudices, and the prevention of bullying. These issues are integrated into a range of subjects, including citizenship education, social sciences, and even some curricular areas like intercultural education. She also mentioned examples of specific initiatives, such as Malta's cross-curricular topic called "education for diversity".

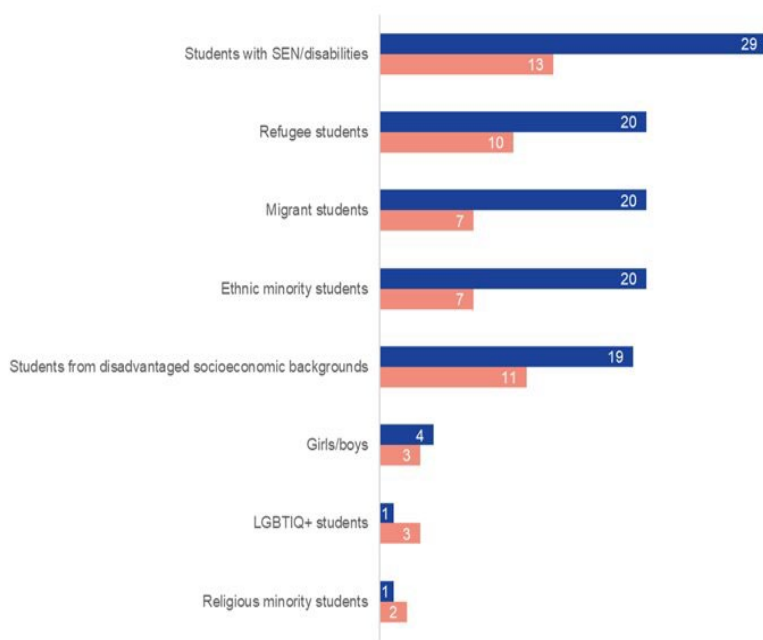


Figure 2. Learners targeted by policies for learning and social-emotional support

Regarding targeted learning support, she revealed that most countries have policies to assist specific student groups, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities. Various measures, including individual education plans and psychological interventions, are often employed. For refugee or migrant students, language support is a predominant focus. Roma students commonly receive support from mediators to overcome language and learning challenges, while students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds frequently receive financial support for meals and transportation. **When it comes to social-emotional support, it was noted that while such initiatives**

exist, they often cater to the student body as a whole rather than focusing on particular groups. An exception was seen in France, which has various policies targeting LGBTQ+ students, including free hotlines and educational campaigns on homophobic and transphobic violence.

The topic then shifted to the importance of teacher diversity and training. Data suggested that only eight education systems have top-level policies for recruiting teachers from diverse backgrounds. This was followed by a look at the level of teacher competencies on diversity and inclusion, with findings suggesting that the **available continuous professional development programs are not sufficiently accessed by teachers.** Finally, the presentation covered educational support staff, such as psychologists and special needs specialists. While most countries have policies recommending schools to employ such specialists, there is often inadequate funding for schools to do so. **This results in families with special needs children sometimes opting for specialised schools over mainstream options.**

The presentation was well-received, with DG EAC noting its comprehensiveness and its alignment with broader discussions on student well-being and emotional learning. During the Q&A slot, Eurochild highlighted the value of the intersectional approach and expressed particular interest in the focus on social-emotional support in addition to learning support. He inquired about any upcoming work that further delves into social-emotional initiatives across the region. In response, it was confirmed that the report contains detailed examples and aligns with other initiatives focused on mental health and well-being for the entire student population. **DG EAC also hinted that the issue of social-emotional learning could be an important area for future studies, potentially coordinated with the expert group on well-being.** She concluded stating that social-emotional learning is a key area of interest among experts and could be part of a larger, more universal strategy aimed at benefiting all learners. There was a call for a back-to-back meeting in January to explore these issues in greater depth.

Key takeaways:

- **Policy Gaps:** There are existing policies, but gaps remain, particularly for LGBTIQ+ and religious minority students. There is a need to delve deeper into the reasons behind policy gaps for these groups.
- **Data Collection and Monitoring:** Most countries have good data on student population characteristics, but data concerning discrimination is limited. Importance of robust data collection for policy formulation will be a focal point in future sessions.
- **National Curricula and Targeted Learning Support:** Curricula generally include considerations for diversity and inclusion. Various learning support mechanisms exist, and they tend to focus on specific groups. The effectiveness of these support measures and the potential for targeted social-emotional learning initiatives are areas to be explored.
- **Teacher Diversity and Competencies:** Few education systems have policies for recruiting teachers from diverse backgrounds. Teacher training and diversity could be key topics for future sessions.
- **Educational Support Staff:** Most countries recommend employing specialists like psychologists, but funding is often insufficient. The financial aspects of educational support, as well as alternative models, may be discussed in future meetings.

Targeted support: identifying groups at risk and providing adequate support

PPMI opened her presentation by affirming the collective agreement on the importance of equity in education, a commitment that is echoed at global, EU, and national levels. She pointed out that despite numerous policy frameworks aimed at both universal and specific groups, equity remains a largely **unfulfilled goal**. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened this situation, deepening existing inequalities.

She went on to remark that various studies have attempted to quantify the economic and non-economic returns of more equitable educational systems. They examine both the cost-effectiveness of inclusive models compared to segregationist models and challenge traditional concepts like integration. The presentation also highlighted the human rights rationale for inclusive education. This approach, she argued, is neither a sacrifice nor a privilege but an intrinsic right. **Various longitudinal studies have attempted to link the quality and equity in education to key life outcomes for individuals and societies. She mentioned the PISA results, suggesting that investing in educational equity can actually bolster performance in international assessments, both academically and in terms of well-being.**

The traditional focus on students with special education needs in research and practice was highlighted, but in the past years the understanding of inclusion has been broadening. It rather serves the benefit of all students, as there are many historically marginalised groups that require attention. **Inclusion is not just an outcome but a process that needs to be mindful and sensitive.**

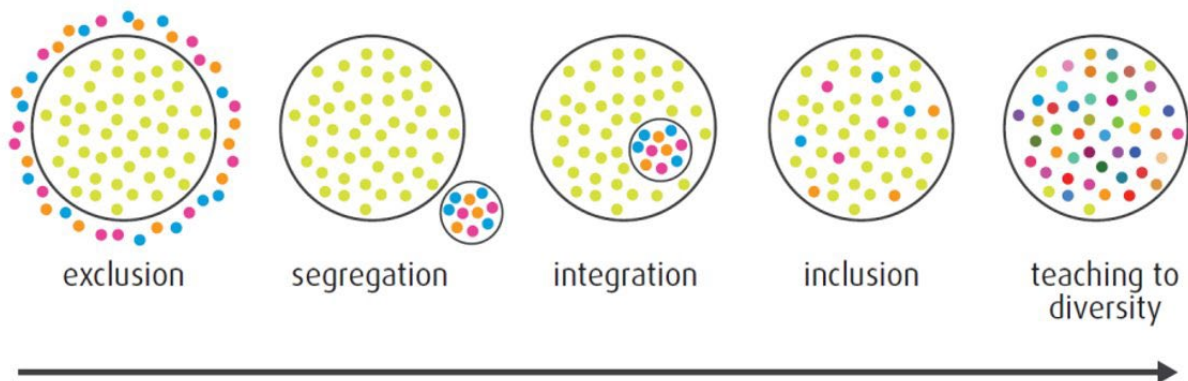


Figure 3. Source: Taken from Inclusion BC (2017) *Implementing Inclusion in BC's Public Schools: report on the June 14, 2017 Inclusive education Summit*. Accessed in OECD (2022)

She emphasised that teaching strategies and institutional structures must adapt to cater to the diverse needs of all students, including invisible ones such as mental health. This calls for a significant shift in the cultural and social fabric of our educational communities. She continued by discussing the challenges of implementing such sweeping changes on a systematic scale, acknowledging that while some grassroots-level schools are close to achieving this vision, significant obstacles remain.

Addressing the complexities of identifying and addressing the diverse needs of students to achieve a genuinely inclusive educational setting, she highlighted that **one of the primary challenges is the question of data collection**. While data are essential for targeted support, certain groups—particularly those most at risk of exclusion—aren't sufficiently represented. This lack of explicit recognition in collected data not only results from their invisibility but also perpetuates it. She pointed out a significant limitation in existing data collection practices: **many data collection efforts don't sufficiently include information on categories of students most affected by exclusionary practices**. While this is sometimes for ethical and privacy reasons, it leads to a lack of consistent approaches and hence hampers policy development. **Even policy documents that do acknowledge some marginalised groups, often focus disproportionately on children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, and gender equality, while other groups are rarely identified explicitly.**

She also observed that education laws are not the only ones with blind spots; laws related to health, gender, and social welfare are even more "diversity-blind." The [Global Education Monitoring report](#) by UNESCO supports this, indicating gaps in the support system that could exacerbate educational inequalities.

Another concern raised was **the stigma effect that can result from data labelling**, especially when such labels ignore the intersectionality of students' identities. Traditional models tend to examine students' characteristics in isolation, thereby missing the nuances that intersectionality brings into the mix. **This lack of attention to intersectionality is evident not just in data collection but also in policy frameworks and academic paths**, affecting transitions between educational levels and responses to disruptive events like political instability or war.

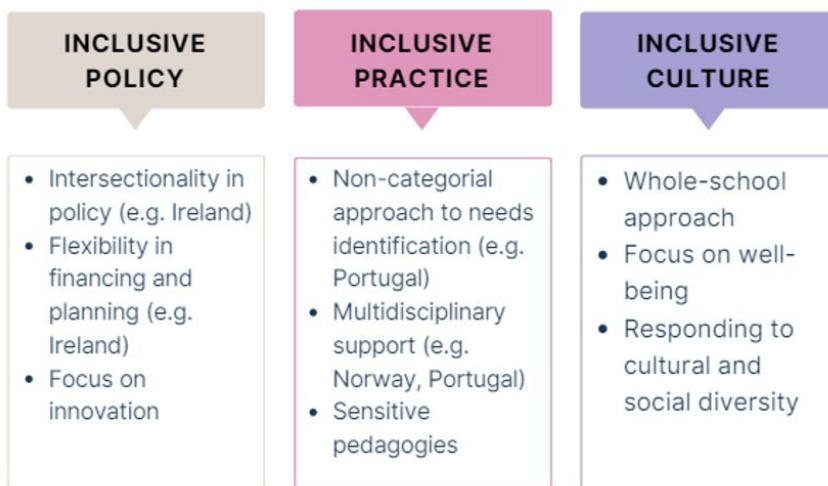


Figure 4. Promising approaches

She then emphasised the need for a **holistic approach, considering the interconnected dimensions of inclusive cultures, policies, and practices.** H.S. stressed that flexibility in financing and planning systems is crucial for schools to adapt to the needs for additional support. Traditional funding mechanisms often restrict innovation, so some countries are pioneering outcome-based approaches. Examples like Portugal's non-categorical

need identification model or multidisciplinary support centres indicate progressive steps.

She concluded her presentation by posing a pivotal question for future discussions: **How to balance holistic education that caters to all needs while providing targeted support that avoids labelling and marginalisation?** This question, she argued, would require thorough investigation into existing practices and data, not for ranking and labelling but for understanding systems dysfunction.

The presentation was followed by a series of questions. Malta brought up the topic of **gifted students**¹, expressing her particular interest in this group as one that often doesn't receive adequate pedagogical focus. She noted her prior experience working in a school setting where this issue came up and wondered what the research showed. H.S. responded stating that the topic of gifted students has also been discussed within the group. She noted that these students are often overlooked when the focus is predominantly on inclusion and diversity. Some existing research highlights challenges faced by gifted students, including the risk of social isolation within mainstream education settings. The speaker expressed that there is room for more systematic inclusion of this group in educational support practices and **this could be a focus in future discussions.**

At this point, Eurochild welcomed the need to consider the **costs of non-inclusion**, particularly in early years. He also raised the issue of lack of meaningful engagement with learners in vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances, pointing out initiatives like the [Child Guarantee](#) that are aiming to tackle intersectional issues including child poverty and education. He expressed an interest in exploring these areas further within the working group.

H.S. agreed that the **lack of meaningful engagement with learners would likely be a topic of future discussions.** As for Eurochild's remark about the cost of investing in education, she said that while most of the research in this area has been outside Europe, the [European Expert network on Economics of education](#), managed by PPMI, attempted to quantify effects in the European context.

DG EAC found the overarching question and vision extremely relevant to her own work and proposed that **individualised support should be more deeply integrated into the teaching model under discussion.** She also highlighted the need for the curriculum to cover diverse minority groups, mentioning that this would necessitate recognition of minority statuses, and thereby touching upon questions of discrimination and data collection.

¹ PPMI shared a link from OECD about gifted student <https://www.oecd.org/education/strength-through-diversity/>.

EASNIE highlighted on her side **the ongoing issue of policy-practice dissonance**, where countries might have commendable inclusive policies but fall short in the actual implementation. She also emphasised the importance of gathering data on policy implementation, and raised issues such as learner voice, family and community engagement, and the problem of labelling. EAC acknowledged these concerns, pointing out that the gap often lies in the implementation of action plans and programs. She added that a concept paper, authored by EASNIE, would be the basis for the next WG meeting, and it aligns closely with the presentation made by PPMI.

Key Takeaways:

- **Broadening Inclusion:** While special education needs have been the traditional focus, we need a wider lens that includes other marginalised groups. Inclusion is identified as both an outcome and a process.
- **Challenges in Data Collection:** Data collection is essential but often lacks information on students most affected by exclusionary practices, thereby hampering policy development.
- **Laws and Policies:** Laws related to education, health, gender, and social welfare often contain blind spots when it comes to diversity and inclusion.
- **Holistic Approach Needed:** A call for interconnected dimensions of inclusive cultures, policies, and practices, emphasising flexibility in funding and planning.
- **Gifted Students:** Importance of further research on gifted students, who are often overlooked in discussions focused on inclusion and diversity.
- **Cost of Non-Inclusion:** The WG should dive deeper into the financial and social costs of not including marginalised groups.
- **Policy-Practice Dissonance:** The difference between having inclusive policies and actually implementing them was highlighted indicating this will be a focus in future discussions.

Break out rooms

During the break, the teams were redistributed into breakout rooms for more in-depth discussions. The aim of these sessions was to delve deeper into the questions raised during the meeting. Specifically, the groups discussed 3 specific questions:

1. How do we identify specific groups of learners to focus on? Do we stick to broader categorisations?
2. How can educational systems improve the early identification of learning vulnerabilities that aren't immediately visible?
3. What kind of data do we need to better understand vulnerabilities, inequalities, and diverse learning needs – most countries do not collect data on specific groups of learners and barriers they face (in participation and learning success)?

Group 1

The first group focused on the complexity and multi-faceted nature of identifying specific groups of learners who require targeted support. **It was noted that identification often varies depending on several triggers or factors, which may be politically driven or situation-specific.** The example of Ukrainian refugee learners was cited to illustrate how crisis situations can shift attention and necessitate broader categories for support.

Regarding current practices, there was mention of **the challenges associated with over-identification of learners through separate diagnostic centres**, and the unsustainable nature of multiple targeted supports. A shift should be considered towards school-level identification by multidisciplinary teams, coupled with an emphasis on mainstream integration. Questions were raised about whether all identified groups genuinely require special targeted support. The idea was floated

that a **more granular, school-level set of data on learner well-being could offer a more accurate basis for targeted interventions.**

The discussion then moved on to the topic of early identification of learners with vulnerabilities. The competence and confidence of teachers were underscored as pivotal elements in this process. **Teachers need both the training to identify needs and the resources and tools to meet those needs, either by themselves or with the assistance of a multidisciplinary team.** It was suggested that perhaps the focus should be less on identifying vulnerabilities and more on creating a school environment that inherently supports holistic development, thereby reducing the incidence of vulnerabilities and exclusions.

Listening to the voices of learners was raised as a crucial part of the identification process. Creating a safe space for them to express their needs and having a peer community to provide support were emphasized as powerful tools for effective identification and intervention.

The discussion closed with the acknowledgment that **more data is needed to understand the outcomes for learners better, not just academically but also in terms of their well-being.** Sweden's ongoing work on linking learner outcomes with disabilities was mentioned as an example of the type of data collection that could benefit these efforts. More studies and evaluations on the impact of specific policies and interventions on diverse learners is also needed. This group session closed with a collective sense that while this was a complex subject, the conversation had been a promising start, and more data and in-depth discussions were needed to address it comprehensively.

Group 2

The discussion began with underlining **the need to focus on specific barriers to learning rather than categorising learners into broad groups.** This approach allows for early observation and screening to identify issues such as learning difficulties. However, **it was pointed out that while addressing specific barriers is important, it is equally crucial to continue targeting specific learner groups.** This dual approach adds complexity but provides a more comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape.

The reflection continued on the historical systematic discrimination against certain groups, indicating **the need to move beyond just educational barriers to include broader wellbeing perspectives.** Even though some colleagues voiced caution against linking specific groups with specific needs, advocating for **quality education for all.**

Further into the discussion, it was pointed out that schools often try to categorise learners. The importance of observing how learners act and react in the face of complex tasks was emphasised as a way to help categorise without prejudice. It was noted that the ability for schools to adapt these practices could depend on their current circumstances, suggesting that schools that are already doing well are better positioned to implement these changes.

The increasing **pressure on teachers due to diversity in schools** was mentioned, suggesting a **whole-school approach to manage it and the necessity of creating safe environments in schools,** emphasising that talking about inclusion needs to be made more practical. The role of teachers as role models was also discussed, along with **the importance of teacher and principal well-being in creating a supportive environment for learners.**

The third segment of the session revolved around the data needed to better understand the educational landscape. It was suggested to develop a **common database between schools and non-formal educational institutions,** whereas it was argued that **while data is essential, it shouldn't lead to learners being put into boxes and that the purpose behind data collection should be clear.**

Key Takeaways:

- **Complexity in Learner Identification:** Both groups acknowledged that identifying which students need targeted support is a multi-faceted issue, influenced by various factors including politics, data literacy, capacity of actors.
- **Importance of Early Identification:** Teacher competence and confidence are crucial for early identification of learners with vulnerabilities, and both should be equipped with appropriate training and resources.
- **Role of Data:** Both groups pointed out the need for more comprehensive and granular data collection, not just focusing on academic achievements but also on well-being metrics. Both groups indicated that more detailed, school-level data might provide a better foundation for targeted interventions.
- **Data Ethics and Utilisation:** Conversations around the ethical implications of data collection and how to use this data to enhance both academic and well-being outcomes for students.
- **Teacher and School Challenges:** With growing diversity, teachers are under more pressure, necessitating a whole-school approach to manage diversity effectively. Further exploration of what kinds of training and resources, as well as support structures, are essential for teachers to effectively identify and support vulnerable learners.
- **Student Voice and Inclusion:** The need for creating a safe and supportive space where learners can voice their needs was identified as essential by both groups.

Concluding remarks

The concluding remarks highlighted the broad and complex nature of the topics discussed, emphasising the need for further dialogue. There was recognition of the tension between identifying individual needs of learners and fostering a more positive school environment. The discussion and upcoming follow-up survey were noted as vital steps in directing future work within the Working Group. Attendees were alerted to future meetings: one scheduled for next month and another in January, both to be held in Brussels. The January meeting is particularly important because it will be a way of opening up the next priority topic which is well-being and that needs to align with the work of the expert group focusing on well-being, set to produce guidelines in March 2024. It will be an opportunity to check with the expert group if we are on the same page about those matters.

Malta announced the dates for a Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in Malta on May 15-17. EAC reminded that building a PLA is a collective exercise that involves input from a steering group. **Attendees were encouraged to consider volunteering for the steering group**, which will be responsible for defining leading questions and possibly organisational details for the PLA.

Further information was shared about an upcoming event on the mid-term review of the European Education Area taking place on October 10 in Brussels. As well, details about the thematic report summarising previous work and the forthcoming **Erasmus+ call for policy experimentation projects** were also announced. The Erasmus+ call will have two priorities on school education, i.e. well-being at school and assessment. **Attendees were urged to disseminate this call within their networks**. In addition, the announcement of the **follow-up survey** was made, which aims to gather input on topics of interest to structure future work.