InclEdu 4AllNeeds

# Joint ETUCE-EFEE GUIDELINES

## for inclusion of persons with special needs and disabilities in education

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# INTRODUCTION

Education trade unions and employer organisations have an important role to play in promoting the full and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and special educational needs in education and society. This can be achieved through their own individual organisational structures and processes and through collaborative engagement in social dialogue at all levels of the education system.

These practical guidelines support the development of a common language among social partners on the inclusion of all children, young people and education personnel in education, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities. They enable a systemic approach to advancing their collective strategic policy priorities on inclusive education, and serve as a critical lens through which social partners in education can monitor and evaluate their progress over time.

Inclusion is a process, and changes to institutional and societal norms can take time. Moreover, ETUCE and EFEE member organisations and their education systems are at different stages of their inclusion journey, with some specific challenges relevant to different sectors of education (e.g. earlychildhood education and care, vocational education and training, and higher education and research). However, these guidelines represent an important and necessary first step towards collaborative, coordinated action and form part of broader efforts to promote transformative change through policies of equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging in education and society.

The guidelines have been developed within the framework of the joint ETUCE-EFEE project 'Inclusive Education for All Needs: European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Promoting Inclusion of Persons with Special Needs in Education' (2024-2026). They were also formulated

in accordance with the principles of international treaties, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practices in Special Needs Education. In this regard, the guidelines draw actively on the social and human rights models of disability. Nonetheless, they are designed to be flexible and, where necessary, adapted to national, regional and local settings, as well as to specificities of different education and training sectors. They also encourage social partners in education to reflect on how laws and best practices across European countries can inform the development of the most suitable approaches within each national context.

# DEFINITIONS

## Disability

Disability is an evolving concept. According to the UNCRPD, persons with disabilities include those who have "long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinger their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". This definition is grounded in the social and human rights models of disability, emphasising the legal obligation of states and systems to remove barriers to participation and to uphold human dignity and rights[1].

## Special educational needs

Special educational needs (also special education needs, special needs or SEN) is a term which is widely used in education legislation, policy and practice across Europe. It describes the educational provisions required by learners with different needs, including those with recognised disabilities. These needs should not be considered the result of "in-child" factors but a discrepancy between the provision offered by an education system and what an individual learner needs to support their learning[2].

1 Lawson, A., and Beckett, A. E. (2020). The social and human rights models of disability: towards a complementarity thesis. The International Journal of Human Rights, 25(2), 348–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1783533

2 European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE]. (2026). Special Educational Needs. SEN. Glossary. https://www.european-agency.org/resources/glossary/special-educational-needs-sen

# JOINT VISION

Social partners in education across Europe jointly advocate for **a concept of** inclusive education that is understood **holistically, integrating the educational, health and socio-emotional needs of all learners across all education levels**. Such systems ensure that learners with special educational needs and disabilities receive **qualified and specialised support**, while education personnel and education institutions have **access to professional preparation, time, staffing, infrastucture and resources** needed to accommodate learners' diversity.

Furthermore, ETUCE and EFEE and their member organisations commit to **ensuring jointly inclusive employment, preventing discrimination and promoting inclusive workplaces** in the education sector for persons with disabilities. This reflects the broader objective of education for persons with disabilities, to enable them to become full citizens and participate in the labour market, including in education professions.

Within such education systems, **strong and sustainable collaborative networks** between education institutions' leaders, education personnel, families, caregivers, students, specialists and education support personnel reinforce shared responsibility for inclusion; **differences are recognised and valued**, discrimination is actively challenged and stigma is reduced both within education and in wider society, and students, education personnel and education institutions' leaders with disabilities **feel welcome, supported and represented at all levels**.

Central to this shared vision is **sustained, meaningful and inclusive social dialogue on inclusive education and employment in education**, ensuring that the perspectives and needs of diverse stakeholders are fully taken into account. Also crucial is that policy and practice are informed by **ethically collected evidence, research and data**, contributing to improved educational outcomes, better working conditions and continuous system development.

# Joint Guidelines

These joint guidelines set out the priority actions for education employer organisations and trade unions at the European, national, regional and local levels.

# 1 Inclusive Education as a Core Social Dialogue Priority

The social partners in education jointly commit to:

1.1. **Recognising inclusive education as an essential and permanent topic of social dialogue and collective bargaining**, taking into account its direct impact on workload, workforce sustainability, wellbeing and educational quality.

1.2. **Promoting a common framework for dialogue** based on the UN CRPD and internationally recognised inclusion frameworks and grounded in a human-rights model of disability, while respecting national education systems and social dialogue practices.

1.3. **Supporting continuity of commitment across political and electoral cycles including the times of instability,** recognising that inclusion requires long term policy stability and sustained investment.

1.4 Ensuring **meaningful disability representation in social dialogue structures** and working groups (accessibility, confidentiality, reasonable accommodations etc.).

1.5 **Verifying that existing national laws and European directives** on inclusion of persons with special needs and disabilities **are applied** in the education and training system (including employment).

# Education Funding and System Capacity

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The social partners in education agree that inclusive education cannot be achieved without adequate, targeted investment and therefore recommend:

2.1. **Dedicated and transparent funding streams for inclusive education**, covering but not limited to:

- Specialist human resources;
- Accessible and adaptable infrastructure;
- Assistive and digital technologies including responsible AI (including accessible procurement, maintenance and support, and staff training to ensure effective and safe use);
- Psychological, medical, educational, legal and social support services.

2.2. **Coordinated use of EU, national and local funding instruments**, ensuring coherent inclusion strategies, clear allocation of responsibilities across national/regional/local levels levels to avoid fragmentation, and accountability for outcomes.

# 3 Working Conditions and Workforce Sustainability

The social partners in education recognise that inclusive education depends on sustainable working conditions and therefore support:

3.1. **Progressive reduction of class sizes**, particularly where learners with additional needs are present, and improved staffing ratios that reflect the complexity of inclusive classrooms.

3.2. Protected **time and organisational support for collaboration**, including planning time with families and multidisciplinary teams, integrated into workload allocation and collective agreements where relevant.

3.3. **Recognition of inclusive teaching through appropriate incentives**, career progression, and access to relevant specific training during working hours.

3.4. **Strengthening the role and conditions of education support personnel**, ensuring clarity of roles, access to training and decent employment conditions.

3.5 Funded **mental health, counselling and wellbeing programmes** accessible to all education personnel.

# Teacher Shortage and Professional Attractiveness

4

To address shortages and retention challenges in the teaching profession, the social partners in education commit to joint actions to:

4.1. **Improve the attractiveness of teaching careers**, through measures on improving working conditions and the status of the teaching profession which are proposed in the joint ETUCE-EFEE Framework of Actions on the Attractiveness of the Teaching Profession.

4.2. **Ensure inclusive education is fully integrated into workforce planning**, initial and continuous teacher training and long term recruitment strategies.

4.3. **Recognise and remove systemic barriers to entry into the profession**, including for candidates from underrepresented groups and persons with disabilities.

4.4 Improve **qualification and career pathways for specialist and support roles** to reduce reliance on underqualified staffing in inclusive settings.

# 5 Initial and Continuous Professional Development

The social partners in education jointly affirm that initial and continuous professional development (CPD) is central to inclusive education and therefore commit to:

5.1. **Supporting funded and accessible CPD on inclusive education** for all education personnel organised during the working time with equitable access across roles and ensuring that it is prioritised in social dialogue.

5.2. **Increased allocation of funding** for continuous professional development related to special educational needs.

5.3 Ensuring the provision of the **initial and continous professional support** for all education personnel **relevant to their professional needs**.

5.4. **Encouraging collaboration between all relevant stakeholders (e.g. researchers, teacher educators, teachers, unions, relevant authorities, employers etc.)**, ensuring that CPD is evidence based and practice relevant.

5.5 **Promoting communities of learning and peer exchange**, enabling the sharing of good practice across education instiutions, education sectors, regions and countries.

# Leadership for Inclusive Education

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The social partners in education recognise leadership as a key enabler of inclusion and agree to:

6.1. Remove barriers that limit the **representation of persons with disabilities** in formal and informal **leadership and decision-making roles** in education.

6.2 **Inclusive, distributed and diverse leadership structures and practices**, which value the contribution of persons with disabilities in decision making.

6.2. **Democratic and safe organisational cultures**, in which education personnel can speak openly, raise concerns and contribute to policy development.

6.3. **Preparation for leadership that embeds inclusion**, including exposure to diverse educational settings and multidisciplinary cooperation.

6.4. **Holistic approaches to inclusion**, balancing mainstream inclusion with specialised provision where this best serves the learner's interests and without reinforcing segregation, ensuring support is delivered within inclusive environments wherever possible.

# 7 Inclusive Employment and Working Conditions

As part of an inclusion employment strategy in education sector, social partners in education commit to:

7.1. **Removing barriers to recruitment, employment and career progression** for persons with disabilities and persons from underrepresented groups.

7.2. **Promoting inclusive and non discriminatory recruitment processes and arrangements**, including reasonable accommodation at all stages.

7.3. **Encouraging individual needs assessments and access to reasonable accommodation** for education personnel.

7.4. **Supporting universal design in buildings and transport**, in cooperation with public authorities.

7.5 Ensuring that **assessments of work ability and functional capacity are based on fair, objective, transparent and non-discriminatory criteria**.

7.6 Promote **safe disclosure environments and confidentiality safeguards** and strengthen anti-discrimination measures so staff can access accommodations without stigma.

# Families, Communities and Partnerships

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The social partners in education recognise families and communities as essential partners in inclusion and therefore support:

8.1. **Strengthening cooperation between education insitutions, families and community services**, including health and social support institutions.

8.2. **Improving access for families to information, translation and other specialist support and early support services.**

8.3. **Awareness raising and education initiatives,** including public campaigns to reduce stigma and challenge discriminatory attitudes (including stigma related to needs identification and requesting accommodations).

8.4. **Recognising education institutions as centres of inclusion within their own community**, supporting stakeholders' engagement and peer learning.

# 9 Data, Research and Evidence Informed Policy

The social partners education further commit to:

9.1. **Ensuring ethical collection and use of data, in compliance with the UNCRPD** on students' needs and education personnel with disabilities, in line with data protection standards, including indicators related to workforce sustainability (workload, wellbeing, retention) to support evidence-informed bargaining and policy.

9.2. **Strengthening collaboration between governments, researchers, employers, unions and practitioners**, ensuring independence of research.

9.3. **Supporting research led by or involving persons with disabilities**, including research on inclusive learning and work environments and progression to further education, training and the labour market.

# FOLLOW UP AND IMPLEMENTATION

**ETUCE and EFEE and their respective member organisations agree to:**

- Promote these recommendations among their affiliates.
- Encourage their adaptation and implementation through national, regional and local social dialogue.
- Further explore potentials and risks of digital technologies and tools to support the diverse educational needs of learners, including persons with disabilities.
- Consider developing a follow-up project focusing on the diversity of the teaching profession.
- Evaluate the guidelines in four years in the framework of the ESSDE to see how the implementation has progressed, and if there are any targeted measures that EFEE and ETUCE could take to support their members futher.

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