**Inclusive Education and the Impact of COVID-19 on learners with disabilities**

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**2020**

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## Abbreviations & Acronyms

**EDS** European Disability Strategy

**ERDF** European Regional Development Fund

**ESF** European Social Fund

**EU** European Union

**MFF** Multiannual Financial Framework

**SEN** Special educational needs

**CRPD** United Nations Convention of Rights of People with Disabilities

## Glossary

**Education Levels**

Primary: Provides learning and educational activities typically designed to provide learners with fundamental skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and establish a solid foundation for learning and understanding.

Secondary: This is often made up of two stages: lower- and upper-secondary. Lower-secondary education is generally designed to continue the basic programme of the primary level, but teaching is typically more subject-focused, requiring more specialised teachers for each subject area. The end of this level often coincides with the end of compulsory education. In upper-secondary education, instruction is often organised even more along subject lines and teachers typically need a higher or more subject-specific qualification.

Post-secondary**:** Includes tertiary, higher education, vocational, technical, and employability training. Higher education programmes build on secondary education, providing more complex learning activities in specialised fields of education. Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education, but also includes advanced vocational, technical, and employability training.

**Levels of inclusivity**

Exclusion: occurs when students are directly or indirectly prevented from or denied access to education in any form.

Segregation: occurs when the education of learners with disabilities is provided in separate environments, typically catered to one specific or to various types of disability, in isolation from learners without disabilities.

Integration: is the process of placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream educational institutions with the understanding that they can adjust to the standardised requirements of such institution.

Inclusion: Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all learners of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences.

**Persons with disabilities**: “Persons with disabilities” include “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (article 1 CRPD).

**Special educational needs (SEN):** An official decision leads to a learner being recognised as eligible for additional educational support to meet their learning needs. An official decision meets the following criteria:

* There has been an educational assessment procedure involving a multi‑disciplinary team.
* The multi-disciplinary team includes members from within and external to the learner’s educational establishment.
* There is a legal document which describes the support the learner is eligible to receive and which is used as the basis for planning.
* The official decision is subject to a formal, regular review process.

**Types of schooling**

Mainstream education: implies placement in a class alongside learners without disabilities, or in some cases in a separate class for learners with disabilities within a mainstream school setting. Those learners who are not in mainstream settings are in fully separate special schools.

Inclusive setting: refers to education where the learner with disabilities follows education in mainstream classes alongside their peers without disabilities for the largest part – 80% or more – of the school week.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Preface

It is important to ensure that all learners, with or without disabilities, are included in mainstream education, in line with Article 24 and General Comment No4 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), to ensure the right of inclusive education for all. It is therefore important that EU legislation and Member States’ education policies are fully harmonised with the provisions of the CRPD.

Despite the ratification of the CRPD by the EU and all EU Member States, inequalities in education still persist in Europe. Furthermore, the global COVID-19 pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing the extent of exclusion and highlighting that work on disability inclusion is imperative.

With schools having closed across Europe during the pandemic, we have observed enormous variations both within and between countries regarding support for learners with disabilities though remote learning. The challenges and barriers to distance learning are numerous and this has had a negative impact on learners with disabilities, their families and school staff. A combination of mainstream and disability-specific measures is necessary to ensure the systematic inclusion of persons with disabilities in education.

Digital transformation is one of the European Commission's policy priorities. High quality and inclusive education and training are a key part of reaching this ambition and ensuring that all people are prepared to live and be educated in the digital age. These priorities coincide with the crucial need to provide inclusive digital learning environments to all learners due to COVID19 outbreak. The European Commission is currently developing a new Digital Education Action Plan, reflecting the long-term vision for sustainable and inclusive digital education, and learning from the COVID-19 pandemic.

EDF welcomes European’s Commission initiative on public consultation and hopes that barriers on remote learning including the inaccessible digital platforms for students with disabilities will be taken into account for the design of a more inclusive design for the upcoming Digital Education Action Plan.

## Objectives and methodology

This Report is motivated by inequalities in inclusive education and therefore by variations in the way of remote learning has been delivered across EU Member States. The report aims to raise awareness about unequal access to inclusive education for students with disabilities before and after the COVID-19 outbreak. It also aims at providing guidelines to governments and NGOs on how to implement more inclusive practices and at sharing promising examples of inclusive methods in education across Europe. The final objective is to promote the right to inclusive education under article 24 of the CRPD in light with General Comment No4 of the CRPD Committee and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

Data for the report was collected from 20th of April to 18th of June 2020. Information on national responses to COVID-19 has been collected for twenty-one countries by contacting their respective Ministries of Education, or representatives from inclusion departments we could reach thanks to the European Agency on Inclusive Education and by looking at additional sources on national websites. Two interviews took place, one with the Representative of Inclusion Department in Malta and one with the Representative in Belgium (Flemish community). Furthermore, for the section “European schools’ response to COVID19”, written feedback was provided by the Education Support Coordinator of the Office Secretary-General (OSG) of the European schools. Finally, information collected from three testimonials has been taken into account (two interviews with teachers and one interview with a mother of a child on the autism spectrum). A qualitative analysis has been applied for the interpretation of collected data.

## EU legal and policy background

### The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) aims at promoting, protecting and ensuring the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.[[2]](#footnote-2) The UN Convention, adopted on 13 December 2006, is the first legally-binding international human rights policy instrument to which the EU and all its Member States are parties.

Article 24 of the Convention sets out that States Parties shall recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education by ensuring an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning. In light to the above, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities responsible for monitoring and interpreting the Convention released its General Comment No. 4 on the right to inclusive education in 2016, clarifying that “only inclusive education can provide both quality education and social development for persons with disabilities, and a guarantee of universality and non-discrimination in the right to education.”[[3]](#footnote-3) General comment No.4 is crucial because it distinguishes between segregation, integration and inclusion and urges governments to transfer resources from segregated to inclusive settings. According to the analysis of Article 24 and General Comment No.4 from Unicef,[[4]](#footnote-4) the impact of inclusive education is reflected at an educational level (all children learn more effectively), a social level (it contributes to more inclusive societies) and an economic level (it is cost-effective). The right to education applies to all children. In other words, in order to provide inclusive education we need to ensure:

* **Non-discrimination**: all children with and without disabilities should be able to access education without discrimination
* **no exclusion**: children with disabilities must never be excluded from general education
* **reasonable accommodation**: in education settings this should never be decided by a medical diagnosis of a child’s condition, instead, it must be decided by looking at the barriers to education that a particular learner faces
* **general support**
* **individual educational plans**
* **trained teachers**.

### The EU Disability Strategy 2010 - 2020

In 2010 the European Commission adopted a EU Disability Strategy (EDS) 2010-2020. One of the objectives of the Strategy was to promote inclusive education and lifelong learning for learners with disabilities throughout the EU. In its strategy the EU pointed out that all learners need to be integrated appropriately into the general education systems and provided with individual support according to their needs.

Some important EU initiatives in the domain of education that followed the adoption of EDS were:

* the Joint Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) Strategic Framework - with priority given to enhanced access to quality and inclusive mainstream education and training for all learners,
* Erasmus Plus - including specific funding available for the participation of students and staff with disabilities in mobility actions and the inclusion of accessibility and reasonable accommodation criteria in all relevant calls for proposal. The Inclusion and Diversity Strategy applied to the Youth strand of Erasmus Plus also ensures that young people with fewer opportunities have equal access to the programme, including young people with disabilities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The European Commission announced in January that it will present a new disability strategy in 2021. We except some important provisions in the domain of education, taking into account the educational needs of learners with disabilities in the case of future pandemic scenarios.

It is important to remember that the Treaty of Lisbon[[6]](#footnote-6) clarifies the [division of competences](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/competences.html) between the EU and its Member States. These competences are divided into three main categories - exclusive, shared, and supporting. Education is a supporting/national competence, which means that the EU can only intervene to support, coordinate or complement the action of EU countries. In addition, non-legally binding EU acts, such as the EDS, must not require the harmonisation of Member States’ laws or regulations through legal obligations. This means that the implementation of the recommendations on inclusive education depends on Member States’ willingness and priorities. This is the reason why we observe many variations on educational systems among the Member states.

### EU funds

An effective way to promote more inclusive educational systems is the use of the EU structural funds. The European Regional Development Fund (**ERDF)** and the European Social Fund (**ESF)** are very good examples as how the EU budget can (and must) contribute to the promotion and implementation of the CRPD and to the right to inclusive education. Translating it into numbers, the EU committed to invest almost 6.2€ billion during current Multiannual Financial Framework (MMF) which lasted from 2014-2020, aiming at combating all forms of discrimination and improving accessibility for persons with disabilities, while easing their integration into employment, education and training.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is however difficult to collect information on exactly how much of this has been used in inclusive education at EU and Member State level and how much will be invested in the coming funding period from 2021-2027.

### Inclusive education in Europe

Learners with disabilities are less likely to complete primary, secondary and post-secondary education compared to learners without disabilities.[[8]](#footnote-8) We have seen a number of commitments taken by the EU and the Member States in the last ten years. Firstly, of course, there was the adoption of the CRPD and its Article 24 and General Comment No4. The CRPD’s sections on education and training favour the better inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education. Secondly, the adoption of the Incheon Declaration (2015) for Education 2030[[9]](#footnote-9) set out a new vision for education for a period of fifteen years. We also saw the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, in which Goal 4 is to *“*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*”. [[10]](#footnote-10)*

From the above, we observe the mobilisation of governments in promoting inclusive education. Education is a national competence, which means that Member States are not obliged to comply with the policy framework within the EDS, but rather should use it as guidance. This is why education is delivered differently in the different Member States. Likewise, inclusive systems are not perceived in the same way in all EU Member States. Some countries opt for inclusive education for learners with disabilities in a mainstream classroom. Other opt for inclusion in mainstream schools but in specialised classes. Some opt for special schools where learners with disabilities are separated from their peers without disabilities.

CRPD Article 24 and General Comment No4 would point to inclusion in a mainstream classroom as the most inclusive form of education, and placement in special schools as the least inclusive.

As we will see, some EU countries are more inclusive than others.

## Some facts to bear in mind

Regarding the legal framework, all EU Member States have adopted legislation promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities in education, at different levels. However, according to the analysis of the data[[11]](#footnote-11) we observe that there are many variations among Member States when it comes to the education of persons with disabilities.

According to a classification in the cross-country report on inclusive education from EASIE, 2018,[[12]](#footnote-12) it is important to bear in mind the following:

**Inclusive setting:** refers to education where the learner with special education needs (SEN) follows education in mainstream classes alongside their mainstream peers for the largest part (80% or more) of the school week.

**Mainstream education**: implies placement in amainstream class, or placement in a separate special class within a mainstream school. Those learners who are not in mainstream settings are in fully separate special schools.

The majority of students with Special Educational Need (SEN) in EU countries are educated in special classes or special schools, outside mainstream education. However, there are some EU countries that have made significant progress when it comes to inclusion and providing accessible learning environments in mainstream education.

In the following table (figure 1) we observe the percentage of learners in inclusive education across the countries of the EU, the Free Trade Association and the United Kingdom.

Figure 1: Percentage of learners with an official decision of SEN in inclusive education/Source from: European Agency Statistics on **Inclusive education** (2018/page 18)

This table allows us to make the assumption that the higher rates signify more inclusive schools environments. The average rate of the European countries in the table is (64,97%) with the following five countries showing the best **performance in inclusion** for learners with disabilities, of which three are EU Member States:

* **Italy (99,12%)**-the only European country so far that has reached almost the full inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream education**;**
* **Malta (94,65%)**
* **Norway (91,89%)**
* **Iceland (91,81%)**
* **Lithuania (89,45%)**

On the contrary, the following five countries seem to have the lowest level of inclusion in education, all of which are EU Member States:

* **Sweden (11,21%)**
* **Belgium - FIanders (19,11%)**
* **Estonia (37,34%)**
* **Finland (38,98%)**
* **Latvia (39,05%)**

### Inclusive practices for Top 5 European countries for inclusive education

In this section we provide more information about the education systems and inclusive practices adopted by some of the five countries listed above as having the most inclusive education systems for learners with disabilities

### Italy

**Some good practices**

* Learners with disabilities attend mainstream schools
* Schools adapt the curriculum and schedule to learners
* By law there are no special schools or classes
* Municipalities are responsible for making school buildings accessible for everyone (Law 118/1971)
* Maximum of 20 pupils in class when there is a learner with SEN
* Free transport for children with disabilities
* Parents/or legally responsible persons for a child with disabilities can take up to 3 years work leave/or 2 hours per day special permission from work until the child is 3 years old
* All students with SEN have the right to individualised education support in mainstream classes
* Adoption of [Law 107/2015 (the Good School Reform Act)](https://labuonascuola.gov.it/index_en/) which ensures full inclusion for all pupils with disabilities.

### Malta

**Some good practices**

* Only 0.53% of learners attend special education settings (resource centers), which is one of the lowest in the EU.
* Early childhood education provision for children aged 0–3 years is becoming increasingly popular in Malta, which enables teachers to identify the needs of learners with disabilities at an early stage.
* National School Support Services (part of Educational Department) provide schools with educators specialised in the support of learners with disabilities, as well as specialists to provide training for staff.
* A personalised approach is adopted in mainstream schools
* The school, in cooperation with families, analyses the needs of the child with disabilities and they decide together what kind of educational approach they take.

### Iceland

### Some good practices

* Each school decides how the teaching of learners with disabilities is organised, in cooperation with the learner’s parents or legal guardians
* Alteration of older school buildings/adoption rules for accessibility for new schools to meet the physical needs of learners with disabilities
* Pupils receive education in local mainstream compulsory schools, most commonly in mainstream classes (there are very few special units within mainstream schools)
* There is a high degree of stakeholder engagement with the issue of inclusive education

### Lithuania

Some good practices

* About 45.7% of all general education schools and 51% of vocational schools are adapted for learners with disabilities
* In 2019–2020, according to preliminary data, 65.8% of learners with disabilities in vocational schools study in an inclusive way, together with peers without disabilities
* In order to increase inclusion, support classes for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools were created to enable learners to develop alongside their peers, closer to home, and to gradually reduce the number of special schools. The aim was to reduce the number of special schools from 47 to 20
* The number of special schools and special education centers has decreased: in 2015 there were 47 special schools, in 2020 there were 44. However, it must be noted that the number of pupils enrolled in special schools has not decreased
* The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is preparing a number of suggestions for changing the Law on Education and creating an action plan to push forward development of inclusive education in 2020–2023.

### Inclusive practices from other countries

Austria: Adoption of pre-school support programmes for better inclusion of Roma children with disabilities.

Belgium: For the French-speaking community, in 2021 there will be a reform in the education system. The aim is to adopt a more inclusive model of education. The objective until 2030 is to pass from 38 thousand to 32 thousand students within special schools. More training will be offered to teachers in order to be able to be adapted to the specific educational needs to each student.

Bulgaria: An inclusive approach has been implemented in Bulgaria by the NGO- and Agency for Social Development “Vision”. This agency is a provider of four main types of social services: Social Assistance for Children with Special Educational Needs, one Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration of Children with Disabilities, two Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration of Adults with Disabilities, 100 Social Assistants for Children with Special Educational Needs. The first of its kind social service in Bulgaria with 120 children with different disabilities students in mainstream kindergartens and schools aims at accompanying the child during classes, helping him/her adapt and include in group and keeping in touch with both parents and teachers in order to update them on the child’s development.

Czechia: The “Fair school project” aims to offer resources (training, raising awareness) for parents and teachers in promoting inclusive education for learners with disabilities.

Denmark: Establishment of a knowledge center for inclusion to ensure the collection of experiences from successful schools and research for better inclusion. This unit is based in the Ministry of Education, and it communicates and initiates new knowledge and information about quality in inclusive education.

France: The Secretariat government - attached to the office of the Prime Minister- is responsible for disability issues and promotes inclusive policy measures. Achievements have been made with the adoption of the Autism Plan promoting inclusive school environments and social inclusion for learners with disabilities.

Germany: The education system in Germany is built on the natural right of parents to determine the upbringing and education of their children, which is guaranteed by the Basic Law. The majority of the Federal States (Länder) are striving to give pupils and their parents a choice between regular schools and special schools. The promotion of inclusive education is based on the recommendation of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs entitled “Inclusive Education for Children and Young People with Disabilities in Schools” (2011). This recommendation, among others, has been instrumental in changing understanding of the task of establishing an inclusive education system. This comprises putting in place suitable professional development offers for teachers and taking measures to adapt teacher training. In 2012, the Ministers of education adopted a decision which stipulates that all teachers are supposed to acquire the knowledge, capacities and attitudes needed for inclusive education.

Greece**:** For the case of Greece, findings are contradictory. According to Ministry of Education the following data were collected: Over the past few years the number of students with disability and/or special educational needs attending mainstream school settings is continually growing. Indicatively, comparing years 2014-15, to 2017-2018, numbers of learners attending mainstream schools and receiving some form of special educational support rose from 68.000 to 94.600 respectively, an increase of 40%. This rate was further increased in the school year 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. Measures have been taken to increase the capacity of schools to respond to the diversity of needs of all learners. For example, in terms of financing, there has been a constant increase in the expenditure for pupils with disabilities via: 1) The increase in recruitment of specialised teachers and support staff. 2) The establishment of 570 new inclusive classes in mainstream schools of primary and secondary education. 3) The development of accessible digital material that can be used by students with disabilities in mainstream settings. 4) And more recently, the publication of 4500 vacancy notices for permanent staff in special and inclusive education. However, ESAMEA(Greek national member of EDF) provides a very different approach in comparison to data that have been collected from the Ministry of Education in the country. ESAMEA analyses that National Law 3699/2008 (referring to inclusive education) remains up to now a separate legislation concerning the education of persons with disabilities. In other words, the Law makes separation between education and special education and this is not inclusive from the definition of the Law. ESAMEA also claims that “inclusion classes” encounter many issues which are linked with the lack of adequate number of staff and a large number of learners. Furthermore, ESAMEA claims that until recently the evaluations of learners with disabilities were based exclusively on the medical model of disability (against principles of UN CRPD). Finally, ESAMEA recognises the efforts that have been made in general the last ten years towards inclusion for learners with disabilities. However they find that additional support is still very limited (lack of specialised staff, financial resources and accessible infrastructures).

Netherlands: Close cooperation between the Ministry of Education, municipalities, school and childcare providers. The education policy on support for learners with disabilities (*Kansengelijkheidsbeleid*) requires municipalities to draw up a local educational agenda together with school boards and childcare providers. In the local agenda, school boards, local municipalities and childcare providers discuss and decide how best to combat educational disadvantages and avoid segregation in education.

Sweden: Investment in the main resource center in the country, which offers training for teachers and parents by offering conferences towards inclusion for learners with disabilities.

General tendencies in Europe ***[[13]](#footnote-13)***

* Each country identifies pupils with disabilities and with SEN differently. This variation can make it difficult to easily compare data
* None of the countries provide a perfect inclusive education system for students with disabilities (that means that they should educated with their peers without disabilities for at least 80% of their time in mainstream school).
* There is an issue in all countries regarding learners with disabilities that officially are enrolled at schools but they never attend the classes.
* Several countries present clear increase in rates of pupils with an official diagnosis of SEN.
* All countries present a decrease in the proportion of pupils with an official diagnosis of SEN being educated in segregated educational environments (special classes and schools).

## European schools’ approach in inclusion for learners with disabilities

European Schools are intergovernmental schools principally designed for children of employees of the EU institutions. They are established by convention under international law and are controlled by the governments of the 27 EU Member states and the European Commission. Children can benefit from free enrollment if their parents work for EU institutions. In fact, more than 80 percent of European Schools’ pupils are children of EU staff. One advantage is that children can study in their mother tongue since EU schools provide instructions in 20 languages. However, the option of choosing among 20 languages is not always possible. The schools may also direct the child to a section based on their nationality instead of their *de facto* first language.

When it comes to inclusion of students with disabilities in EU schools, a lot of negative criticism has been made to EU schools. In 2015, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with disabilities indicated in its review of the EU that “not all students with disabilities receive the reasonable accommodation needed to enjoy their right to inclusive quality education in European schools in line with the Convention, and that the schools do not comply with the non-rejection clause”.[[14]](#footnote-14) After this statement, several articles have been published criticising European schools for discrimination against students with disabilities. A report published by Human Rights Watch illustrated testimonials from parents of children with disabilities within European schools.[[15]](#footnote-15) Some of the barriers that children with disabilities are facing within the European schools are the following:

### Barriers to inclusion for children with disabilities in European schools:

Exclusion and pressure to leave the school: According to the educational support policy of European schools, they can refuse the attendance of students with disabilities when the school outlines its inability to meet the special educational needs of the student.[[16]](#footnote-16) There are some different forms of pressure such as guiding the child towards others schools, making the child repeat their academic year, informing the parents that the outlook will be bad in the year to come, expressing difficulties in following Baccalaureate exams, providing educational support that is not of required quality and inadequate support for staff.

Inadequate support and lack of accommodations: Most of the children and parents interviewed by Human Rights Watch stated that the educational support provided has not been focused on the individual needs of the students, depending instead on the willingness of the staff or the school in question.

Lack of flexibility in the curriculum: The organisation of the European schools offer only one academic curriculum which leads to European Baccalaureate without providing any flexibility to students, including those with disabilities or other pupils.

Lack of awareness and training: Eight out of ten parents interviewed claimed that school staff lacked sufficient training and knowledge about disability.

Limited alternatives and private school tuition fees: Children with disabilities who have been excluded from the European schools face further difficulties to adapt to new school settings. When a learner is excluded, parents often have to take the difficult decision to send the child back to their home country in order to provide education in a language they can speak (mostly in private schools).

From testimonials provided we observe that the fundamental principles to inclusive education are not applied, such as the individualised support and the reasonable accommodation of the school setting in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities. According to parents, such accommodations were not applied in a systematic way and depended on the willingness of school staff. It is worth mentioning that variation between schools is large and cannot be easily explained by selection effects or other.

# The impact of COVID19 on learners with disabilities

## The context

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly affected the lives of **learners with disabilities**. Most European countries closed schools as part of their measures to limit contact between people and to slow down the spread of the virus. Closures of schools started from Italy, the first country hit hard by COVID-19 on the 5th of March 2020. Very soon, other EU countries followed the same strategy as a preventive measure to halt further transmission of the virus. Since then, all EU countries have announced the closure of schools to varying extents. In many cases, education was continued remotely, such as through the use of “Google Classroom” which connects classes remotely. In addition, the EU provided a common platform on learning resources provided by EU-funded projects[[17]](#footnote-17) where students, parents and teachers could find learning materials. Furthermore, Member States responded to the outbreak in proving distance learning and resources to students. The challenge that Member States had to face was to provide accessible learning resources for all students, by taking into account the specific needs of learners with disabilities. Below we will explore how this was done differently in different countries.

## European countries’ response to education during the COVID19 outbreak

### Austria

In Austria distance learning was provided at all levels of education. The materials and resources available correspond to all students [[18]](#footnote-18). One alternative strategy was that the Ministry of Education provided students with a mobile device for those who did not have sufficient digital infrastructure at home (during distance learning).[[19]](#footnote-19) **However, distance learning material addressing needs for learners with disabilities was not systematically made available.**

### Belgium

The schools closed on 16th of March 2020. Education in [Belgium](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgium) is regulated by three [communities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communities,_regions_and_language_areas_of_Belgium): [Flemish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flemish_Community), [French](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Community_of_Belgium) and [German-speaking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German-speaking_Community_of_Belgium). Each community has its own school system. In each system there has been autonomy in terms of decision making in measures during the COVID-19 outbreak. General measures adopted by three communities: 1) no new learning objectives during COVID-19, 2) every community is organised in an autonomous way with the objective to keep contact between the schools and the students. The online platforms provided cover the teaching material from nursery to secondary education.[[20]](#footnote-20) **However, distance learning material addressing needs for learners with disabilities was not systematically made available.**

### Croatia

It is worth mentioning that the majority of students in Croatia are educated in mainstream schools. However, general teaching material and resources have been shared by the Ministry of Education to teachers, students and their families[[21]](#footnote-21) for the organisation of distance learning. **There were no specific instructions given for learners with disabilities.**

### Cyprus

The enrolment of pupils was suspended on the 13 March 2020. Pupils of the 3rd grade of lyceum (secondary education) returned to schools on the 11 May 2020 and the rest of the pupils on the 21 May 2020. Existing infrastructure is used to support distance learning in public schools. As a priority, measures were taken to ensure that all pupils have access to a computer and internet at home. A distance education programme was implemented, using Microsoft Teams, for the pupils of the 5th grade of primary level up to the 3rd (final) grade of upper secondary level. In addition, supportive educational material has been uploaded to the Ministry’s webpage[[22]](#footnote-22) and individual school Webpages for all pupils in order to minimise the effects of school closures. Furthermore, public and private television stations are supporting the overall efforts, especially for younger pupils, by broadcasting lessons and other educational programs.  **For learners with disabilities attending mainstream classes or special units, the same instructions apply for their pedagogical support as for the rest of the pupils**. With regards to **learners with disabilities attending special schools, instructions were given to head teachers to communicate with parents/guardians to provide suggestions for creative activities, during the suspension period, depending on the particularity of each child.** At the same time special schools were encouraged to upload educational materials on their websites that teachers have developed or used in the classroom to further support children, as well as suggestions for pedagogical and therapeutic activities that can be implemented at home, in collaboration with parents/guardians**.**Special education material (e.g. for pupils with hearing impairment) has also been uploaded and has been disseminated to other special education groups of pupils. In addition, pupils with hearing impairment were allowed to open their cameras to see their teachers and their sign language interpreters were also granted access to participate during the distance learning sessions.

### Czechia

From May onwards schools partially started opening, starting with higher education institutions. The learning platforms available cover the learning material in the same way for all pupils. **There was not found to be adapted learning material addressing needs of learners with disabilities.**

### Estonia

The organisation of distance learning for learners with disabilities does not differ from the one established for students without disabilities. The detailed conditions of teaching, including assessment, are organised by the school. In Estonia there was not found to be adapted learning material addressing needs of learners with disabilities. However, the Ministry of Education adopted what were known as“[Pathfinder centers](http://rajaleidja.innove.ee/)”   to support all schools and teachers in [organising homeschooling and distance learning](https://www.innove.ee/blogi/innove-rajaleidja-kuidas-saavad-vanemad-oma-last-kaugoppe-ajal-toetada/) for learners with disabilities.[[23]](#footnote-23)

### France

In France the learning material found on on-line Platforms is the same as for all learners without disabilities.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, the country adopted several inclusive methods in supporting students with disabilities and their families. Special attention was given to ensure contact between families of learners with disabilities and teachers made efforts to transform the teaching material in an accessible way. It is important to mention that each school developed its own individual communication system to maintain contact with learners and to adapt the online material in a more accessible way for learners with disabilities, meaning that the quality of distance learning varied between educational establishments. A testimonial we gathered from a teacher in a mainstream school for the purpose of this research showed that, in the case of this person’s school at least, the platforms used for distance learning were not accessible for students with disabilities. One solution they found is to allow parents to enter schools at specific times during the day in order to provide them with printed accessible material for students with disabilities.

### Germany

The Federal States and national government have created online platforms to provide students with the learning materials.[[25]](#footnote-25) **However, this material is not adapted to the needs of learners with disabilities.** The accessible material was provided at the initiative of schools and teachers.

### Greece

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, Greek schools closed on March 10th. During the lockdown the Greek government adopted **three key measures in ensuring the inclusion of pupils with disabilities** and the maintenance of their education. The first was the circular letter 39317/GD4 “Distance learning for pupils with disability and/or special educational needs” which was issued on the 19/03/2020 and was sent to all schools and stakeholders., the circular letter 41070 /GD4 “Distance support for pupils with disability and/or special educational needs and their parents and teachers by the Special Support Personnel”, which was issued on the 27/03/2020 & circular letter F8/38091/D4 contains detailed instructions for the use of a variety of available digital teaching material for all educational levels, e-books, setting up accounts for e-classes, platforms and links. More specifically, with regards to inclusive education, there is information concerning teaching resources and material available at the “prosvasimo” website,[[26]](#footnote-26) where accessible digital material is provided, adapted according to different types of disability and educational needs. **A lot of criticism has been made regarding the limitations to accessibility on the online platforms**. However, a social measure was adopted with the distribution of 9.000 digital devices (at a cost of more than 1.48 million euros) to support distance learning during lockdown. Other distance learning provisions have been made as well through the national television ERT2 TV channel where students can follow some lessons with the contribution of the Greek Sign Language interpreters.

### Hungary

In Hungary there was a relatively mild pandemic, with very strict closure of schools. All school closed in the middle of March and would not open until the next school year. It was the same at primary, secondary and university level. The government published methodological guidance on digital education with recommendations included for children with disabilities. All schools had to assure home schooling online, however the realisation of this objective varies from school to school. Despite efforts, digital e-learning platforms are not accessible for all students (for instance there is no accessibility foreseen for students with hearing impairments).

### Iceland

Iceland, according to EASIE data[[27]](#footnote-27), has very high rates in inclusion for learners with disabilities. Early childhood education and care and compulsory schools did not close but had some restrictions from the 16th of March until the 4th of May. Upper- secondary schools and higher education closed entirely for students and staff from the 16th of March until the 4th of May when they were allowed to open for smaller groups and laboratory work. During the restriction period all upper secondary schools and higher education institutions used various distance and on-line teaching methods to keep education going**.** Many compulsory schools used these methods, mainly for lower secondary students (age 13-16). Since May 2020 learners returned to the classroom settings. Some parents decided to keep their children at home even after this date. Some upper secondary schools made exceptions and kept the schools open for the most vulnerable group of students. **All upper secondary schools kept contact with students on a regular basis, to ensure their wellbeing and to motivate them to keep up their studies and daily routine**. The schools experienced, surprisingly, that some students considered being in danger of dropout, kept up their studies, even better than before. The same was observed in compulsory schools concerning some vulnerable groups. It was also found that the Ministry of Education was in close contact with school staff and parents during the outbreak in informing and advising them on how to ensure continuity of learning.

### Italy

In Italy school directors were requested from the Ministry of Education to ensure remote teaching and to carefully consider the needs of learners with disabilities. The Law-Decree No. 22 of 8 April 2020 on “Urgent measures to ensure the conclusion of the school year, the beginning of the new school year and on final exams” was passed. The Law-Decree allowed the adoption of specific Ordinances of the Ministry of Education ruling the following crucial issues: guidelines for the evaluation of the performance of the students; the conclusion of the school year; the final exams and how to perform them using digital devices; the measures to start the next school-year in September and the possibility to fill any education gap caused by the emergency. Furthermore, Art. 1.5 specifically stresses that **these Ordinances must carefully consider the needs of students with disabilities or any other specific education necessities.** Art. 2.3 recalled the necessity for all teachers to ensure the continuity of teaching using remote on-line platforms and any other available technological devices. The Law-Decree seems to have been effective. Furthermore, an online petition was launched by parents of learners with disabilities who have high support needs, asking the Government to allow teachers and special assistants to provide support to their children at home, since these students could not always participate in online teaching. Finally, the parents of children with disabilities asked for an increases hours leave for those who need to take care of children with disabilities.

### Ireland

Schools closed mid-March in Ireland and until the end of the school year. The Ministry has provided general guidance to schools on ensuring that they continue to provide education for learners and guidance to schools. Platforms are available providing teaching material to students[[28]](#footnote-28) [[29]](#footnote-29) however,there was not found to be adapted learning material addressing needs of learners with disabilities.

### Lithuania

Lithuania is one of the top five countries in inclusion for students with disabilities in Europe. All educational institutions closed in Lithuania on the 16th of March. From the 30th of March educational institutions at all education levels had to ensure provision of distance learning. **We can identify several inclusive measures for students with disabilities.** To help schools with the digital teaching some methodological materials, teaching aids and other school-relevant information was updated on the National Education Agency's website. In addition, to ensure the availability of distance learning for all pupils, 35 000 digital devices (15 000 tablets and 20 000 laptops) were bought for 35 000 pupils from lower socio-economical backgrounds. 9,2 million euros has been foreseen for the acquisition of these digital devices, including Internet connection in the package. Furthermore, teachers are offered free courses to enhance their digital skills. Teachers and parents were also advised to watch a webinar series on distance learning on the VMA MOODLE platform, organised by the KTU University on E-Learning Technology[[30]](#footnote-30) or other National Education Agency web-based distance learning seminars and consultations. Another social measure fighting against poverty is that meals (packages of food products are delivered by social workers) continue to be provided for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who used to get free warm meals before closure of schools. In all schools, teachers continued to have overall responsibility for the education of pupils, including those with SEN. During the closure period, mainstream class teachers had to continue to differentiate tasks appropriately to match the learning needs of pupils with SEN. They were asked to provide regular feedback to parents and guardians and pupils on days and times that have been agreed. Mainstream class teachers had to collaborate with special-needs teachers, social workers and psychologists to ensure an effective approach to work for learners with disabilities. Finally, municipality support was provided for technical assistance at home.

### Malta

Schools closed as of the 13th March 2020 until the end of the school year. An online platform was launched called “Teleskola”[[31]](#footnote-31) and material from different teachers was uploaded such as lessons and resources. Distance learning was done using different online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Where possible, printed resources (handouts etc) were being sent to homes so that children could continue learning at home. Resources from National School Support Services were shared with educators, and teachers in turn were encouraged to share adapted and modified lesson resources. Some schools and local councils took the initiative to post storytelling sessions on the social media to support and encourage online learning.  The government acknowledges the fact that many families have difficulties to have access to education. For this reason, they provided laptops to the students that did not have any. Individual laptops and tablets were distributed. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 lockdown a helpline was created in order to improve inclusion. Parents can call and ask information about learning materials or other issues related to inclusion for their children. Learners can call themselves to ask for information. **Malta made considerable efforts to be inclusive during the COVID-19 outbreak**. However, there are still challenges to address. For instance a major challenge observed was the difficulty that children on the autism spectrum are facing in adapting to the new reality and getting used to following e-classes instead of going to school in the morning.

### Netherlands

From mid-March schools were closed in the Netherlands. Municipalities were in close contact with the schools by taking the initiative to identify the children for whom extra measures must be taken (including children with disabilities).

### Norway

In Norway both kindergartens and schools closed on March 13th. Such as in case of Netherlands, there was a strong cooperation between schools and municipalities to identify the needs of children with disabilities and therefore respond better to their needs. Kindergartens opened again on April 20th and Primary school opened on April 27th. In order to cover the special educational needs of children, a specialised platform was launched for this propose.[[32]](#footnote-32)

### Portugal

Schools closed in March and remain closed until the end of the school year. The government, in order to maintain the fundamental right to education, has launched an online platform.[[33]](#footnote-33) In addition, TV broadcasted starting from 20 April for basic education (1st to 9th grade) to complement the use of online tools.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, despite the existence of digital infrastructure to ensure distance learning, **the Portuguese Association of People with Disabilities has criticised the government** regarding barriers in accessing the e-learning platform from learners with disabilities and in the organisation of e-classes for pupils with SEN.[[35]](#footnote-35) In addition, for all levels of education each school cluster has a school open to provide support to learners disabilities conducted by specialised staff. In addition, a helpline was launched to support families and persons with disabilities to deal with the stress of isolation. Furthermore, social services have been providing some support in certain cases for students with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds.

### Sweden

Schools generally remained open in Sweden after the COVID-19 outbreak. In some cases, education was provided through the website “[Skolahemma](https://www.skolahemma.se/" \t "_blank)‘’[[36]](#footnote-36) supported by the Swedish National Agency for Education, offering materials for students and teachers to facilitate distance learning. **However, this material is not adapted to specialised needs of learners with disabilities.**

### Switzerland

Schools in Switzerland have been partially closed during the pandemic. The 26 cantons are responsible for the education of all learners. To maintain distance learning and provide resources, a platform called “eduport” was launched[[37]](#footnote-37). However, **the material mentioned does not cover all the needs of all students with disabilities.**

### United Kingdom

The United Kingdom was the last country that announced the closure of the schools. Schools remained largely closed until the end of the school year affecting 15,401,612 learners. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland disseminated information and established **systems to support parents and caregivers** to guide them on how to face competing responsibilities while at home and to better support the educational process of children with disabilities. Despite the fact that the country had a delayed response to the crisis, some available sources seem to be accessible to students with disabilities and SEN and covered their needs[[38]](#footnote-38).

### Classification of countries according to COVID-19 response on inclusive education

Figure 3 below indicates the map of countries related to the degree of inclusion during COVID19 outbreak

Countries searched: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom

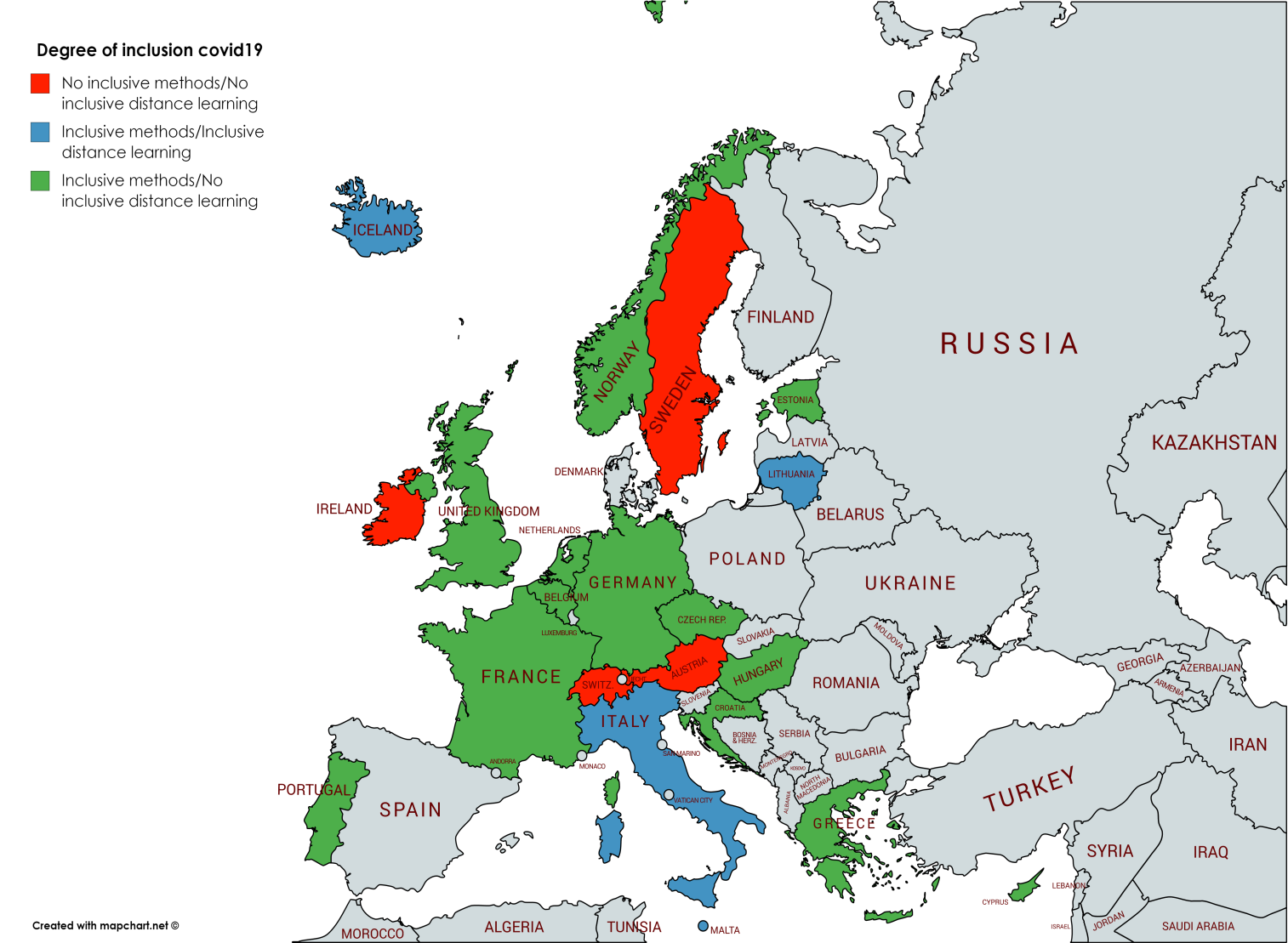


Figure 3: Degree of inclusion COVID19

Color Indicators

Red - No inclusive methods/No inclusive distance learning

Green - Inclusive methods/No inclusive distance learning

Blue - Inclusive methods/Inclusive distance learning

**There were no inclusive methods/no inclusive distance learning** found to support distance learning in: Austria, Ireland, Sweden.

**There were some inclusive methods but no inclusive distance learning** to support distance learning in the following ways and in the following countries:

-Exceptions and adjustments to school closures for learners with disabilities were found in Belgium and Estonia

-Inclusive social measures to support distance learning for learners with disabilities were found in Italy (funding to support distance learning covering resources/accessibility, laptops etc), Malta (funding for digital equipment), Greece (funding for digital equipment), Estonia (parent allowance), Lithuania (covering meals and technical support to adjust the home to the new school environment), the Netherlands, Norway, Germany and Czechia (these four countries developed the “nursing support system”), Croatia (priority for re-opening of schools for learners with disabilities), Cyprus (sign interpreters for children with hearing impairment during online learning), Hungary (social initiative helping to create accessible e-learning environments for all), United Kingdom (systems to support parents and caregivers).

**Inclusive methods and Inclusive distance learning** were found to support learners with disabilities in Italy, Lithuania, Iceland and Malta.

Almost all countries introduced distance learning to ensure the continuity of education. Distance learning may can take the form of emailing homework to students and parents, recording classes and putting them online, and using educational apps and online platforms to communicate with students.

We conclude that the majority of the European countries except of Austria, Ireland and Sweden adopted inclusive measures to support learners with disabilities and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak. However, only few countries (Italy, Lithuania, Iceland and Malta) have adopted both inclusive methods and accessible digital learning environments adjusted to needs of learners with disabilities (not fully accessible though since improvement is still needed). The rest of the countries, which is the majority (13 countries) mostly adopted inclusive social measures to support learners with disabilities and their families. In most of these countries efforts to ensure distance learning have been made but there are still many limitations regarding accessibility of the online platforms for students with disabilities.

It is worth mentioning that these four countries are among the top five European countries regarding the inclusion of learners with disabilities (before the COVID-19 outbreak) as it has been identified in the first section of the report. This supports the hypothesis that countries with an inclusive education system before the crisis would take an inclusive approach to education during the crisis as well.

### European schools’ response during distance learning due to COVID-19 outbreak

According to the Position of EC Disability Support Group (EC DSG) on the 30th of April 2020, several inequalities have been identified in measures taken by the European schools for learners with disabilities[[39]](#footnote-39). According to testimonials of parents, the main barriers identified during distance learning were the following:

* online platforms are not properly adapted for students with disabilities
* it is not clear how distance learning is implementing – communication of written material - feedback
* unavailable evaluations to submitted work
* limitations in proving SEN assistance
* no flexibility in deadlines to submit work

It is very important that SEN support coordinators continue to stay in close contact with parents of students with disabilities in order to provide good-quality support through distance learning for all students.

## COVID-19 Exit plans in education

The situation in Europe varies regarding measures taken on social distancing in order to avoid the spread of the virus. Today, some countries have already returned to normality with the re-opening of schools. Other countries announced the partial re-opening of schools.

In this section we provide an overview of countries’ status regarding their exit plans in the domain of education. Countries are grouped under three categories. The same terminology is applied for the three categories as retrieved from the original source of data collection, Unesco.[[40]](#footnote-40)

We provide information from the latest update on 16th of June 2020 on Unesco’s website[[41]](#footnote-41). Data collected corresponds to the number of learners enrolled at pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary levels of education [ISCED levels 0 to 3], as well as at tertiary education levels [ISCED levels 5 to 8].

Information has been collected for all EU Member States and for three other European countries, Norway, Iceland and the United Kingdom.

In the figure 4 below, we have an overview on the progress of exit plans in education after the COVID-19 outbreak.

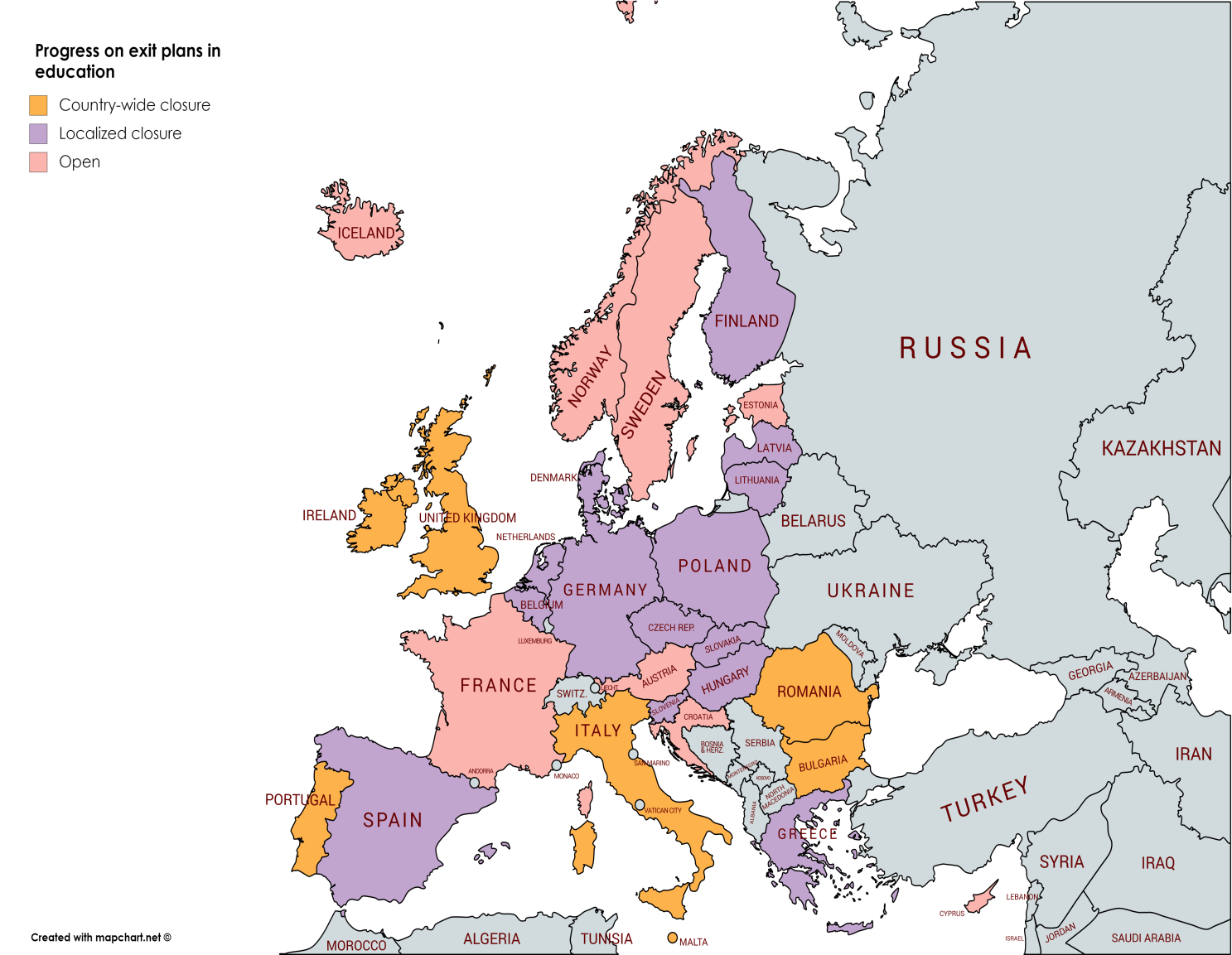


Figure 4: Progress on exit plans in education *[[42]](#footnote-42)*

Country-wide closure: Government-mandated closures of educational institutions affecting at least 70 % of the student population enrolled from pre-primary through to upper secondary levels [ISCED levels 0 to 3].

Localised closure: Government-mandated closures of educational institutions affecting up to 70 % of the student population enrolled from pre-primary through to upper secondary levels [ISCED levels 0 to 3] either at national level, or in at least one district/region/administrative unit of an education system with a decentralised governance structure such as Federal States.

Open: Governments have officially announced that schools are allowed to re-open following a localised or country-wide closure.

From the analysis of data from UNESCO[[43]](#footnote-43) on the monitoring of school closures caused by Covid-19 we conclude with the following information:

**Countries with country-wide closure (last update on 16th of June 2020)** are the following: Italy (10,876,792 learners affected), Romania (3,483,465 learners affected), Portugal (2,000,703) Ireland (1,289,122 learners affected), Bulgaria (1,224,406 learners affected), and Malta (80,205 learners affected), United Kingdom (15,401,612 learners affected).

**Countries with localised closure (last update on 16th of June 2020)** are the following: Greece, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg, and Slovenia.

**Countries with open status (last update on 16th of June 2020)** are the following: France, Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Croatia, Austria, Cyprus, and Iceland.

As it is observed from the findings, the majority of the countries (15 countries) have a localised closure status, which means that educational institutions are partially closed. For 6 countries, schools are totally closed and for the other 8 countries governments have announced the re-opening of schools.

## Barriers to inclusion due to distance learning

During the lockdown, the learning process has been primarily taking place virtually. However, the lack of accessibility and necessary support to permit learners with disabilities to follow online school programmes increases the risk of exclusion. The majority of countries remained closed for at least two months in order to protect students from the spread of virus. This was of course an important measure to secure children’s health. To prevent potential losses in education, schools in Europe offered distance learning to their pupils. However, this option is only available to some children and as a consequence, many learners with disabilities were left behind. Online learning also raises questions about disability and gender equity. Below, we highlight the main barriers to distance learning. Some of the data provided is from testimonials of parents of children with SEN and teachers.

No accessibility to digital infrastructure for all due to financial reasons: It was found that poorer children in countries using distance learning programmes tend to be less able to access them and may fall further behind if additional support is not made available.[[44]](#footnote-44)

No accessibility to distance learning platforms due to technical/social reasons: Absence of internet connection, poor connectivity and absence of technical support to help students with disabilities and their parents to connect to online platforms are crucial barriers to distance learning. For the majority of the cases parents were responsible for helping their children with connection on online learning material. However, parents’ literacy rates may drive further inequalities.

Platforms are not adjusted to all students’ needs: The online material and resources found on national platforms are not all accessible for students with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Untrained school staff: Most education providers have not received additional training to support students with disabilities. Therefore most teachers are not qualified enough to provide students with inclusive education material during distance learning.

Lack of one-to-one support: Learners with disabilities who are educated in mainstream education are mostly supported through one-to-one parallel support. During distance learning students do not have this possibility. Students with high support needs might not be independent enough to follow the instructions of the teacher during online learning. Therefore, parents had to support their children themselves. The challenge they face is that parental leave was not given to parents in this situation in most countries.

We therefore conclude that distance learning has become a crucial barrier to deliver inclusive education in a quality way to learners with disabilities and SEN. Not all educational establishments or students have the equipment necessary for effective distance learning. During periods of crisis, all the weakness of the education system are enhanced. One main weakness was that of including learners with disabilities, as shown by the inability of distance learning to cater to their needs.

Students with disabilities have been impacted by the COVID-19 not only through disruption to their learning, but also by the additional stress, fear of failure and isolation it has caused. A major challenge for children on the autism spectrum was to be adapted to new environment and change their daily routines. In addition, several surveys have been published after the lockdown highlighting the very high rates in domestic violence. Girls with disabilities in particular seem to be more vulnerable to domestic violence during lockdown. Parents also needed to cope with their own fears and uncertainty of losing their jobs and at the same time taking on the role of teachers during home schooling. More barriers were added depending on the level of literacy of parents and their capacity to help their children during distance learning in a practical way. Furthermore, teachers have been influenced from the pandemic. From one day to the next they had to deal with a new virtual reality, re-adjust their teaching methods, re-organise the school curriculum, re-evaluate the learning objectives for this academic year, be supportive to students and finally cooperate closely with parents to ensure distance learning. Finally, the planning of exit plans also had a psychological impact on students with disabilities, their parents and teachers. There was anxiety linked to fear of the spread of the virus and also linked to the change of routine.

## General recommendations

### Recommendations in promoting inclusive education

**Invest in training for teachers** and other school staff with CPD Programs (Continuous Professional Development) to be better qualified and respond effectively to the needs of learners with disabilities.

**Involve learners with disabilities and their parents** **or legal guardians** to get their perspectives in policy making for more inclusive educational policies at Member State level.

**Provide free, accessible and inclusive educational environments** with provisions of reasonable accommodation and support for all learners at all levels of education, in line with the UN CRPD.

**Invest in early diagnosis/early intervention**with comprehensive accessibility provisions and individualised support to better prepare the child with disabilities for mainstream education.

### Recommendations for inclusive education during the COVID-19 crisis

**Ensure** accessible digital learning environments with adapted materials for students with disabilities. For this reason we recommend that digital learning platforms are included in the European disability/accessibility act.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**Provide** alternative and accessible education materials ensuring reasonable accommodations based on individual needs of students with disabilities (audio-visual materials to disseminate through different media, radio programmes, television programmes etc.)

**Commit** money from EU social funds and React-EU to provide accessible learning platforms train school staff, support students with disabilities and their families on inclusive education through remote learning.

**Provide** common EU education platform among Ministries of Inclusive education departments to exchange good practices in inclusive education.

## Limitations of the research

It is important to highlight some limitations in the research. For the section focused on measures adopted by countries due to the COVID-19 outbreak, different degrees of information were collected from Ministries of Education (Representatives on inclusive education). Some countries provided us with more detailed measures, while others gave a very short feedback on measures. In addition, some other countries did not give written feedback; instead they provided us with some internet links in their national language. This means that the degree of data collected varies from country to country. Therefore, this does not allow us to make an entirely fair comparison on measures adopted across countries, since the information collected has not been standardised. Therefore, concluding points on the COVID-19 outbreak measures reflect only the data collected which means that they may not fully represent the quality of measures adopted by countries researched. Finally, in the first part of the report (inclusive education) we present contradictory references only for one country (Greece). This is because very detailed information was provided. We assume that contradictory references apply also to other countries but we could not identify them due to lack of sources and language limitations.

## Conclusion

This report has approached inclusive education across European countries and the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak to students with disabilities. The public health emergency was rapidly turning into a human rights crisis. It requires important support and political commitment to ensure the right to inclusive education for all learners. A disability-inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery will contribute to more inclusive and accessible learning and it will pave the way for a better future for all. Inclusive EU and national legislation and education policy needs to be fully harmonised with the provisions of the UN CRPD. A combination of mainstream and disability measures in education is necessary to ensure systematic inclusion of learners with disabilities. The role of EU social funds is indispensable to contribute to more inclusive educational policies and sustainable systems.

## Acknowledgements

**For the realisation of this report, I would like firstly** to thank my supervisor, Haydn Hammersley, Social Policy Officer at European Disability Forum for his guidance and support through each stage of the process and Marine Uldry, Human Rights and Gender officer at the European Disability Forum for the insightful information on the UN CRPD and on education*.* **I would like as well to express my gratitude to Katerina Nanou,** Senior Advocacy Advisor at Save the Children EU in providing me with very useful information on children’s rights and priorities at the EU level. Special thanks to Dimitris Logaras from ESAEA in Greece in sharing with me implications of UN CRPD at national level in the domain of education. I owe my deepest gratitude to Representatives of Inclusive education of Ministries of Education who have contributed with their responses to this report. My deepest appreciation goes to Representatives of Inclusive education in Belgium and Malta for devoting time from their busy schedules during the COVID-19 outbreak for an interview on inclusive education and measures taken due to pandemic. Finally, I would like to thank the Education Support Coordinator of the Office Secretary-General (OSG) of the European schools for proving me with feedback on the measures taken during COVID-19 outbreak.

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