KEYCONET’S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR STRENGTHENING KEY COMPETENCE
DEVELOPMENT IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
INTRODUCTION

The European Reference Framework of Key Competences was defined in the Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning\(^1\) adopted by the Council and the European Parliament in December 2006. The framework identifies eight key competences and various transversal themes – which combine knowledge, skills and attitudes – considered as necessary for personal fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment in the 21st century.

The key competence framework, with its emphasis on the application of knowledge in real world situations represents a significant departure from “traditional” content-based approaches, with subjects taught and assessed discretely. Such deep changes in classroom practice require comprehensive and coherent policies at national, regional, local and school levels, investments in both human and material resources and supports, and time for teachers to change mind-sets and develop new pedagogical approaches and practices. The European Commission has a key role to play in supporting the process of change and promoting international peer learning, as well.

The European Policy Network on Key Competences in School Education (KeyCoNet) was launched in 2012 with the remit to analyse and map emergent strategies in implementing key competences in education across Europe, and to develop recommendations to strengthen policy and practice in different country contexts. This is the Executive Summary of the report that sets out the Network’s final recommendations. It draws on evidence collected through literature reviews, country overviews, case studies, peer learning visits, national expert consultations, and an international online public consultation which gathered feedback from education stakeholders.

The report provides a brief summary of the key competence approach and its implications for teaching, learning and assessment, presents the state of the art in policy and implementation, and presents recommendations, for deepening and sustaining competence-based education where significant progress has already been made, and for scaling key competence reforms in varied national and local contexts. Recommendations for the European level are also included.

8 key competences

- Communication in the mother tongue
- Communication in foreign languages
- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- Learning to learn
- Social and civic competences
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- Digital competence
- Cultural awareness and expression

7 transversal skills

- Creativity
- Critical thinking
- Constructive management of feelings
- Decision-taking
- Initiative
- Risk assessment
- Problem-solving

POLICY FRAMEWORKS

While no country has made a complete shift toward competence-based education, several of the KeyCoNet partner countries have made significant progress. These strategies have included:

- **Legal frameworks for key competences** - Legislation or special decrees or orders may ensure high visibility for key competences and help clarify government priorities for education.

- **New competence-based curricular frameworks** - Most countries have specified key competences in a cross-curricular framework, while others have added competences to specific areas in existing curricula. The different approaches reflect prevailing political ideas about education as well as long-standing education traditions.

- **New and innovative partnerships, pilot projects** - National ministries, private foundations, associations and nonprofit groups have launched a range of innovative projects and initiatives to test new teaching and assessment methods in one or more key competence areas. In several cases, collaboration with stakeholders within and external to education systems has been vital for competence-based approaches.

- **Dedicated funding** - Dedicated funding for new project design, teacher professional development, and the necessary material resources has been central to the success of these initiatives. European Social Funds have supported the development of key competence initiatives in several countries. Lack of sufficient funding has been cited as a significant barrier for change.

- **Capacity building** - Professional development has been absolutely essential for teachers integrating new teaching and assessment practices. Centrally-developed guidelines, tools and exemplars have been another way to support teachers in changing practice. Teachers have benefited from feedback on their practice. School leaders and inspectors have also benefited from relevant professional development.

- **Monitoring and evaluation of new initiatives** - Each of the initiatives featured in the KeyCoNet case studies has included evaluation of implementation and impact. Evidence of positive impact on teaching and learning has also been important for sustaining initiatives and securing funding.

The KeyCoNet case studies and international online public consultation highlight the importance of these strategies in supporting schools to introduce key competence curricula. They also highlight the importance of effective school leadership. Successful school leaders have communicated the objectives of key competence reforms and highlight their importance in school plans. They have also created direct links with business and cultural communities. Teachers have been involved in each stage of the change process and have had opportunities for training and peer learning.

KEYCONET’S ONLINE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

**PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS**

5,615 respondents from 29 countries including:

- 3,451 teachers
- 768 students
- 652 parents
- 468 head teachers
- 276 other stakeholders

As this consultation is not based on random sampling, the self-selection bias of respondents needs to be taken into account. It should also be noted that the number of respondents across countries is uneven.
Results of the online international public consultation

More than 5,600 individuals from 29 countries responded to the online international public consultation, including 3,451 teachers, 468 head teachers, 768 students, 652 parents and 276 other stakeholders (including for example representatives from ministries, universities, teacher training organizations, inspectorates, Non-Governmental Organizations etc.). As this consultation is not based on random sampling, the self-selection bias of respondents needs to be taken into account. It should also be noted that the number of respondents across countries is uneven, with significantly more representation from a few countries (Romania, Spain, Portugal, Poland and France). Nevertheless, the responses do highlight a range of stakeholder viewpoints and provide important input for policy and practice.

A significant majority of teachers and head teachers at all levels and in most countries agree that in their national curriculum guidelines, key competences are defined and integrated. Head teachers and teachers alike indicate they have taken a strategic approach to implementing key competences in school curriculum, including teacher professional development (58%), key competences taken into account in school development plans (50%), and ICT training (50%).

There are also signs of progress in changes in classroom practice. Student respondents indicated that teaching that incorporates open class discussion and dialogue (65%), project-work (63%), games-based learning (48%) and other methods considered as more innovative were helpful for learning key competences. Fifty-nine percent of students responded that all of their teachers had assessed their key competences. Thirty-eight percent said that some but not all of their teachers had assessed key competences.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The case studies and international online public consultation also signal areas where more can be done to promote implementation of key competences. The recommendations outlined here suggest ways policy makers and school level stakeholders may further key competence reforms.

Countries are at very different stages in terms of integrating key competences in curricula, engaging stakeholders, and investing in teacher and school capacity. Implementation is also shaped by factors such as current political and policy priorities, resource constraints, and historical and institutional contexts. Individual schools have very different ways of working. The recommendations set out here recognise the diversity of contexts and the varying rates of progress across countries, regions and schools. They therefore first address national/regional levels and schools where there has already been significant progress in introducing key competences, but more will need to be done to deepen and sustain these reforms. A second set of recommendations address challenges for scaling reforms, and are of particular relevance to education systems and/or schools at an earlier stage of development.

Both sets of recommendations are relevant for all countries/ regions and schools. No country can be said to have achieved real sustainability of these still recent policy changes, nor has any country scaled policies across all areas of the curricula or for all school levels. The recommendations for all levels (countries/regions and schools) are based on broad principles that may be adapted (rather than replicated) in very different contexts.

The final set of recommendations identifies European level strategies to support ongoing key competence reform.

DEEPENING AND SUSTAINING REFORMS

Countries have introduced new policies and curricular frameworks and provided support for innovative pilot initiatives to test new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. It will now be important to develop strategies to deepen and sustain reforms at the policy level and in schools.

At the POLICY LEVEL, it may be important for national/ regional policy makers to:

- **Further clarify objectives, deepen curricular reforms:** Stakeholders have indicated a need for greater clarity through a more precise vocabulary on key competences, as well as for clear overall curriculum objectives and supporting materials. Expectations about acquiring and developing keys competences should be clear and set at levels appropriate for learners of different ages and stages.

  In some cases, the focus has been on introducing key competences through extra-curricular initiatives rather than the core curricula. But policy makers will also need to consider strategic approaches to systemic change. Curricula should also be flexible enough to include other competences that are not currently in the European framework. Future curricular reforms should focus on priorities for learning in order to allow time for deep learning within the competence-based approach.

- **Develop coherent assessment and evaluation frameworks:** New tools and criteria to help teachers in assessing competences – for both summative and formative purposes—are needed. Classroom-based formative assessments emphasise in-depth questioning and extended dialogues, self- and peer-assessment, as well as feedback and guidance on improvement. Innovative approaches to summative assessment, such as portfolio assessments or ICT-based assessments allow learners to demonstrate complex skills and reasoning processes. Multiple measures of school and learner achievement over time provide a better view of overall performance.

  The overall assessment and evaluation frameworks also include school self-evaluation and inspection. Although not all countries require schools to self-evaluate, this approach may support schools to monitor and adjust implementation of key competence reforms. School inspectorates are common across countries. Training for inspectors is needed to better ensure that their evaluations are appropriately aligned and that they are able to support the implementation of key competences in schools.

  But respondents noted ongoing challenges. Most indicated a need for greater collaboration within and beyond schools (only 36% of teachers believe that collaboration and networking were used as a means of professional development; 18% of teachers indicated that their school had engaged with the broader community to facilitate implementation of key competences). Teachers and parents alike want to improve cooperation between schools and families. These two stakeholder groups indicated a clear interest in improving engagement with business and community leaders.

  There is also room for improvement in communication. Sixty-five percent of learners said that their teachers had explained the purpose and goals of key competences, so a significant minority have not had these approaches explained. Only 21% of parents indicated that they had participated in discussions on key competence education.

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2 Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.
• **Support teachers:** As teachers play the most crucial role in implementing key competences, resources for their continuous professional development should be a priority. Teachers should also be considered as important stakeholders and included in the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of ongoing policy and curricular reforms. Initial teacher education will need to be reformed in order to align with key competence education but for a variety of reasons, reforms to teacher education lag behind. This should be a priority as countries make efforts to deepen and sustain key competence reforms.

As technologies play an increasingly significant and useful role in education, teacher training related to the integration of ICT should address both the technical and pedagogical aspects in depth.

• **Provide opportunities for networking and collaboration:** The traditional organisation of schools has meant that teachers are often isolated in their classrooms and have few opportunities to exchange ideas and insights. Teacher networks, whether online or face-to-face, may support peer learning and may also stimulate innovation. Collaboration with stakeholders external to school systems is also essential to ensure that teaching and learning reflect “real world” challenges, and blends formal, non-formal and informal learning. Collaboration with researchers is also important.

• **Strengthen political support:** Strategies to strengthen political support and sustainability may involve harnessing broad stakeholder support, including parents, the business and cultural communities, and teacher unions. Evidence of impact of key competence approaches on learning will be vital for sustaining support for policies.

• **Invest strategically:** Key competence reforms entail significant investments in human and material resources. Training for core staff, who then share their experience with other colleagues, may be a smart use of resources, and also reinforce learning among the core staff.

Renewal and possibly remodeling of school facilities involves significant expense and will need to be planned for over the long term. While schools are constantly working to keep up with ICT needs, some countries have been able to moderate expenses through Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policies. However, such policies will need to be piloted and tested in different communities, as parents’ willingness and ability to invest in mobile devices, such as smart phones tablets or laptop computers, will vary – thereby potentially creating inequities in the school system.

To deepen and sustain key competences at the **SCHOOL LEVEL**, it may be important to:

• **Allow time for teachers to develop and deepen their practice:** Many teachers are used to prioritising teaching which focuses on content in one single subject area. They may need time to change their perceptions on the value of competence-based approaches. They will also need time to develop their own understanding of key competences and to integrate new methods such as project-based learning, and meaningful assessments. New ways of relating to students, parents and other stakeholders will also take time.

• **Modify learning environments to better support project-based and interdisciplinary learning:** To some extent, classroom environments may be fairly easily changed to support collaborative work and research or modified school timetables. But investments in new technologies, or remodeled facilities may also be needed over the long term.

• **Improve communications on the objectives to build broader support:** Participative processes associating the main stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, community and business leaders) should continue on a regular basis to ensure ongoing support and to gather feedback on how approaches should evolve. Networking and collaboration among teachers and with local communities are also vital to sustaining school-level reforms.

• **Highlight key competences as a priority in school plans:** School plans set out priorities and intentions and provide a way to benchmark progress and identify areas for improvement. These plans should also reflect feedback from teachers, students and parents on the implementation of key competences.

• **Monitor and evaluate at the school level:** Qualitative and quantitative data on learner and school performance will help school leaders to identify what is working well, and where adjustments may be needed.
SCALING REFORMS

Countries that have made some progress will, in addition to deepening and sustaining practice, also look to scale reforms across schools and in all curricula. Policy makers and school leaders that are now introducing key competence reforms will have the advantage of learning from earlier innovators. But they will also have unique opportunities and challenges.

At the POLICY LEVEL, it may be important to:

• **Participate in international policy networks:** International networks are vital for peer learning at the policy level, and building the evidence base on what has worked, for whom and under what circumstances. Inevitably, policies will need to be adapted to the local circumstances. Networks should therefore identify the common principles to support effective reform efforts, rather than seeking to develop a recipe for success.

• **Make strategic investments in human and material resources:** In many cases, countries and regions that are now in the early stages of key competence reforms have fewer resources available. They will need to make strategic decisions on how to leverage limited resources for effective professional development and reforms to initial teacher education. Investments in high-quality training materials and exemplars will also be important.

At the SCHOOL LEVEL, it may be important to:

• **Promote peer learning across schools:** Schools that are now at the early stages of implementing new curricula and/or new initiatives for key competences can benefit from experiences of schools that have piloted new key competence-based approaches, and learn from how they implemented the change process.

• **Address the sceptics:** In some cases, schools and teachers may have avoided adopting reforms because they are sceptical about the value of the key competence approach. Leaders in these schools face additional challenges. Effective communication, including opportunities for exchange and feedback will be vital.

AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

The European Commission may also take several actions to support key competence reforms.

At the EUROPEAN LEVEL, it may be important to:

• **Support networking activities:** Networking activities for developing key competences as these activities allow for cross-fertilisation and peer exchange concerning the experience of implementation should be supported. These exchanges may build on KeyCoNet’s established network of stakeholders.

• **Support peer learning:** School twinning activities related to key competence development across Europe would strengthen opportunities for peer learning.

• **Share examples of good practice:** Examples from Europe and further afield should be based on a set of clear criteria regarding good practice. This is important for each of the eight key competences, but a special focus should be placed on good practice in teaching and assessing the transversal skills, as this is an area where teachers have less training and experience and fewer tools. The Commission may propose videos with examples of effective teaching and assessment on its website, along with support tools that may be adapted to different contexts. Their availability should be widely communicated.

• **Monitor progress over time:** Because key competences represent such a fundamental and deep change to education policy and practice, it will be important to monitor progress in implementation over time. This may involve periodic international stakeholder surveys (for example, every three to five years) and/or studies addressing specific aspects of implementation, such as changes in initial teacher education. These studies may build on KeyCoNet’s initial work to map key competence policies and practices across Europe.

• **Plan for future needs:** European policy on ongoing key competence reforms should link to a foresight perspective, addressing how well current competences are preparing students and identifying future challenges and needs.
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