

**Agency Impact Project
Summative Study
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Prepared by

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This report describes the findings and recommendations associated with a year-long external, summative study of the impact of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (Agency).

The Impact Study was conducted to assess the Agency's impact in member countries and beyond as part of the final evaluation requested by the European Commission in the period of the Jean Monnet Programme.

The study used the following definition of impact:

“Within the context of the Agency work, impact is identified when there is valid information to say that Agency work has had an influence on a change in thinking about or implementation of policy or practice for special needs and/or inclusive education.”

The Impact Study employed multiple methods including:

- A Country Survey, completed by Representative Board Members from all member countries, assessing country-level impact and effective processes and products;
- An Expert Survey, completed by Project Experts, assessing the impact of Agency Projects on member countries and experts' careers;
- Case Studies of the impact of two Agency projects: Teacher Education for Inclusion (TE4I) and Early Childhood Inclusion (ECI);
- Vignettes of selected Agency activities and collaborations; and
- A Summary of Agency dissemination and outreach activities.

The Impact Working Group made up of country representatives, Agency staff, and the external evaluators participated in the planning, data collection, and reporting phases of the study.

Findings

Findings have been organized according to three themes: Systemic Impact and Value-Added, Effective Processes and Products, and Credibility and Recognition.

Systemic Impact and Value-Added

1. The European Agency has had significant impact on special needs and inclusive education in member countries. This impact, though, is of different nature in different member countries.
 - a. The *degree and nature of impact is dependent* on how the issue of inclusion stands in the country in question, traditions surrounding special needs education, and centralization of control over factors, such as teacher education and provision for special educational needs.
 - b. The Agency strives successfully to achieve a *match between country trends or needs and Agency activities* through a bottom-up, participatory process in which all member countries give input into a multi-year work programme so that Agency products influence current discussion, reinforce national developments, and influence outcomes, although it is difficult, given different countries' needs.

- c. In *indirect impact*, the Agency, through networking, thematic projects, and study visits, influences the knowledge and attitudes of RBs, NCs, and experts, who then influence internal discourse, policy making, curriculum development, and practice in their respective countries. Indirect impact is the most common type of impact and is noted in virtually all member countries.
 - d. *Direct impact* on policy, teacher education, and classroom practice is not as common, but there are numerous examples where legislative language has been taken directly from Agency publications or where Agency publications were used as the basis of teacher training programs.
 - e. *Impact on practices* is generally more difficult to identify than impact on policy, especially in countries which have decentralized systems of educational governance, but some examples exist.
2. The Agency is seen as “*adding value*” by member countries, representatives of the EC, and international agencies because it accomplishes tasks that could not be accomplished by member countries alone and are not a part of other agencies’ portfolios, including developing European-level metrics, indicators, and recommendations; collecting and reporting data on special needs and inclusive education from member countries; and regularly convening professional meetings on inclusive and special needs education at the European level.
 3. The Agency has a *systemic, unifying effect* by bringing the heterogeneous assembly of member countries toward harmonization in thinking about special needs and inclusive education, diversity, and human rights through the development of definitions, key principles, standard terminology, European-level normative data, and general guidance which find their way into policy and teacher training.

Effective Processes and Products

4. *Thematic projects (including study visits) and biannual meetings* are significant occasions for sharing information across countries, influencing attitudes, forming useful professional networks, and focusing attention on critical issues in special needs and inclusive education without which the effectiveness of the agency would be reduced.
5. *Networking* among country representatives and project experts facilitates cross-country collaboration and communication and promotes better understanding of European-level issues and national circumstances.
6. *Publications in EU official member country languages* are very important for promoting Agency impact on country-level policy, professional development, and possibly practice.
7. The *Agency website* is a primary mechanism for dissemination and has grown in importance in recent years.

Credibility and Recognition

8. *Agency recognition and credibility* is growing among ministers of education in member countries and the European Commission.
9. *Status of the Agency with international organizations*, including those that work outside Europe, has greatly increased in recent years, as evidenced by more active collaboration, replication of Agency ways of working, requests for consultancy and Agency participation in external events, and citations of Agency products.

Recommendations

1. At present, the Agency strives to influence both policy and practice, although its primary audience is policy makers and its mechanisms for impacting practice are indirect. Given limited resources, the Agency may want to reconsider its capacity to influence practice in member countries and, if still committed, develop a plan of action that includes supporting countries in initial implementation (e.g., developing teacher training modules, convening working groups of teachers, etc.).
2. If a primary goal is to influence practice, the Agency should focus on producing and disseminating more detailed case studies and exemplars of successful practices, effective large-scale professional development, and country-wide implementation of reform to illustrate how practice can be reformed systemically.
3. Given the importance of providing needed information to countries at the right time, the Agency should develop explicit strategies for addressing different needs and priorities among member countries in its multi-annual work programme.
4. The Agency should help countries enhance the selection and continued involvement of experts and external consultants to maximize impact (e.g., providing explicit criteria for the selection of experts; planning for experts to do work in country after project end).
5. In response to member countries' desire for evidence-based practice and policy making, the Agency might enhance its research capacity and strengthen its connections with and influence upon the research community through mechanisms, such as presenting at scientific conferences, collaborating with universities and research organizations, sponsoring visiting scholars or research fellows, and partnering on research grants.
6. Given its importance in dissemination, the Agency should enhance its website by incorporating videos; professional development materials and links to research literature; and exploring its use of webinars, online training, and other interactive options.
7. Publications in official languages of member countries are critically important and should be made more user-friendly by including more photographs, graphics, and other highly engaging material without compromising accessibility.
8. The Agency should explore ways of promoting involvement of new members and encouraging networking and cross-country interaction during bi-annual meetings (e.g., induction, cross-country panels and discussion groups, assigned seating, icebreaker activities).
9. The Agency should continue to conduct on-going formative evaluation and independent summative evaluation at the end of each project to continue to benefit from feedback and maximize impact.

Conclusions

The Agency made changes in response to the Interim Impact Study (2009) that resulted in improved impact and added value. Since the Interim Impact Study, the EA has grown and matured as an organization, adding both member countries and agency staff. The Representative Board Member network has evolved into an effective professional learning community. The Agency has built upon those practices identified as successful (e.g., professional networking, participatory approach, documents in member country languages), responded to recommendations (e.g., name change, improved quality and timeliness of translations, website redesign), and evolved considerably with

regard to its importance to Ministers of Education, the EC, and international organizations. The systemic impact of the Agency on member countries' thinking and policy making and its value-added in terms of data reporting and building a professional network on special needs and inclusive education at the European level were evident in this evaluation. It is also clear that the Agency is having impact beyond Europe as international agencies working in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East look to the Agency as a model mechanism for international collaboration and reform in inclusive and special needs education.

At this point in its development, it is important for the Agency to reconsider and recommit to a unified vision and plan of action that is realistic and meets the needs of member countries. At present, the Agency has just undergone a name change and is developing a new multi-annual work programme. This is an excellent time to consider the recommendations in this Summative Impact Study and incorporate them as the work plan moves forward.