

LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES

LEARN

Grant Agreement 101132531

Work Package 5: Communication, Dissemination and Exploitation**Deliverable D5.6: Policy Brief: Closing the Attainment Gap**

Project acronym	LEARN
Project full title	Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing iNequalities
Due delivery date	30/09/2025
Actual delivery date	30/09/2025
Organization name of lead participant	Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester Met)
Dissemination level	Public

Funding Acknowledgement

Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Programme HORIZON-CL2-2023- TRANSFORMATIONS-01 Grant Agreement 101132531 and co-funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) grant agreement number 10108849 and the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)




Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme under grant agreement N° 101132531.



Innovate UK

Project funded by

 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Confederation

Federal Department of Economic Affairs,
Education and Research EAER
State Secretariat for Education,
Research and Innovation SERI

LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES

D5.6 Policy Brief: Closing the Attainment Gap: Scoping Report on the Role of Evidence in European Education

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Data Control Sheet

Deliverable number:	D5.7
Work Package:	WP5
Work Package lead:	Paula Sergeant

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Document Revision History			
Version	Date	Comments	Modified by
1.0	18/09/2025	First submission	Lee Bentley
1.1	19/09/2025	Review	Steven Morris
1.2	29/09/2025	Light editorial review	Paula Sergeant

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Executive Summary

The infrastructure for getting evidence of 'what works' into classrooms is highly uneven and underdeveloped. Initial findings from the Horizon Europe LEARN project show a clear pattern: countries with mature Evidence-Based Education (EBE) systems have invested in dedicated 'knowledge broker' institutions to bridge the research-to-practice gap. Without these bodies, or mechanisms to perform a similar function, even high-quality research fails to impact student outcomes.

To build more equitable and effective education systems, our initial recommendations focus on three key levers for change:

- **Fund national 'knowledge broker' institutions** to manage the evidence pipeline from research to classroom.
- **Invest in the research literacy** of teachers and policymakers through sustained professional development.
- **Promote a collaborative culture** that integrates rigorous evidence with professional expertise.

Investing in these areas is crucial for empowering educators with the best available evidence and enabling the scaling of proven practices to benefit all students.



Policy Brief

September 2025

Closing the Attainment Gap: Scoping Report on the Role of Evidence in European Education

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This brief is based on research conducted by Prof. Steven Morris and Dr. Lee Bentley. We are grateful to our project partners and our interview participants. DOI [10.5281/zenodo.17224130](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17224130)

Funding Acknowledgement

This Policy Brief was supported by the European Commission action HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01 for the project LEARN (Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing iNequalities), Grant Agreement 101132531.

LEARN D5.6 Policy Brief: Closing the Attainment Gap



Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Programme
HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01 Grant Agreement
101132531 and co-funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)
grant agreement number 10108849 and the Swiss State Secretariat for
Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)



Highlights

This brief presents initial findings and recommendations from the work stream focused on **Evidence-Based Education** in the Horizon Europe LEARN project, which investigates the drivers of educational inequality.

The focus of LEARN:

A student's background remains a powerful predictor of their educational success across Europe. Our research finds the infrastructure for getting evidence of 'what works' into classrooms is highly uneven and often underdeveloped, creating a key barrier to reducing this attainment gap.

Key Recommendations:

Our initial findings point to three key levers for change: providing long-term funding for 'knowledge broker' institutions, investing in the research literacy of teachers, and promoting a collaborative culture.

Impact:

Strengthening these areas will help create more equitable education systems by empowering teachers with the best available evidence, ensuring proven practices can be adapted and scaled effectively to benefit all students.

The Policy Context: A Persistent Gap

Across Europe, persistent educational inequality remains a critical policy challenge both within, and between, countries. Efforts to create a cohesive **European Education Area** are undermined when a child's socioeconomic background continues to dictate their future (Pellegrini and Vivanet, 2021). To be effective, policies aimed at reducing this gap should support what happens in the classroom.

One of the most promising ways to do this is through **Evidence-Based Education (EBE)**, which aims to put "the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation" (Davies, 1999). This means focusing on the link between research and practice (Hargreaves, 1996), prioritising methods like randomised controlled trials (RCTs) that can show what truly works (Slavin, 2002), and ensuring this evidence is actually used. Yet, as our research confirms, a significant gap still separates the production of high-quality research from its application in schools (Gorard, See, and Siddiqui, 2020).

Policy Recommendations

To build stronger and more equitable systems, we need to address the barriers that prevent good research from informing policy and practice. The recommendations below are based on our initial literature review, a survey of eight European nations, and in-depth interviews with leading experts. We will explore these ideas further in the next phase of our research, which will involve three detailed country case studies.

1. Fund National Knowledge Intermediaries

The EU and national governments should provide long-term, stable funding to create or strengthen national centres for EBE. These bodies should be tasked with managing an evidence pipeline: funding new research, synthesising findings into practical toolkits, and building networks between schools and researchers.

2. Invest in an Evidence-Literate Profession

Member States should embed skills for critically appraising and adapting research into initial teacher training and professional development for both educators and civil servants. A lack of training and data literacy are persistent barriers to evidence use.

3. Promote a Collaborative, Evidence-Informed Culture

Policy should incentivise partnerships that bring teachers and researchers together. Our discussions indicate that a top-down approach is often resisted; success depends on integrating rigorous evidence with the professional judgment and contextual knowledge of practitioners.

The Evidence: Lessons from an Initial Scoping Review

Our findings come from a multi-stage research process that began with a broad theoretical review and narrowed to specific, country-level data. Throughout this work, a clear pattern emerged: the countries making the most progress are those that have invested in dedicated institutions to bridge the research-to-practice gap.

Our research unfolded in three key stages:

1. Scoping Paper and Literature Review

We began with a comprehensive literature review to provide a theoretical overview and establish a working definition of EBE. We define it as an approach that integrates the best available research with professional expertise and is characterised by five key components: a focus on evidence for teaching practice; an emphasis on methods that establish cause and effect; systematic synthesis of evidence; effective dissemination; and the support of dedicated institutional frameworks.

2. Expert Interviews

We then explored this framework through in-depth interviews with six leading international experts. This qualitative work added crucial nuance, confirming the importance of intermediary institutions and identifying implementation as a core, universal challenge. The interviews also gave us a comparative perspective, pointing to specific European nations where EBE development could be investigated further.

3. Country Survey

The final preliminary stage was a detailed survey across the eight LEARN project consortium countries. This gave us comparative, country-level data on EBE infrastructure, confirming the significant variation across Europe and allowing us to classify different national models.



Two key findings stand out from this work:

Successful Models Rely on Intermediary Institutions. We found a clear link between a mature EBE system and the presence of central, state-supported institutions.

England's Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was consistently highlighted by experts as a transformative body that has successfully shifted the research landscape through its significant funding and focus on systematic evidence synthesis (Edoald and Nevill, 2020).

Similarly, the **Netherlands**, which our survey identified as a mature EBE ecosystem, has a robust infrastructure led by its national research body, the NRO, and knowledge translation platforms like Kennisrotonde (Wubbels and van Tartwijk, 2017).

The Research-to-Practice Gap remains a major barrier. Even in countries with strong research traditions, we found a persistent disconnect between the evidence being produced and its use in the classroom. This gap, often caused by the absence of 'knowledge broker' institutions or other systematic translation mechanisms, is a critical weakness. Two examples highlight this problem:

Ireland:

While some high-quality educational trials have been conducted, our survey of consortium countries indicates there is no systematic mechanism to promote these findings or embed them into practice. As a result, valuable evidence may be generated but fails to achieve widespread impact.

Germany:

Our research noted that while the quality of German educational research is often very high, the country lacks the institutional mechanisms needed to connect those findings with teachers and schools, limiting the impact of its research in the classroom. There are also very few examples of systematic trials, involving RCTs or similar approaches, which limits the kind of evidence that could be translated.

Next Steps: Deepening the Analysis with Country Case Studies

While our initial findings show *what* a mature EBE system looks like, we now need to understand *how* and *why* these systems develop in specific national contexts. The next phase of the LEARN project will address this by conducting in-depth, qualitative case studies in three strategically selected countries:

The Netherlands:

As an example of a mature, state-led EBE system.

Switzerland:

As a developing system with clear capacity to support a framework of EBE.

Finland:

As a system with a focus on large-scale policy experimentation, a highly functioning education system, but less evidence of classroom-based interventions.

This comparative analysis will allow us to explore the different configurations of policy support, institutional design, and practitioner culture that shape EBE development. The findings will provide richer, context-specific lessons for policymakers seeking to build a successful evidence-to-practice pipeline.

Conclusions

This scoping report confirms that educational inequality remains a persistent challenge across Europe. A key barrier to progress is the systemic gap between research production and classroom practice. Our initial research points to a clear and consistent finding: the presence of dedicated **'knowledge broker' institutions** is a critical factor that separates countries with mature, effective EBE systems from those where high-quality research fails to translate into widespread impact. To address this, policymakers should focus on three interconnected goals: providing long-term, stable funding for these bodies; investing in the capacity of the education profession to critically engage with evidence; and fostering a collaborative culture that values rigorous research and professional expertise. These steps are important to building the infrastructure needed to address the attainment gap and create more effective and equitable education systems for all students.

About the LEARN Project

Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing iNequalities (LEARN) is a research project funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme. It aims to understand the barriers to reducing educational inequalities by examining best approaches in policy and practice. This brief outlines the initial findings from our work on Evidence-Based Education, which will inform a series of in-depth country case studies.

NOTE

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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