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## 9. High Quality European Education for All

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*Editor's summary: The goal of this ECI was to raise awareness of the need for a high-quality, multi-lingual and multi-cultural European educational model. It asked for a new EU platform to support the development of a pluralistic European educational model across the EU. As a complex and novel idea, the campaign struggled to convey a compelling message. It also encountered significant problems stemming from personal data requirements and related data protection rules. It lacked sufficient resources to meet with all its country coordinators. However, it did succeed in building a vibrant new pan-EU network to promote European education and intends to work via a virtual platform to spread this model.*

### **An ECI to raise awareness of a European educational model**

*MEET (Movement towards a European Education Trust) believes that Europe's future depends on how to educate citizens and how they learn. Common EU educational goals should reflect European core values and facilitate mobility. They should open children's minds to the diversity of EU languages and cultures and celebrate diversity as central to solving today's challenges. MEET launched the *High Quality European Education for All* ECI to create a multi-stakeholder platform to develop a European educational model. It would bring together existing recommendations and implement them in ways accessible to all European children and teachers.*

We knew that collecting one million signatures in 12 months was an impossible task and one we would not achieve. Our primary goal was therefore to *raise awareness* of a high-quality, pluralistic educational model for all Europeans. This model includes European schooling leading to the European Baccalaureate. Started in 1953, this system has produced syllabi approved by ministries of education and educational inspectors in all EU member states. We launched our ECI in 2013 to coincide with the 60th anniversary of European schools, the European Year of Citizens and the run-up to the 2014 European Parliament elections.

### **ECI helped build our network and understanding of educational issues throughout the EU**

Our ECI was most successful as an "added attraction" to widen our network and connect with others in the field. A core campaign team worked at EU level and centralised the message, key communication tools, images and strategy. Their experience with EU institutions proved invaluable. Country coordinators worked mainly within national networks on specific issues they identified. This was extremely important as each country needed to communicate in its own language and each has different national educational issues related to pedagogy, curriculum, teaching, and student and parent involvement. Discussions with country coordinators were crucial to getting a wider picture of what was really happening with education in Europe.

### **Developing a clear and motivating message was ECI's greatest challenge**

Our ECI campaign was a rewarding experience, even though, as expected, we did not collect one million signatures – not even close. Since our ECI campaign ended, we have reflected on what we could have done more, better, quicker. We had many contacts, partners ready to provide funding

and experienced professionals ready to devote time and energy. We had an online ECI support form in all 24 EU languages, a good website and an active social media campaign. However, at the end of the day, it boiled down to the message. Not all ECIs have a “sexy” topic or one that can be summed up in a simple yes/no answer or a 140-character tweet. Ours was particularly complex.

Our ECI asked the Commission to *start a discussion at European level and set up a multi-stakeholder platform* on European education. Anything else would have been outside the Commission’s competences. Yet calling for yet another European platform was not as motivating as asking for legislation or policy changes.

Education is not a simple message, *European* education less so, especially in times of widespread disenchantment with the EU, national governments and even democracy. European education has been stigmatised as “elitist” education for children of EU bureaucrats, although it has been open to others since 2009. There are also many different perspectives on and national variations in education. Moreover, education is a fiercely guarded national competence which some groups use to enhance their own interests. This diversity of perspectives, however, was one of the most enriching and integral aspects of our ECI campaign.

We are now ready to find our own solutions. We launched a competition and selected a virtual European education platform *Free Easy Way* – [freesyway.com](http://freesyway.com) – to allow schools, educators, students and authorities to share knowledge and create a common yet flexible curriculum. We’re also implementing workshops in schools to raise awareness of disabilities and social exclusion.

### **Difficulties using the ECI far exceed expectations**

Using the ECI was far more challenging than we expected. Even those of us experienced in working with European institutions found the procedures daunting. To begin with, it took us lots of time *just to set up* the ECI. Once it was launched, it became clear that, in its current format, the ECI is not an appropriate tool for ordinary citizens. There are many problems: it is too legally and technically complicated, personal data requirements are too high, working across Europe with multiple languages is difficult, there is no institutional funding, the ECI support forms are complicated and the online signature collection system is not user-friendly. Worst of all, mobile Europeans living outside their country of nationality (our target group) often cannot vote due to national residency or ID requirements. Furthermore, twelve months is not enough time to collect one million signatures, unless one already has an established organisation.

### **Extensive personal data requirements at heart of difficulties**

Extensive and complicated personal data demands, and related data protection requirements, were at the root of most of our difficulties. Each ECI’s online collection system (OCS) must meet extremely high personal data protection criteria. Our campaign rejected the idea of collecting signatures on paper as too risky. It is simply impossible to ensure that signatures are collected in accordance with each national data protection system. Data protection is difficult enough in one’s own country and language. Imagine the challenges when enthusiastic and well-meaning citizens, most unknown to data controllers, collect signatures all over Europe. Plus, in the event of any breach of data, members of the ECI campaign are *personally held criminally liable*.

With limited resources, it was hard for us to cover travel costs to meet with our partners across Europe although Skype was very useful. Our official ECI site was in all EU languages, however, for the extended messages to be successfully passed on at national level, they needed to be in local languages or dialects. Some centralised funding would have helped overcome practical difficulties of distance and language. Additional help could be given to attract new partners. For instance, the Commission has large mailing lists which could be used to invite people to contact relevant ECIs.

### **The ECI must connect citizens with each other and EU institutions – or it can only fail**

It is unfortunate that ECIs are not and do not intend to become part of a community similar to Avaaz or Change.org which have worldwide branches and integrated mailing lists. Although not everyone agrees with all initiatives, they should at least be able to hear about them. ECIs cannot even use data on their supporters, let alone share it with other ECIs – unless they keep secure parallel records – another administrative burden. Furthermore, most people have never even heard about the ECI or how it works.

The ECI's core mission is to connect the EU institutions with ordinary EU citizens and to connect like-minded Europeans with each other. If an ECI cannot be started by ordinary citizens who are not connected to a strong network or significant financing, then it can only fail. If the efforts of an ECI campaign are not recognised and it is simply labelled "obsolete" when it does not collect one million signatures, then it can only fail. If an ECI can only be on "yes/no" issues or topics people already have pre-set views about, then it can only fail. The success of an ECI at the moment seems to be determined only by the number of signatures it collects, not the serious issues it raises.

We wish every success to the current initiatives and those to come! May they profit from the lessons learned by the pioneer ECIs.

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You may order the book by email: [contact@citizens-initiative.eu](mailto:contact@citizens-initiative.eu)

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