

# "SOTEU 2021: NEXT GENERATION WHO?"

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We, OBESSU, the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions, have followed with dismay the unraveling of this year's state of the European Union address. For the first time in the history of the union, forces from all over the political spectrum expressed agreement on the least agreeable thing of all: the creation of a European army. **For those who, like us, make Education a priority for social and human rights, it's a problematic reversal of the political agenda, while students and young Europeans still suffer the wounds of pandemic.**

With the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan and the immediate resurgence of the Taliban, we wonder what is the successful political and historical precedent that justifies such a decision. We wonder exactly in what ways this new political priority can possibly intersect with a just and equitable transition to a greener, more digital Europe. We wonder who is going to reap the gains of waging war abroad, and who is going to bear the brunt of an increased defence budget.

Meanwhile, the elephant lingers around in the room and grows bigger. In a State of the European Union where Next Generation and Future of Europe were central concepts throughout all interventions, surprisingly very little space was given to education and its crucial role to shape the future of the union in a direction that is coherent with its core values. **If last year, just like in 2018, we claimed that Education had been left out in the cold again, this time we sadly regret to see how it had been left to freeze.**

Yet this does not have to be. By celebrating the advancements that the EU has made in terms of health cooperation of the Member States, and the ones ahead to come to face a health crisis like the one generated by COVID-19, we have seen what a united, strong Europe can do under pressure. **We regret that the ongoing educational crisis that has affected over 17 million students Europe-wide is not being addressed with the same enthusiasm and unity; it is barely being addressed at all.**

In this framework, we appreciate any new initiative aiming to empower young people and especially those with a disadvantaged background as good news. This is the case of the Conference of the Future of Europe which includes, among other activities and events, a platform where Europeans can submit inputs and that we will analyze according to its potential, strengths and weaknesses, once the outcomes and the usage of these are clear.

We don't hide our distrust of consultations with a top-down approach, preferring bottom-up paths, in which social needs are clear. This is why we will carefully await the concrete definition of the content of the Year of the European Youth (2022) proclaimed by President Von der Leyen. Rather, as said by the European Youth Forum, the point is: #InvestInYouth ! With the same glance, we hope that the new ALMA programme doesn't solve with transnational young cheap labour force the problems that should be solved with education. **We hope that the EU Commission does not forget the programmes (e.g. Erasmus+) in place and finally cut compared to the 2019 mission letter of Commissioner Maria Gabriel and the European Parliament position.** Above all, we call public attention to a point left obscure by the President's address, that is the European Education Area by 2025: we find reprehensible that no public commitment has been announced on the achievement of such an ambitious objective.

It is not hard to realise, from the President's speech and the rest of the interventions during the debate, that the Twin Transition (Green and Digital) are the biggest priorities of the EU at this moment. Which makes even more shocking **the fact that education is not recognised as the core instrument to achieve these transitions in a structural and sustainable manner. How is it possible to imagine a better future if it is not done through the most powerful tool that we can count on to shape it?**

When it comes to the priorities of the green transition, we believe that creating sustainable infrastructure in a sustainable way, can leave a mark on our continent, yet **we reiterate that education can achieve just as much by leaving a mark on its citizens. We want to see urgent issues tackled, on the environmental and social price of the transition, and how to make it equitable and accessible to all. We cannot afford this transition to be sidetracked by the current inequalities that are embedded in our society.**

In terms of the digital transition, we want to stress that the current focus on cybersecurity neglects to address the challenges of digitalisation in our societies and more specifically, on the long-term future of our societies - our education systems. We would like to see a digital transition that tackles the issues of equality and accessibility, health and safety, big tech monopoly, privatisation of platforms, and the spread of misinformation.

On this note, and especially during the MEPs debate, **we have observed a worrying resurgence of xenophobic, homophobic, climate change denialist and anti-democratic arguments. We have also witnessed a spectacular stunt in defense of the sovereign prerogatives of some Member States by MEPs representing those who attack the rule of law.** These messages about migration or as a reaction to the situation in Afghanistan, going against the core values of the EU such as solidarity, seem to have spread in the European Parliament and the different parties. We strongly condemn this drift.

Regarding the situation in Afghanistan, we welcome the increase of 100 million euros in humanitarian aid and the announcement of an Afghan Support Package but we expect the Union to prioritise the right to independent education of all Afghans as their best shot to become a more free country for the future generations, as much as we hope for permanent humanitarian channels to allow the hospitality and asylum in Europe of Afghans, against the usual selfishness that we have also seen in the parliamentary debate. No amount of isolation and border control will make us safer - it will only make us more vulnerable. Youth has been giving a clear direction on how to address these complex, divisive issues: education, solidarity, and divestment from exploitative and destructive supply chains systems should be top priorities.

**Youth and students have also been one of the groups that have suffered the most during the pandemic.** The challenges that the education system has witnessed on all its levels had many different consequences for the student body in Europe and the world. OBESSU welcomes the initiative of a Global Summit on Education, launched during the debate. **If there is something that Students Organisations have learnt from the health crisis is that global problems require global responses.<sup>1</sup> The new normal<sup>2</sup> should put in the center of the debates both students and young people, policy-makers and national authorities must take into account the needs of these groups in order to ensure that no one is left behind.<sup>3</sup>**

During the debate, the organisation of a Global Education Summit was mentioned. **OBESSU, in partnership with its homologues in Europe and the world, would certainly monitor this and other initiatives to ensure a fair representation of its constituency.** Furthermore, OBESSU, through the Global Student Forum as its worldwide umbrella organization, will initiate dialogues to promote the participation of students all over the world in order to have a common approach for the challenges of the future.

“If it seems impossible – then it can be done. Se sembra impossibile, allora si può fare. This was the spirit of Europe’s founders and this is the spirit of Europe’s next generation” : with these words the President Von Der Leyen indicated in the gold medal Italian paralympic athlete Bebe Vio a model for our generation. Accepting this challenge and this inspiration, OBESSU replies: **EU make EDU more accessible, inclusive, public, more funded, eco-sustainable, digitally renewed, overcoming ancient and new fragilities worsened by the Covid-19 crisis. Let’s make education a part of a Social Compact and structural resilience planning to support the next generation.**

Don’t you hear our voice, President Von Der Leyen?

“If it seems impossible – then it can be done”: isn’t it?