

Policy paper on Curricula for the 21st Century

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Introduction

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe.

Outdated, unpractical or too theoretical, non-specific, are some of the terms that students engaged in OBESSU used to describe their curricula. They have the feeling that schools are failing to keep up with new, practical knowledge but also with the methodologies to deliver it and the tools to apply it. Some of them describe it as a feeling of unpreparedness to face some challenges that every person will face in their adult life as a job-seeker, a voter or in their personal relationships.

The consulted youth –both organised or individual students– highlighted the topic of curricula to be central in the discussions with their peers or within their organisations. Society in general seems to have concerns about the quality of the content delivered in schools but, unfortunately, these discussions tend to not replicate in the political landscape where the most improvements can actually be achieved. Shouldn't more space for change be given to the people that, in fact, are generally most impacted by the quality of the curriculum? Shouldn't the concerns of the people who care the most about these topics be heard and acted upon?

OBESSU defends the need to include the views and necessities of school students in the development of their curricular path. Such involvement should not be limited to the content itself but also learning goals, extra-curricular activities, methodologies and assessments. OBESSU believes that, for students, this involvement would translate into an increased feeling of belonging and being heard. It would also boost their interest in the content provided and its relatability. **School students should be involved at national level – in policymaking for curriculum–, at a local level – in designing the curriculum–, and at school level – by having the possibility to choose a part of their curriculum–.**

Good practices practices from the OBESSU Membership

With a new curriculum for high school in preparation to be implemented in September 2023, CNE has been an active consultant of the Ministry of Education. All the changes that CNE has proposed were a result of research, discussions with national authorities and its partners, media campaigns, protests or events. They advocate for topics such as inclusive education, mental-health counselling, sexual education with special emphasis on what consent means and sustainability education to be included in the reform. CNE has also campaigned for students' rights to truly pick the subjects they want to deepen.



Students should also be given spaces to provide teachers with their feedback in all dimensions of teaching: curriculum, methodologies, inclusivity and the added value of the delivered education in order to achieve a strong set of life skills that will be useful for students in their academic and personal development, transition to labour market and acquisition of skills to become active citizens.

The students engaged in the preparation of this policy paper have identified five topics that need to be urgently adapted –or included at all– in current curricula to cover the needs of students in terms of readiness:

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing are currently one of the most important topics for youth, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, which drastically increased the suicide rates and incidence of mental health issues. Currently, there is not enough emphasis on the topic of mental health, in various countries, this topic is usually just a part of biology, social sciences, or no subject at all. Education systems often focus on just solving the negative consequences of mental health issues, not on how to prevent them. Furthermore, the overall better mental health of students improves their learning abilities, performances, and other skills.

When it comes to the promotion of Mental Health and well-being in schools, research suggests the most effective method is the whole-school approach. This approach refers to mobilising the various resources of the entire school community, meaning active engagement of students, staff, parents and professionals. Mental health education needs to be recognised as having equal value to physical health education, and as such, it must be included in national curricula and delivered with an interdisciplinary approach.

Good practices from institutions

Norway traditionally lacked a focus on mental health literacy in its curriculum. However, in Trondheim, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training developed and implemented a well-being subject entitled education in mental health (EMH) for students in secondary school. EMH was implemented as a separate subject in the secondary school timetable in 2017. The core emphasis of EMH is on mental health literacy and especially on the components of understanding how to obtain and maintain good mental health and practising good decision-making with an additional aim of enhancing students' help-seeking efficacy. After one year, an evaluation was conducted with the students' thoughts and input. 84% of students agreed that EMH should be a separate subject in the curriculum, but also had some important suggestions for improvement. These included allowing for more discussion time, focusing more on the good things in life, and working with issues that regularly arise such as how to deal with stress and difficult thoughts.

Good practices from the OBESSU Membership

In 2021, CANAE published a Manifesto on Mental Health that was supported by the Spanish Minister of Education. The Manifesto was the result of a study where students emphasised mental health as



their biggest concern, especially as a result of the COVID pandemic and the shift to online education. Some of the demands collected in the document included the need to guarantee quality psychological support for students, to include emotional education in school curricula and to increase the number of professionals working on mental and emotional health in schools. The Manifesto was backed up by 23 organisations in the sectors of education, youth and children's rights, including OBESSU.

Demands:

1. Identify and address school systems' teaching and learning methods that can contribute to poor mental well-being of students, such as heavy workload, language barriers and rigid assessment methodologies.
2. Identify and address the school systems' social determinants of poor mental health, such as bullying - either in the traditional form or in its growing digital version, usually called "cyberbullying" - and discrimination based on ability, citizenship status, skin colour, gender presentation, sexual orientation or socio-economic background.
3. Invest in mental health literacy and include mental health in the school curricula, with a view to involve young people in the development of resources and implementation of activities aimed at raising awareness on different aspects of mental health.
4. Implement measures to understand and mitigate the potential harm of social media, phone usage and new technologies in general.
5. Invest adequate resources in putting in place well-functioning, high-quality and free of charge mental health support at school, shaping these according to students' collective and individual needs.
6. Overall, adopt a "whole school approach" to mental health and its determinants, where all stakeholders in the school have the knowledge and tools to build, together, a safer, better social climate where everyone feels welcome and respected.

Sexuality Education

Holistic sexuality education should provide all children and young people with unbiased, scientifically correct information on all aspects of sexuality¹. Several countries in Europe, by not providing mandatory sexuality education, still deny the right to students to receive this type of education, which is essential to protect themselves, self-determine their sexuality or be empowered to develop healthy relationships. Furthermore, even if countries include sexuality education in their curricula, its interpretation and implementation vary widely, resulting in different messages and information delivered based on the geographical area or the cultural context of each student.

¹ [WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe](#)



The holistic nature of sexuality requires a cross-curricular approach. Education around it should go beyond sexual intercourse and its threats. Being a multidisciplinary subject, different aspects of it would be covered in different subjects, with one person in the school coordinating the different materials and contents. Synergies with external stakeholders would also be positive for the development of students, especially healthcare personnel or youth workers and NGOs specifically trained in sexuality education.

All students share the right to receive this kind of education regardless of their gender, sexuality or any other trait. It should be inclusive in a way that the content is relevant for all students so that they are represented.

Good practices from institutions

In Austria, sexuality is considered to be an important part of children's overall development as a person, and sexuality education is designed to support children in ensuring their sexual health physically, cognitively and emotionally. As a result, SexEd in Austria is considered to be comprehensive and holistic by NGO representatives and is designed with the WHO Standards in mind. The curriculum, therefore, focuses on biological aspects and the prevention of early pregnancy and STIs/HIV but also explores issues around sexual identity, mutual consent, online media and gender-based violence, something most other curricula are lacking. With the aim of meeting the requirements of the 21st century, the Austrian Ministry of Education released new ordinances around sex education and citizenship education. This was done in consultation with a working group including stakeholders, educational experts and health professionals.

Good practices from the OBESSU Membership

DGS advocated towards policy-makers to make sexuality education mandatory for all students through different campaigns and the organisation of a strike across several upper secondary schools in Denmark. These efforts led to a concession of the minister of education admitting the importance of the subject and committing to its implementation with the support of students to decide its content. DGS's approach consisted on giving importance to the different aspects of life that would improve with this subject in their curriculum: better well-being of LGBTQi+ students, better understanding of boundaries or creating safe spaces for people who experienced transgressive behaviour.



OBESSU demands:

1. All students should be provided with sexuality education. It should start from an early age with an appropriate approach. Early sexuality education should focus on body changes, love and sex in the media.
2. This content should be homogeneous throughout the different countries in Europe.
3. To have an inclusive approach, making it useful and representative for all students.
4. Sexuality education to be delivered with a cross-curricular and holistic approach.
5. To go beyond the biological aspects of sex and reproduction or risk prevention to include aspects such as gender roles, mutual consent, human rights, online media or LGBTQI+ issues.

Education for democratic citizenship

The Council of Europe defines EDC as: "Education for democratic citizenship" means education, training, dissemination, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and moulding their attitudes and behaviour, to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law.

Most countries across Europe apply one of the three main curriculum approaches to citizenship education presented below, or a combination, at all three levels of general education. Within these approaches EDC: being a separate subject; being integrated into broader compulsory subjects or learning areas such as the social sciences or language studies; or it may be a cross-curricular objective to be delivered by all teachers. Overall it is also greatly decentralised when it comes to delivery, in different countries as well as domestically. Students are taught the topic at different ages, with different numbers of required hours. There is also a gap between the national programmes and their effective implementation in schools.

Good practices from institutions

Many national parliaments worldwide, including some EU Member State national parliaments, contribute to citizenship education for instance by organising youth parliaments. It is a non-traditional approach to the curriculum with practice-based learning. Such initiatives are organised to promote democracy and young people's interest in civic and political participation. For instance, in Finland, the Youth Parliament first took place in 1998 and is organised by the Parliament of Finland. Students in the upper level of the comprehensive school participate in the initiative, which is designed to inspire students to get involved in making a positive difference in things that are important to their generation. The Finnish Youth Parliament's most important forms of activity include the parliament clubs for students in 8th and 9th year, club events, and other events under topical themes relevant to society. The Finnish Youth Parliament has inspired many similar initiatives in Finland, which contribute to its civic education today.



OBESSU demands:

1. Fundamental principles of democracy to be included in all forms of formal and informal education from an early age, encompassing skills such as argumentation, critical thinking, communication skills, active participation and changemaking.
2. General civic education to be delivered as a subject to cover itself and its history on a global scale in a cross-curricular, inclusive and factual manner.
3. That schools provide a framework for student activism in which this kind of engagement is not only not punished but encouraged, diversifying the opportunities to participate.
4. The availability and promotion of opportunities to practise democracy and participation through practical exercises such as acts of community service or simulations, for instance. These opportunities should cover matters such as voting and engaging with public authorities.
5. That EDC and curriculum in general will no longer be used as an electoral tool by political parties resulting in periodic curricular changes that best fit their political agenda and therefore diminishing the value given by society to this kind of education

Sustainability, ecology and climate change

For the past 20 to 30 years, school curricula in Europe and around the world have progressively adopted different forms of environmental education, including climate awareness. Various educators have successfully incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals and UN principle of teaching for sustainability into their lessons. They have also helped young people develop four essential skills for the 21st century: creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. However, a lot more can be done, especially seeing the critical point society is reaching with the climate crisis. The programmes and policies can go further to teach young people to adapt to and mitigate climate change by increasing their resilience and sense of belonging as well as harnessing their skills for change.

The dominant approach to educating young people on environmental education is to present them with facts, figures, and scientific arguments. Nonetheless this approach varies from country to country, leaving students with very different levels of education on the topic.

Good practices from institutions

There is currently an ambitious strategy at EU level to deliver on sustainability and the transformational changes needed across our economy and society. The aim of the proposal is to support Member States, schools, higher education institutions, non-governmental organisations and all education providers in equipping learners with understanding and skills on sustainability, climate change and the environment. The Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability maps out a new learning approach regarding environmental sustainability with hands-on, engaging and action-based ways of learning that foster knowledge, understanding and critical thinking, practical skills development, which refers to applied learning, and empathy, solidarity and



caring for nature meaning socio-emotional learning.

OBESSU demands:

1. Education for sustainable development to be based not only on scientific facts but also on real and practical examples and cases.
2. To provide tools and knowledge that can be applied to a student's daily life.
3. Education for sustainable development and SDGs to be mainstreamed in the curricula with a transversal and interdisciplinary approach, including as well outdoor activities.
4. School students and learners in Europe should have access to a comparable level of education no matter their country of residence.
5. Sustainable learning environment in terms of: buildings and infrastructure, facilities management, governance, partnerships with the local communities, sustainable and safe transportation options for learners and staff and consumption of local and sustainable products.

Representation of marginalised groups

Curricula across Europe tend to deliver content based on the perspective and values of privileged groups. Women, minorities, members of the LGBTQi+ community and other oppressed groups are often underrepresented or not present at all in school curricula, failing to provide students with an accurate picture of current European societies that they can relate to. This gap between school and reality might cause students to disengage apart from the reinforcement of detrimental dynamics and behaviours.

One good example is the way in which history is taught, which greatly affects multiple aspects of daily life. History as a school subject does not reflect modern standards and methods according to scientific research. In various European countries, history is taught in a very eurocentric way and still contains the remains of biased information from the Cold War or colonialist era. There are not included topics such as the history of ethnic and social minorities, colonialism or patriarchy. Under any circumstances, history education must be critical, decolonised, diverse, and inclusive for different minority groups.

Good practices from institutions

The Observatory on History Teaching in Europe is an agreement organised by the Council of Europe, whose goal is to "promote quality education in order to enhance the understanding of democratic culture." Currently, they are working on the report on the state of history teaching, e.g. the content of history curricula, textbooks at primary, and secondary levels of education, teachers' training, the level of development of CoE member states in terms of history education, etc. The Observatory works also on the thematic report "Pandemics and Natural Disasters as Reflected in History Teaching" - how they are covered in curriculum, and how they impact the status quo. It should be finished by the end of 2022.



Good practices from the OBESSU Membership

DGS is currently advocating for the list of literature authors to be updated to better represent society. Currently, thirteen out of fourteen authors are men so, DGS is putting part of its lobbying efforts on the topic, encouraging students to write debating sections in newspapers and organising social activism asking their peers to take action and give visibility to the issue.

OBESSU demands:

1. Education to be factual, not eurocentric and acknowledge the impact of colonialism and systemic issues such as racism or the patriarchy.
2. Schools to engage NGOs and create spaces for underrepresented groups to share their perspectives.
3. Curricula to highlight the past of oppressed groups and communities (e.g. racial, sexual or religious communities) and to give visibility to their work and culture through literature or arts, for instance.
4. Education to provide students with an understanding on how what is taught affects their societies and some groups of their communities particularly.

Better equipped teachers: training, materials and assessments

Each of the topics identified is unique and highly specific but there are common denominators that can be found in all of them. Generally, a cross-curricular approach is preferred to educational silos, there is a need for inclusive and representative materials and teachers lack specific training on the topics covered by this Policy Paper.

Additionally, in many countries, the materials that teachers rely on to deliver their subjects are often outdated, struggling to keep up with scientific developments but also with societal changes which might result in non-representative and non-inclusive materials.

Assessments must be transformative, as well as feedback- and learner- centred, in order to ensure that the educational processes are relevant for school students and that they aid the process of acquiring skills. This is important to avoid thriving for the best results on paper and therefore deprioritising the actual process of learning and becoming an well-educated student.



OBESSU demands:

1. Teachers receive training on the topic of intercultural competence to learn innovative approaches to managing diversity in education and ensure the rights of immigrant children to education regardless of their linguistic and socio-economic background. They should also be able to promote understanding and acknowledgement of the cultural differences between different groups.
2. That teachers are provided with the necessary IT skills to be able to mainstream them in the content and methodologies of all subjects.
3. That teaching materials, practices and extracurricular activities to be accessible and representative for all school students, including students with disabilities regardless of their race, ability, sexuality, beliefs, nationality etc.
4. That the format of teaching materials to alternate in order to encourage different learning methods and meet different learning needs and styles.
5. That the materials to be up to date with scientific developments.



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