

Europe Needs Us

A School Student Manifesto towards the upcoming European Parliament Elections

Adopted at the General Assembly 2023 – Copenhagen, Denmark

Strengthening democracies through meaningful youth participation

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. It was founded in April 1975 in Dublin, Ireland and brings together Member, Candidate and Affiliate Organisations from all over Europe. All Member Organisations are independent, national, representative and democratic school student organisations.

OBESSU represents an incredibly diverse and widespread community of European students from over 25 countries, who are invested in shaping the future of both education and a Europe that can thrive.

OBESSU is the voice of school student organisations and a driving force for transforming education in Europe. OBESSU represent their needs and interests and fights for the advancement of their rights through democratic political processes, fostering inclusive spaces and dialogue, exchange of tools and solidarity.

Towards a European democracy based on youth engagement

Empowering youth and amplifying their voices is fundamental to rejuvenating our democracies and driving higher voter turnout. Active youth participation is pivotal in shaping the legitimacy and future of our democratic institutions. As we stand at a critical juncture, it is imperative to recognise the significance of youth engagement. The demands and measures outlined below represent OBESSU's manifesto to the incoming European Parliament. Looking towards a different Europe, a more youthful, empowering and inclusive Union, OBESSU's Manifesto emphasises the pressing need to address major issues in education and skills development. Let us delve into these core messages and understand the urgent call for action.

Democracy needs to be practised, not taught theoretically.

Young people have a stake in how both the present and the future of Europe look like. They should not only learn about political decisions that affect their lives, such as climate change, education, employment and social justice, but they should be able to have a say, too.

Being excluded from formal decision making and being often infantilised, young people are at higher risk of feeling disconnected from traditional politics and participation. This is why lowering the voting age to 16 can increase political participation and engagement among young people¹, and promoting sustainable and participatory change.

For this to become a reality, education, information, empowerment and critical thinking should become the defining principles of any democratic exercise. Education systems in Europe must respond to the democratic crisis and potential risks collectively.

Initiatives like lowering the voting age must be accompanied by other measures and actions that aim at educating about and re-engaging the youth in political processes. A concrete step to achieve that would be through the development of a European framework on citizenship education competences. The way

¹ Congress of the local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe, 2022, *Voting at 16. Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level*. Available [here](#).

these competences are acquired in each Member State should be more harmonised, to truly be able to develop such a European citizenship that can be, both local and global at the same time. Education systems in Europe must respond to the democratic crisis in a shared way.

School student involvement far from tokenism

The school student movement has been active across the world in different forms and ways for decades, with the constant goal of facilitating the involvement of school students in decision making both within schools and across society more broadly.

Disappointingly, exclusion from decision-making processes is still an issue that students face on a daily basis. If it be in the classroom of a small town or in the hemicycle of the European Parliament, institutions too often fail at granting a real space for participation, reproducing a patronising behaviour towards a social group that can be, and is indeed, organised and proposes clear solutions to the multifaceted crises we are living today. School students are tired of being the token young person. Learners demand a real seat at the table, at the level of consultation and deliberation where other social partners are.

It is crucial to involve students in political and decision-making processes. Their role as active stakeholders in education systems make their views, opinions and concerns fundamental elements to determine the impact and success of new reforms and changes to educational systems Europe-wide.

We must move away from tokenism and similar behaviours. It is necessary for school student involvement in decision making to be meaningful, and that entails the need to ensure the recognition of students as valuable and relevant stakeholders when it comes to decision making regarding them.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- That the newly elected members of the European Parliament work with their national party members to explore extending the voting rights to citizens from the ages of 16.
- That the European Parliament and the newly appointed Commission promote initiatives to meaningfully involve citizens in the developing and planning of local, regional and national initiatives, through for example participatory budgeting.
- That increased support for projects for youth on democracy, participation, mobility and exchange on national, EU and global level be provided by European Institutions.
- That the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council engage in innovative conversations with education stakeholders about promoting education for democratic citizenship more actively in European school systems. Especially, OBESSU demands that European Institutions engage in conversations on the development of a Framework for Global Citizenship education to be developed in the form of recommendations and in consultation with learners and other relevant social partners and education stakeholders.
- School student unions to be considered as Social Partners in European policy making arenas. OBESSU believes a mainstreamed process of consultation with school student organisations at European level should be the norm, and not the exception.

Fair and sustainable transitions

Can we get some A.I. to pick plastic out of the ocean or do all the robots need to be screenwriters?"

OBESSU believes in a just society, where influence and resources are distributed fairly, and everyone's voices are equally heard. As school students, we see the digital and green transitions as crucial steps towards building such a society.

We are faced with a number of challenges and emerging threats. Big tech monopolies dictate our approach and policies to digitalisation and powerful lobbies are at the steering wheel of green transition initiatives. Often these groups have their own interests and approaches that are not necessarily in line with society's needs and goals, while the extent to which they are held accountable is failing to achieve the changes we need to see to ensure an inclusive and fair twin transition.

Right now we face an abundance of problems coming from digital technology not being harnessed in the correct way, which has resulted in a spread of mis- and disinformation. In 2022, 47% of all internet traffic was by bots².

Incorporating AI and digital technology into education and our everyday life is expected, however it must be done ethically and with careful consideration of the potential impact this will have on learners and the wider society. We do not always have concrete answers or are witnessing the lack of democratic oversight over policies that regulate and set up the ethical use of AI in education or in European education and training-related debates. We cannot be blinded by the shiny innovation that AI and digital technologies bring or any of their short-term benefits. We need to remember that the most important aim should be to create a future where technology is not used to replace human labour, but to enhance it; where digital tools become an enabler of democratic participation, and not a criterion for exclusion; where AI is a force for public good that is publicly financed and developed.

Regarding climate policy, the current system has failed to meet the urgent needs of our planet. Economic interests have wrongly been prioritised over environmental concerns. The green transition is essential for mitigating the brutal effects of climate change, and to create a more sustainable future for all. We do, however, have to ensure that climate policy is effective and prioritises the needs of the planet - and this cannot be done without those that are currently shaping, and will continue shaping the world we live in: school students and young people in general.

To truly advance towards a transformative climate policy that prioritises the public good, we must be able to hold corporations and governments accountable for their environmental impact. In order to do so, inclusion and diversity must be driving principles of the digital transition, to shift the existing power balance and give influence and power back to the people. The green transition, just like the digital transition, is not just a technological one, it's clearly a political and societal one - one where school students need to be put at the centre.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- That the so-called *twin transitions* be treated as the political and societal revolutions that they can potentially be, and that the technical narrative around them be substituted with a people-centred one aiming at public good.

² New York Magazine, 2023, *You are You Are Not a Parrot And a chatbot is not a human. And a linguist named Emily M. Bender is very worried what will happen when we forget this.* Available [here](#).

- That European institutions guarantee democratic oversight and co-creation of policies around digital technologies and AI in education, in cooperation with European school student representative organisations and other legitimate education and training stakeholders.
- That European institutions support a student-centred approach to digitalisation in education, including through policies to support a higher bargaining power in relation to Ed Tech, as well as legally binding rules on using Artificial Intelligence and data privacy in education - as also demanded by the European Students Union³.
- That bigger steps be taken in terms of enhancing the accountability of big tech corporations, to strip them of the monopoly they hold on accessing digital tools and finance public technological developments through higher taxation of the aforementioned companies.
- That European and national Institutions and stakeholders engage in conversations around a radical transformative rethinking of economic systems for the green transition to be effective. moving from the attainment of macroeconomic objectives to a “wellbeing economy” through, among others:
 - Enhancing the taxation of environmentally harmful and resource-intensive industries and high-income individuals
 - Ending fossil fuels subsidies, tax benefits and consumption subsidies which keep the fossil fuels industry artificially alive and in competition with renewables and withdrawing from the Energy Charter Treaty, as also demanded by Generation Climate Europe⁴
- That European institutions take further steps to ensure the climate neutrality of education institutions, through targeted funding and support beyond the Recovery and Resilience Facility and that Member States be held accountable.
- That countries in Europe and globally make Quality Climate Change Education for All a reality, as also demanded by Education International⁵.
- That neighbouring countries be involved in conversations around the twin transitions and the educational response needed as equal partners and in view of peer learning and exchange and cooperation.

³ European Students' Union, 2023, *Resolution on Student Manifesto – 24 proposals for the 2024 European Elections*. Available [here](#).

⁴ Generation Climate Europe, 2023, *Manifesto for an intergenerationally just post-growth European economy*. Available [here](#).

⁵ Education International, 2021, *Education International Manifesto on quality Climate Change Education for All!* Available [here](#).

Investments in quality education

Education aims and is expected to empower people and to do so by providing to them equal opportunities for learning. Investing in Education can have a long-lasting impact, with adding up on supporting mechanisms for economic, social and cultural development. Education should therefore not only be a priority in itself, but ensuring quality education is essential.

Quality education involves learning that stretches beyond the classroom and continues through the rest of your life and has the ultimate aim of making students and their experience relevant and effective to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Quality education requires the shifting of evaluation processes beyond just good scores on a piece of paper. It must be structured in a way that promotes and ensures students' ability to think critically, solve complex problems and apply what is learned in the classroom to real-world contexts. It requires competencies of inclusion and understanding the world beyond the four rooms of a classroom. It requires the development of competencies that foster intellectual curiosity, engagement in learning and the promotion of the values of diversity and lifelong learning.

All the above statements are supported by a majority of European leaders at different levels, yet we have not seen a consistent application of those principles in policies. On the contrary, over the last two decades, we have witnessed a constant decline of public funding to education, with the application of budget cuts and austerity measures after the 2008 financial crisis. We also have been constantly targeted by discourses around the role of education in providing a skilled workforce for a changing labour market, while the labour market itself has been fragmented, deregulated and became more and more precarious. Vocational education (VET) and apprenticeships became a sudden priority of national and European policy makers shifting the narrative from education for lifelong learning and common good to education for market purposes⁶.

Generally speaking, education does not seem a priority for European countries. In 2021 the general government expenditure in the EU on 'education' amounted to €701 billion or 4.8 % of GDP⁷. Ten years after 2015 we have not yet seen governments delivering on allocating that 6% of GDP to education as promised by UNESCO Member States⁸. The fallback of this underinvestment was clearly visible with the COVID-19 pandemic, that found education systems all over Europe unprepared to face a challenge for equality and inclusion, resulting in education being inaccessible for many.

A holistic approach to education means making it a priority for public investment, without falling into the toxic narratives of return of investment and employability. This can only be done if we bridge the gap that is being created across Member States and in European institutions for which education and training, general education and VET, are treated separately and in silos, respectively being attributed to Directorate Generals or Ministries of Education and Employment.

The many challenges of education must be addressed by public funding and they cannot be addressed in a vacuum. We need the EU to rethink its economic framework to ensure long-term impactful investment in education by all Member States, starting from thinking of education as a human right and a public good that should not be negotiated on, as also affirmed by the Futures of Education framework proposed by UNESCO⁹.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

⁶ OBESSU, 2023, Position Paper on the European Year of Skills. Available [here](#).

⁷ Eurostat, 2023, *Government expenditure on education*. Available [here](#).

⁸ UNESCO, 2021, UNESCO Member States united to increase investments in education. Available [here](#).

⁹ International Commission on the Futures of Education, UNESCO, 2021, Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education. Available [here](#).

- That education is not treated as an enterprise and such it should not be commodified. The quality and accessibility of education should not be compromised, and its focus should never be narrowed to the short-term needs of the market rather than fostering holistic development and critical thinking.
- That public investment in education be reinforced to foster quality, accessibility and inclusion also through making tax justice a political priority for efficient and equitable investments, also demanded by the Global Student Forum¹⁰.
- That the newly appointed President of the European Commission considers taking concrete steps in bridging the gap between policies on general education and VET and apprenticeships, but proposing a unified Commissioner on Lifelong Learning. OBESSU emphasises the need for greater alignment between DG Education and Culture and DG Employment in the European Commission in both policies and practices. Collaboration and coherence between these directorates should be strengthened to address the interconnectedness of education and employment and to align to one narrative on skills: that on skills for life.
- For VET and apprenticeships policies to be treated as education policy. OBESSU demands that VET and apprenticeships policies be firmly embedded within the broader education policy framework. This integration is the only way to ensure that VET and apprenticeships are treated as legitimate educational pathways with equal status, resources, and support as other forms of education.
- That the newly elected Parliament and the newly appointed Commission deeply and critically reform the Stability and Growth Pact, through which welfare states and education systems have been slaughtered over the last decades, by removing education from debt sustainability, as also suggested by the Lifelong Learning Platform¹¹, and by reinforcing structured mechanisms to increase and ensure democratic oversight over fiscal reform¹².

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¹⁰ Ulloa, H., 2023, *The global student movement demands tax justice for education!* Available [here](#).

¹¹ Lifelong Learning Platform, 2022, Investments in education and training: a public good for all. Available [here](#).

¹² European Youth Forum, 2022, Position Paper on Fiscal Policy. Available [here](#).

