

# Policy Paper on Twin Transition

## Transforming the Future Of Education with Students and for Students

Adopted by the Council of Members on the 9th & 10th December 2023

### Introduction

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions, syndicates, and other such bodies active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. This Policy Paper has been developed to reflect on the ambitious targets and overall EU vision for a climate neutral Europe by 2050.

As our societies have to adapt to a new or rather different reality through the Green and Digital Transitions, so must our Education Systems. In this process, we are presented with an opportunity to transform the future of education and it is necessary more than ever before to do so with students and for students.

### The EU vision for 2050 - Moving onwards through a Twin Transition

In 2018<sup>1</sup>, the European Commission outlined its aim of achieving and creating a climate neutral economy as part of its EU Vision for 2050 "*Our Vision for A Clean Planet for All*". Tackling all sectors to different degrees, the plan aims to achieve climate neutrality by harnessing the potential of a variety of technological solutions in what has been since dubbed *The Twin Transition*.<sup>2</sup>

While the majority of policies being developed and implemented so far towards the twin transition relate to emissions-intensive economic sectors such as agriculture, transport and construction - the most important of them being the EU Green Deal - both in the working definition and background documents the social aspect of the transitions is acknowledged, insofar as "*skills, education, new tasks and occupations are important enablers of the twin transition*".

The global Covid-19 crisis highlighted the magnitude of the challenges lying ahead in this regard: the forced transition to remote education and employment, as well as the sudden halt of many emission-intensive processes highlighted the unequal cost of the health crisis. Five years later, socio-economic inequalities appear as one of the main barriers to the digital and green transitions.

### The green transition

In the past decade, school students have been at the forefront of battles to bring climate change and its effects to the centre of the political debate, both in Europe and globally, as it plays a vital role for our and future generations' lives. As young people, we have particularly high stakes in the

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, November 2018 "*Our Vision for a Clean Planet for All*". Available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, February 2023 "*Making the Twin Transition a Reality*". Available [here](#).

fight against climate change, having to inherit a planet that is heading towards a potential climate collapse. Thus, being deprived of the power to lead change, but also having to deal with the consequences of lack of action by older generations in regards to climate.

After several successful trials to obtain the attention of decision-makers, the latter are failing to take the bold action that is needed to achieve meaningful impact. An example of this is the recent developments in the EU Green Deal negotiations - with the delays and redimensioned ambitions for critical regulations in agriculture, nature conservation and chemical manufacturing.<sup>3</sup>

There is a wide consensus across the European scientific community, green parties and civil society organisations that to be successful and fair, the green transition presupposes a deep transformation of society, starting from the economic imperative for growth and the safeguarding of private financial interests over environmental concerns.<sup>4 5</sup>

They argue that the current focus on green growth over both environmental concerns and the social dimension of the green transition is fundamentally incompatible with the finite amount of resources of our planet. Tackling challenges such as overproduction, overconsumption, and accountability of “big polluters” - corporations, governments and high-income individuals - requires a paradigm shift from the attainment of macroeconomic objectives to the attainment of social and environmental objectives.

Similarly, the narrative on skills shortages proposed by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union address of 2023, referred to as “challenges facing the labour market”<sup>6</sup> fails to capture the social and economic challenges faced by students and workers and therefore to offer any solution that would improve their condition.

## The digital transition

The digitalisation of systems and processes, understood as the ongoing integration of digital technologies in daily lives and work, can support the transition process in different ways. It also has many benefits for young people in terms of education, employment and personal life.<sup>7</sup>

In education, for example, digitalisation can support teachers and learners by improving their access to information and facilitating immediate communication. It can also be integrated into the learning process in various ways, in some cases allowing students to have more ownership over their learning process.

Yet the integration of digital technologies is not without dangers or challenges. We identify two pressing challenges for a successful digital transition:

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<sup>3</sup> European Environmental Bureau, September 2023 - *Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union speech conceals setbacks, delays and broken promises*. Available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Generation Climate Europe, May 2023 - “*Manifesto for an intergenerationally just post-growth European Economy*.” Available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> Solidar, July 2020 - “*Ups and Downs in the Skills Agenda*”. Available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> European Commission & Ursula von der Leyen, 2023 - “*2023 State of the Union Address by President Von Der Leyen*”. Available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> European Youth Forum (YFJ), 2022 - “*Making Digitalisation work for youth people*”. Available [here](#).

- The profit-driven nature of many digital platforms, owned by big tech monopolies with minimal civic and public oversight, by virtue of which the interests of users' are subdued to economic interest - for example, the documented potential adverse effects of intense usage of digital technology on citizens' mental and physical health.<sup>8</sup>
- The digital divide, highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, or the social gap in skills, equipment and resources between those able and those unable to benefit and access technology. Even amongst the most resourceful and skilled groups, the lack or low levels of digital literacy—the ability to find and evaluate information online—poses a variety of threats both at the individual level, in terms of cybersecurity and personal data, and at the broader democratic level, affecting electoral cycles and lending itself to undue foreign interference.<sup>9</sup>

### **A path building on Sustainability approach**

Based on all of the above, OBESSU proposes a vision that establishes the centrality and fundamental role of an approach for sustainability as part of the twin transition. For us, adopting a sustainability approach means to:

- Urgently acknowledge and address socio-economic inequalities, the biggest obstacle to a successful transition, through a policy making for well-being;
- Shift the focus on skills from labour market needs to learners' and workers' needs and current studying and working conditions;
- Privilege long term gains over short term rewards in terms of economic, environmental and social policies.

### **Transforming Education Systems**

Throughout the Twin Transition it is fundamental that we focus, engage and utilise our education system, and namely the participation of school students and school leadership in decision-making structures. OBESSU recognises that the adoption and implementation of the Twin Transition is not an easy task or process; this is why we require a whole school approach and investment in order to achieve the goals of the transition.

It is simply not possible to merely change a few factors in education systems and expect the rest to follow. We must take this opportunity to transform our education systems for the benefit of students and their future.

In order to do this, we believe that the focus should be put on **curricula, sustainable funding and student engagement**.

### **Curricula Development for the Twin Transition**

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<sup>8</sup> European Youth Forum (YFJ), 2022 - "*Making Digitalisation work for youth people*". Available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> European Youth Forum (YFJ), 2022 - "*Making Digitalisation work for youth people*". Available [here](#).

In the shift towards a climate neutral society and economy, we must proactively implement progressive enablers into our education systems. Curricula stands alone as a focal point of our systems which allows us to promote sustainability, meaningful climate action, and promotion of the twin transition.

Across the 27 Member States of the EU, only 54.9% of Europeans are competent in basic digital skills, however this ranges from as low as 27.8% of people in Romania to 79% in the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> We are at a turning point in society towards a digital world, and it is essential that quality education now reflects education for digitalisation and that our teaching models reflect the practical real-life implementation of technology through the classroom.

As the building blocks of society, our education must reflect the green transformation by encouraging sustainable practices and teaching of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education. Students must be able to recognise the impact of climate change and understand how to lead a sustainable life, both inside and outside of the classroom.

While it is important that we develop our learning environments to be technologically advanced, we cannot neglect the implications of increased use of technology on both students and the quality of teaching and learning. Technology allows young people to communicate, socialise and learn, however some aspects, such as constant access to screens, information, entertainment and social media can have a significant negative impact on our mental health. Whether in reality or online, student's privacy and safety must always be prioritised.

Furthermore, technological advances provide new methods for research and learning that students must be allowed to utilise. In this regard, the creation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms such as ChatGPT and Quilbot has made the benefits of technology in learning more accessible. However, we must ensure that AI does not replace quality education, learning and critical thinking. It must be used alongside quality teaching practices to fine tune our learning methods to the rapid changes of the modern world.

Therefore OBESSU Demands:

- Students and their unions to be included in development of curricula and all other policies regarding education and training.
- That the proposed and future reforms of VET address the urgent issue of working and learning conditions and needs of students and apprentices as priority over the imperatives of labour market needs
- Investment and prioritisation of education for digital literacy, as a core focus of all curricula.
- Regular assessment and national reporting of basic digital skills.
- Mandatory quality Education for Sustainable Development for all levels of education, accessible to all students.

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<sup>10</sup>EuroStat 2021, *Individuals' Levels of Digital Skills*. Available [here](#).

- Increased focus on Global Citizenship Education to reflect the international effort of transition and the impact climate change has had globally.
- Increased education for online safety and ethical use of technology.
- That all students maintain the right to disconnect from school work, and retain the right to privacy when participating in online learning.
- The regulation by the European Union of AI in education, including ethical usage and access by the education sector.

## The Role of Education Funding

Our education systems and institutions have only ever been underfunded and in essence just about provided the means to survive. In 2015, the Member States of UNESCO agreed to increase their expenditure in education to 6% of their Gross domestic product (GDP) or 20% of their annual expenditure.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, as of 2021 only 4.8% of GDP from the 27 Member States of the EU was being invested into the topic of education, which amounts to only €701 Billion.<sup>12</sup>

In order to achieve meaningful and quality changes in our education systems in line with the objectives of both the green and digital transition we need increased investment and more sustainable funding models for education.

OBESSU has previously identified hidden costs of education which can have a major impact on the basic needs of students and their access to quality education; transportation, accommodation, materials (including digital services), food and social/cultural life were among these areas.<sup>13</sup> Students and schools alike must be adequately funded and resourced to achieve the opportunity of outcomes from education, and to ensure that they are active participants of the Twin Transition.

In this sense, we must also allow schools to retrofit their buildings and spaces to become climate neutral spaces by providing resources and grant base opportunities for refurbishments, extensions, and implementation of green/sustainable facilities such as e-vehicle charging stations, solar panels, recycling stations and much more.

At the same time, we must consider the impact of overuse of technology on young people, and learners in particular. The use of technology in the classroom and school environments must have forms of regulation to allow for technology-free periods within education. Schools and their leaders must be able to identify the overuse of technology in their classrooms and provide support and opportunities to disconnect. We must continue to make use of traditional resources and methods while integrating the best that the digital transition has to offer.

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<sup>11</sup> UNESCO, November 2021 - "*UNESCO Member States Unite to Increase Investment in Education.*" Available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> EuroStat 2021, *Government Expenditure on Education*. Available [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> OBESSU, 2022 - "*Policy Paper on Education Funding and Student Welfare.*" Available [here](#).

Therefore OBESSU Demands:

- That the European Union and Member States increase funding and resources available to students, teaching & auxiliary staff, and schools in order to achieve the objectives of the Twin Transition and to provide quality and meaningful Education.
- That the European Institutions ensure that the digitalisation of education systems and examination processes will not incur a cost or barrier to education for any student.
- That the hidden costs of education at all levels be included and covered by the relevant government authority to reduce the financial burden on students and their families.
- That school communities be repurposed and retrofitted to become sustainable environments and purposefully built to be sustainable, long term institutions.
- That the EU regulates the use of technology in the classroom and provides guidelines for technological free teaching and learning methods.
- That curricula must reflect the need of students to allow for digital-free education space, and that the digitalisation of education not overpower the education system, allowing for students to disconnect from technology.

### **Whole School Approach to the Twin Transition**

OBESSU has and always will advocate for the “whole school approach” of adapting to change in our education systems and the Twin Transition is no different. It is vital that students, teachers, school leaders and all other stakeholders in our communities are consulted and considered in this transition, in particular marginalised groups of students such as migrant and refugee students and students with additional educational needs.

We must take the opportunity presented by the transition to support vulnerable groups of students and use assistive teaching and learning technologies to enhance their experience in education and the quality of learning they receive. As part of this process, European Institutions must take into account the “whole school approach” and work towards means that allow for student and school leaders to tackle this transformation, providing the resources, support, training and consultations which are necessary to make this switch.

School leaders and management must be provided with necessary training and equipment in order to overcome the challenges associated with the digital transition and climate change, as well as the knowledge on how best to implement the transformation to fit the needs of their students and learning environment.

All teaching and learning staff must be provided with free and accessible continuous professional development training in order to understand and benefit from the digitalisation of our classrooms, as well as sustainable models of education and lifelong learning. In order for the system to grow and develop alongside the implementation of the transition, students and teachers alike must develop digital literacy skills.

Therefore OBESSU Demands:

- The Institutions of the European Union and National Ministries of Education provide school leadership and teaching/learning staff, basic and continuous professional training in digital skills and the use of technology in learning environments.
- That school leadership be provided with the resources to identify and solve issues which might impede the implementation of the twin transition.
- That school leaders engage with school students and teachers alike in order to identify their needs in the adoption.

### **Meaningful Youth and Student Participation**

Being excluded from formal decision making and being often tokenized, young people are at higher risk of being disconnected from mainstream politics and participation in society. Meaningful youth engagement and participation is a key enabler of the Twin Transition, especially in our schools and learning environments.

For the Twin Transition to become an effective reality, the European Union must centre the students' voice both inside our education institutions and wider society. On a national and European Level, we must begin by increasing the voting franchise to allow 16 and 17 year olds to participate in the democratic process.

On a curricular level, we must encourage civic, political, and social education, and expand on the theoretical basis of teaching to actively engaging students, including School Student Unions, in practical democratic exercises within and beyond the classroom. As we transition towards sustainable and digital education systems, school student unions must be utilised, prioritised, funded and recognised as a social partner in the decision-making process.

We must take this opportunity to mandate the inclusion of school students, and their school student unions within school leadership such as with mandatory student seats on Board of Management, not just within the scope of curricula development, but more broadly on policies related to education at all levels - local, regional and national.

Their role as active stakeholders in education systems makes their views, opinions and concerns fundamental elements to determine the impact and success of new reforms and changes to educational systems such as those who would derive from the Twin Transition. Without meaningful youth and student participation the Twin Transition will fail.

Therefore, OBESSU demands:

- That our educational systems promote and foster a safe space for all students in participatory processes, and protects students' right to protest, express dissent and manifest their opinions in an inclusive and non-polarised way.

- That European Institutions promote meaningful youth dialogue and engaging initiatives to involve citizens in the developing and implementation of the Twin Transition.
- That our newly restructured education systems become student focused, and promote the self-organisation of democratic and engaged school student unions.
- That school students are granted a seat within their schools leadership and management bodies, especially in VET schools and institutes.
- That the European Union takes active steps to promote and support Member States in providing inclusive processes that engage students in the development of Curricula, along with their meaningful engagement across policy processes within the education sector.
- That increased support for projects for youth on democracy, participation, mobility and exchange on national, EU and global level be provided by European Institutions, with particular attention to the mobility of VET students.

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