



PRESIDENCIA ESPAÑOLA  
CONSEJO DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA

## **Concept note**

# **INFORMAL MEETING OF MINISTERS FOR EDUCATION AND YOUTH**

**Saragossa, 18-19 September 2023**

**How to commit Europe to its youth?  
Education, rights and welfare of young  
people.**

## YOUTH WORKING SESSION

**A European policy that places youth at the center of political commitment, through an inclusive and participatory approach that guarantees the rights and well-being of young people in the EU.**

Since 2002, youth, their welfare and the full enjoyment of their rights have been gaining weight on the European agenda and have become, in recent years, one of the central issues to be addressed in order to shape the future of Europe.

The succession of economic and social crises in recent years, the unprecedented health crisis of the COVID19 , as well as the energy consequences of the war provoked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, have deepened the precariousness and asymmetries affecting European young people. As a consequence, two determining effects for their future have been accentuated: the inequality gaps between young people and the adult generation, as well as the pre-existing differences between young people who have a greater degree of access to their rights in the EU and those who live in a context of precariousness and/or exclusion.

The year 2023 offers us an unbeatable context of opportunity to advance the rights of European youth. We are counting on the learnings from the legacy of the European Year of Youth, and soon we will also be able to examine the conclusions of the mediated evaluation of the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027, scheduled to be published by the end of the year by the European Commission.

It is, therefore, an ideal moment to compile lessons learned, experiences and promote European policies that place the well-being and the extension of young people's rights at the center of their priorities, reinforcing the close collaboration between European institutions, Member States and youth representatives in decision-making, as well as the implementation of a youth perspective in the design and evaluation of these policies.

In this process, the youth must play a leading role. Young people are subjects of rights with a potential, capacity and talent that are essential for any society and should therefore be fully incorporated into political processes and decision-making spaces. The participation of young people is essential in order to provide greater legitimacy any political process, as well as to achieve the credibility and confidence of young people in

the European project, strengthening the bond that unites young people with the identity and values of a Europe that must also commit itself to its youth.

For this reason, the Government of Spain and the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, in the framework of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, have set the objective of promoting youth policy in the Union, based on a coherent and comprehensive set of proposals, aimed at:

- 1) Strengthen coordination and cooperation between European institutions and Member States.
- 2) To standardize the application of youth mainstreaming in the design and evaluation of public policies.
- 3) To consolidate the participation of the European young people as an indispensable condition in decision-making processes.

### **Questions for the policy debate:**

Delegations are invited to answer the following questions.

- How does the structured and accessible participation of European young people contribute to the greater legitimacy and credibility of EU decision-making processes?
- How can youth mainstreaming in public policies in the EU contribute to the well-being of young people and the fulfilment of young people's expectations for the future?
- How can the impulse of a closer cooperation and coordination between the European institutions, Member States and youth representatives improve mutual learning, analyses of young people's challenges and the implementation of initiatives with a significant impact on their lives?

## UNIVERSITIES WORKING SESSION

### **Boosting transitions, successful experiences and completion of higher education for disadvantaged students.**

The first principle under the European Pillar of Social Rights sets out that ‘everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning’. Compared to the rest of the world, Europe has accessible higher education. However, disadvantaged groups (ethnic minorities, people with migrant background, or from poor families, children from low qualified parents or people with disabilities) are still underrepresented. According to a recent report, “participation rates of under-represented groups have not improved significantly during the lifetime of the Bologna Process”<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, students from low-income families are reported to experience more uneven trajectories before and through higher education. They tend indeed to be older and are more likely to enrol in shorter and non-university higher education and to be studying at a low intensity and part-time. They also tend to rely more on public support or their own earnings rather than on family support. Moreover, once in higher education, these students indicate, on average, a lower sense of belonging in higher education<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, several studies show that these socio-economic differences go beyond access and extend to performance, so that students from more educated and affluent families have better chances of completing a degree<sup>1</sup>. In Spain, a recent study shows that students from lower education backgrounds, with unemployed parents, and beneficiaries of income-conditional grants have higher chances of dropping out, mostly during the first year, in which 60% of dropouts concentrate<sup>3</sup>.

The reasons behind these patterns include economic insecurity and difficulties to cover direct, indirect and opportunity costs of higher education; academic deficits accumulated throughout primary and secondary education, and exposure to an unknown culture and practices that lead to a lack of feeling of belonging and integration in universities.

Making higher education more inclusive has been a consistent, though evolving goal in Europe. In the context of the Bologna process, the goal was initially framed as the extent to which the student body entering in, participating in, and completing higher education reflected the diversity of the reference population. But the Rome Communiqué of 2020 expanded this definition by stressing that “the social dimension encompasses the

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<sup>1</sup> European Higher Education Area in 2020, [Bologna Process Implementation Report](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Eurostudent VII](#), 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Fernandez Mellizo-Soto, [Análisis del abandono de los estudiantes de grado en las universidades presenciales en España, Ministerio de Universidades](#), 2022.

creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities”<sup>4</sup>.

More recently, the European Strategy for Universities of 2022 has included the need to “foster diversity, inclusiveness and gender equality” to ensure that universities remain “lighthouses of the European way of life”<sup>5</sup>. For this reason, the Commission committed to draw up a “European framework for diversity and inclusion”.

Increasing the inclusiveness of higher education is also a stated goal to the European Education Area for 2025<sup>6</sup>. Specific policies such as directing Erasmus+ support to develop and implement integrated strategies for inclusion and study success from admission to graduation and promoting the development and testing of flexible and modular programmes of study supporting wider access to higher education have already included in the Renewed EU agenda for higher education.

The policy toolbox to address this challenge includes regulations explicitly governing access and social inclusion; funding targeted to students and students’ families as well as universities; organisational policies to better fit the needs of disadvantaged and non-traditional students; and information policies, including individualized mentoring and guidance both during higher education and at earlier stages that play a major role in determining the chances of entering higher education<sup>7</sup>.

### **Questions for the policy debate:**

Delegations are invited to take into consideration the following questions for the debate:

- How can Member States and EU institutions further improve access of students with disadvantaged backgrounds considering the persistent inequalities?
- Building on the Rome Communiqué, how can Member States and EU institutions encourage institutional change to create “an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities”, and thus improve completion and graduation of disadvantaged students?

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<sup>4</sup> [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#), 2020

<sup>5</sup> [European Strategy for Universities](#), 2022

<sup>6</sup> [European Education Area: Towards inclusive and connected higher education](#)

<sup>7</sup> Kottmann, A., Vossensteyn, J. J., Kolster, R., Veidemane, A., Blasko, Z., Biagi, F., & Sánchez-Barrioluengo, M. (2019). [Social Inclusion Policies in Higher Education: Evidence from the EU](#). Publications Office of the European Union.

## EDUCATION WORKING SESSION

### **How can education foster democratic citizenship and our common values in the EU?**

The European Union is a common project, born and grown on the basis of shared values and respect for democracy, as recognised in the Preamble and Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. However, the threats and crises of the last decade have shown us that we cannot take this for granted and that it is necessary to continue working for the values that are common to us in the Union and for democracy, in particular through education.

Several phenomena are threatening these pillars of our coexistence and the common European project: the impact of the economic crisis on the fabric of our societies; cultural and technological changes and, as a result, the rise of disinformation, polarisation and tension in public debate in Europe; and, more recently, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's brutal and unjustified attack on Ukraine.

Education, at all levels and in all contexts, plays a fundamental role in promoting these values among Europeans, in preparing them to become citizens capable of exercising their rights and duties in a democracy, and in training them to respect human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights.

Education is also the tool to ensure that the citizens of the Union are aware of the history and functioning of the European Union and have the information to appreciate its relevance and added value.

All this leads us to rethink how and what education can continue to contribute to our democracies and our common values in this new, changing and globalised context.

Both the European public and the various EU institutions have already expressed their views on this contribution. Thus, the European Parliament already made a set of recommendations for a renewed European citizenship education in its Resolution of 6 April 2022 on the implementation of citizenship education actions<sup>8</sup>. The Council of the European Union adopted in 2018 a Recommendation on the promotion of common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of education<sup>9</sup>. In its November 2022 report on progress towards the European Education Area, the European Commission called for reflection on improving education for European citizenship<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, the Conference on the Future of Europe made clear the will of citizens to

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<sup>8</sup> [2021/2008\(INI\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [2018/C 195/01](#)

<sup>10</sup> [COM/2022/700 final](#)

strengthen education on the values of the EU, its history and functioning, as well as civic education on democratic processes<sup>11</sup> .

For the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, it is a priority to make progress on this objective, especially in view of the mid-term review of the European Education Area.

In this session, we invite the Ministers of Education of the Union to reflect on what role education should play in fostering the common values of the Union and democratic citizenship. We will also hear the voice of Spanish students and the Spanish education community.

### **Questions for the policy debate**

Delegations are invited to take into consideration the following questions:

- How can education make a decisive contribution to promoting common values and democratic citizenship among Europeans as a means of strengthening cohesion and participation in our democracies and in the EU?
- What educational actions and initiatives could member States and European institutions deploy to promote common values and democratic citizenship?

## **DEBATE POLICY FOR INTERVENTIONS DURING THE SESSIONS**

The Presidency will seek to ensure that all delegations can intervene in each session, that a conversation can take place and that it is possible to intervene by replying in the debates.

To this end, we would ask that Ministers' interventions **should not exceed 2 minutes**.

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<sup>11</sup> [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 2022