Student Voice in Upper Secondary Education

A look at policies and strategies for upper secondary education

OECD Above and Beyond Project

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What is "student voice"?

Student voice is about young people having their voice heard and being able to have agency and influence over matters that affect them and their education.

This can be in the classroom, to do with other areas of school life, or this can look like young people participating in processes to improve their education system. Young people's input should be sought and respected, regardless of their age and stage of development.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gives children the right to have their views given due weight in all matters affecting them.

Did you know: More countries have ratified the Convention than any other human rights treaty in history.

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

– Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
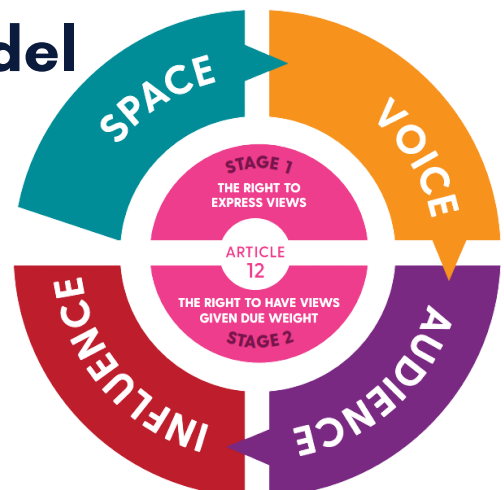
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RESPECT FOR CHILDREN'S VIEWS

196

countries have ratified the Convention on the rights of the Child

On 23rd January 2023, the Above & Beyond team at the OECD organised a **peer learning discussion** with representatives from Norway and Ireland on the subject of student voice in assessment reform in upper secondary education. This brief provides a short overview of the issues discussed and the examples shared. For more about peer learning discussions, please contact aboveandbeyond@oecd.org

Spotlight on the Lundy Model

In Ireland, the Lundy Model of Child Participation (developed by Prof. Laura Lundy of Queen's University in 2007) is the basis for all state engagement with young people, as set out by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The Lundy Model provides the basis of Ireland's National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making. The Framework aims to support departments, agencies and organisations to better listen to children and young people and give them a voice in decision-making.

SPACE

VOICE

INFLUENCE

AUDIENCE

STAGE 1
THE RIGHT TO EXPRESS VIEWS

ARTICLE 12

THE RIGHT TO HAVE VIEWS GIVEN DUE WEIGHT
STAGE 2

How can schools support student voice?

Consult with students on issues affecting them at school e.g. through questionnaires

Support school councils and invite reps to sit in on school policy-making activities

Co-create a classroom charter

Introduce a feedback box, either at the classroom or school-wide level

Seek student input into study topics and assessment objectives

Give all students the opportunity to have their voice heard through feedback surveys or drop-in sessions

Did you know: Student voice pedagogies are closely related to other student-centred practices, such as 'assessment for learning' and 'inquiry learning'?

"Give learners a voice in what they learn, how they learn, where they learn and when they learn"
- **Declaration on Building Equitable Societies through Education from the 2022 Meeting of the Education Policy Committee at Ministerial Level**

What are the benefits of student voice?

"You're empowering them for the future and not just that one event."
- **Peer learning discussion participant**

Education systems have a responsibility to listen and respond to student voice. This respects the rights of children and young people and also has added benefits.

Benefits for learning
On average across OECD countries, 68% of students were in schools whose principal reported that the school seeks written feedback from students regarding their lessons, teachers or resources, according to PISA data. Students in schools that seek feedback from students performed better in reading than students in schools that do not, on average across OECD countries and in 16 countries. In many education systems, socio-economically advantaged schools tend to seek feedback from their students more than disadvantaged schools do. However, after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile, seeking feedback from students is still associated with better reading performance.

Social-emotional skills and democracy
Participant countries in the peer learning discussion on student voice observed that when students experience democracy in school contexts, they are more likely to have a positive disposition to it going forward. In Ireland, networks of schools where student voice is a focus observed greater student wellbeing and sense of self-esteem.

Improved policy-making
When it comes to student voice in education reform, upper secondary students typically have many years of experience in education and are well placed to provide feedback on what works, what doesn't, and to participate in making changes. Decisions at the upper secondary level are often extremely high stakes, and so it's important students can have a say in matters that may affect them or the next generations of students, such as changes to qualifications or post-school pathways.
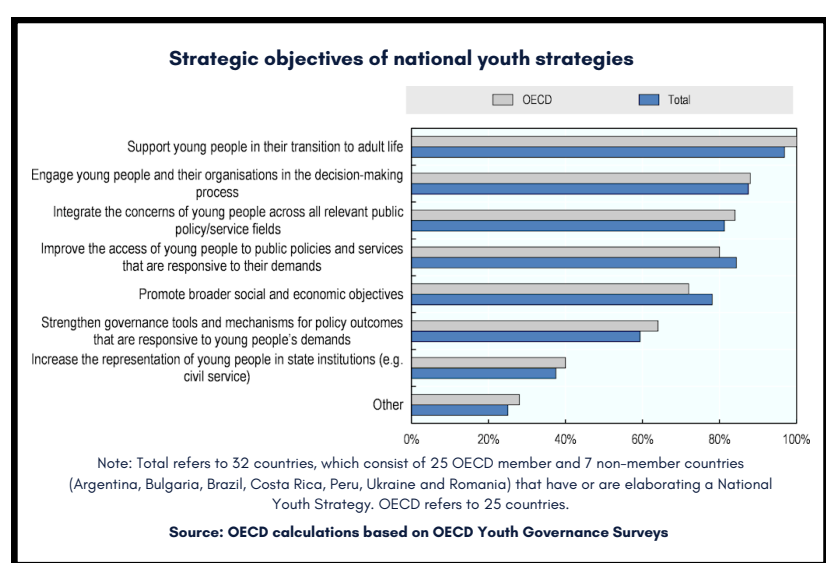
What are countries doing to make engaging with students and other young people a priority?

When looking beyond the school gates at how students can be involved in making decisions that will affect their and others' experience of education, national youth strategies may be used to facilitate youth participation in policy-making. Responses collected from the OECD Youth Governance Surveys, as published in 'Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice', show that in 2020, three in four countries had an operational national youth strategy.

Most countries surveyed (90%) had national youth strategies focusing on engaging young people and young people's organisations in the decision-making process.

National youth strategies can be a way for governments to set priorities and introduce frameworks for youth-related policy-making. These will often be government-wide strategies designed to ensure co-ordination and coherence across different government departments and agencies.

Strategic objectives of national youth strategies

Legend: OECD, Total

- Support young people in their transition to adult life
- Engage young people and their organisations in the decision-making process
- Integrate the concerns of young people across all relevant public policy/service fields
- Improve the access of young people to public policies and services that are responsive to their demands
- Promote broader social and economic objectives
- Strengthen governance tools and mechanisms for policy outcomes that are responsive to young people's demands
- Increase the representation of young people in state institutions (e.g. civil service)
- Other

Note: Total refers to 32 countries, which consist of 25 OECD member and 7 non-member countries (Argentina, Bulgaria, Brazil, Costa Rica, Peru, Ukraine and Romania) that have or are elaborating a National Youth Strategy. OECD refers to 25 countries.

Source: OECD calculations based on OECD Youth Governance Surveys

What structures already exist for involving young people in education reform?

Youth-led organisations and representative bodies are present in **77%** of the countries surveyed.

Did you know:
In some countries, such as Finland and Norway, the establishment of local youth councils is mandatory at the municipal level.

Youth advisory groups exist in 59% of the countries surveyed.

High school student unions are present in 77% of the countries surveyed.

Spotlight on Norway

During the peer learning discussion, Norway representatives shared that Norway has a strong tradition of student democracy, particularly through student councils and the School Student Union of Norway. Norway brought the student union into decision-making processes by including a representative in the review group for their senior secondary exams review, enabling them to get direct student insights into issues and possible solutions.

Spotlight on Ireland

During the peer learning discussion, Ireland representatives shared that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a new partnership between Ireland's education agencies. The Irish Second-Level Students' Union was represented in the national exams advisory group that was set up to provide advice on the education response to COVID-19 and how students would be assessed for the purposes of the Leaving Certificate. Since then, the Minister of Education appointed a representative from the students' union to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's main Council. The student representative now has a seat at the table alongside trade union representatives and school management bodies.

For more on student agency, check out OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 and student agency in the OECD Learning Compass 2030.
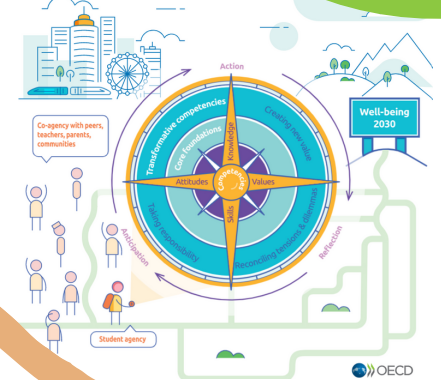
What are ways policy-makers can engage young people in education reform

Develop national youth strategies and strategies for children and young people's participation in decision-making

Include representatives from student councils or unions in government advisory councils or boards

Work with youth-led organisations and representative bodies e.g. student unions and councils

Sustain engagement with groups of young people e.g. advisory groups, with opportunities for them to engage in a deeper way and initiate activity / set the direction

Tell young people what changes are happening and how they can get involved

Create opportunities for all young people to have a say through open consultations or surveys

Test and refine policies and materials with young people in focus groups or pilots

Did you know:
Different types of engagements have unique benefits and challenges, so policy-makers should engage with young people in a range of ways from informing/consulting to collaborating and more sustained engagement

Looking ahead: important issues for policy-makers to consider

In the peer learning discussion, Ireland and Norway shared some reflections on what can be done to improve the inclusion of student voice in policy-making:

Ireland's Our Voices Our Schools website has many great resources on working with young people with learning disabilities, young people who are disempowered, and seldom-heard young people.

Before engagements

Ensuring that engagement with young people is genuine and not just used to tick a box or add legitimacy to a pre-determined policy position

Creating a safe and accessible space for students to participate, where there are different options to engage (including anonymous options)

During engagements

Engaging with young people in culturally appropriate ways, and ensuring young people can have their voices heard alongside and in the context of their families and their communities

Ensuring diversity of students in engagement processes like pilots and focus groups

Connecting with seldom-heard and hard to reach students, including those who may already be disengaged from the education system
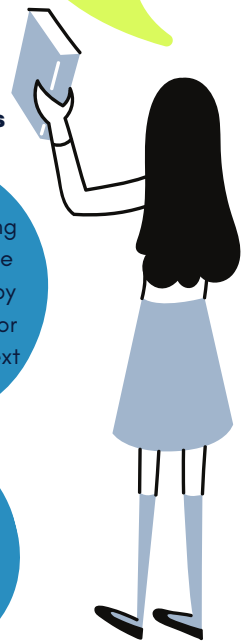
Respecting the time and effort it takes to engage and compensating young people for that

After engagements

Ensuring that young people's words are not manipulated by political interests or taken out of context

Protecting young people's identities when they speak up about issues that matter to them

Sources and further reading:

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