

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

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Summary of the Youth Consultation on the building blocks of the proposed OECD Youth Recommendation

20 September 2021

The consultation of 30 young people from 20 OECD Member countries, including representatives from civil society organisations representing young people, took place via Zoom from 12:00-13:30 CEST on 20 September 2021 as the second event of the OECD Youth Week. During this consultation, young people could propose ideas to address the challenges that their generation faces today and discuss how these suggestions could be integrated into the proposed OECD Youth Recommendation. Participants had access to the updated OECD Youth Action Plan prior to the consultation and were asked to reflect on whether there were major elements missing in the plan's building blocks and if so, what they were.

To gather young participants for the consultation, the Secretariat reached out to TUAC and Business at OECD for young representatives, members of Youthwise (the OECD's youth advisory board), and youth organisations and associations located in OECD Member countries. The Secretariat invited six representatives each from all 38 Member countries through the Directorate of Public Governance's Network of Youth Organisations based on a random sampling method. The Secretariat also sent individual invitations to non-profit organisations and youth associations that support young people in vulnerable circumstances – including homeless young people, young people experiencing mental health conditions, young people from migrant backgrounds and young people with disabilities – in recognition of the fact that young people in such circumstances are often under-represented in consultations of young people.

Opening remarks

Elsa Pilichowski, Director for Public Governance of the OECD, Stefano Scarpetta, Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs of the OECD, and Anna Jeppesen, a member of Youthwise, provided short interventions to open the consultation. Morgan Williams, a member of the Young Associate Programme at the OECD, was the master of ceremonies during the consultation.

In her remarks, Anna Jeppesen highlighted some of the points that were previously discussed in a meeting on 9 July 2021 between Youthwise and OECD experts on the updated Youth Action Plan. Many members of Youthwise commented positively in the meeting in July, welcoming the inclusion of the importance of networks, the emphasis on regional and local policy action, job security, mental health, engagement of young people in

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

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decision-making, diversity and intersectionality, and housing security. Comments from Youthwise on topics with areas for improvement included the following:

- Civic education: Given the necessity of strengthening the link between young people and public and political institutions, the promotion of teaching civic education in schools should be given more prominence.
- Guaranteed and quality employment: Young people finishing secondary school should have access to not just any job, but a quality job. Schools should be doing more to prepare students for the world of further education and work. Governments should foster an environment in which investments are funnelled into new sectors that can create quality jobs while addressing crises such as the climate crisis.
- Fostering economic independence: Interns and trainees should be adequately paid for the work that they do. Young people in unemployment should be provided with support, and measures should be in place that encourage training and return-to-work.
- Digital divide: Digitalisation can be a tool to overcome inequalities, for example, through allowing young people to live in less expensive rural areas while avoiding commutes. However, this potential can only be realised if there are investments in digital infrastructure, technology and digital skills.
- Climate and biodiversity: It is important to acknowledge the climate and biodiversity crises, and to recognise that they are interrelated but nonetheless distinct crises.
- Health care: In certain countries or situations, the existence of a health care system may not guarantee that it is accessible and affordable to all.
- Future challenges: There are other future challenges beyond those associated with the current COVID-19 pandemic, such as automation, which should be properly considered, in addition to the climate and biodiversity crises.
- Role of private sector: The private sector often appears to act with fewer constraints than governments, and so enhanced private sector collaboration is necessary.
- Generality and specificity: Some actions are too general for highly specific issues, and so the level on which action is best suited – whether local, national or international – should be kept in mind.
- Definition of a young person: There should be a standardisation of the definition of a young person, since different OECD documents currently refer to different age groups when talking about young people.
- Disaggregated data collection: Statistics, in particular regarding housing and mental health, should be more specific and should ideally be available as well broken down by gender.

Following the introductory remarks, split up into five breakout sessions, for more focussed discussions on education and skills; employment and jobs; social inclusion; youth trust, participation and representation in public life; and making governments fit to deliver to youth. An OECD expert moderated each of the breakout sessions, and a participant (not affiliated with the Secretariat) was designated as a rapporteur to summarise the main points of discussion during the plenary for the benefit of all participants.

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

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Education and Skills

Theme #1: Young people are not a homogeneous group

It must be clearly defined who falls under the “youth” category. Young people should be considered as equal citizens with complex needs, rather than as one singular entity. Policymakers must consider the nuances in different subgroups of the youth population. For example, the needs of younger individuals are very different from the needs of older individuals in the group. Similarly, in terms of education, some young people are studying and others are apprentices or starting their careers. Therefore, it should not simply be assumed that all young people are students.

Theme #2: Education is not a linear path and can take different forms

Rather than considering education as a linear trajectory (i.e. go straight to college and then find a job and become economically independent), it should be recognised that individuals may choose different paths. For example, entrepreneurship may not require the same sequence of skills and education acquired in a traditional university curriculum. Participants emphasised that young people should have room to make mistakes and should have access to guidance from mentors and teachers.

Relatedly, the participants stressed that education should not be treated only as a means to attaining a job. Education is a broad experience that includes activities inside and outside of a traditional classroom. Participants expressed that their university education left them with little time to explore alternative learning opportunities and participate in extra-curricular educational experiences. One participant suggested that learning opportunities that take place outside of the classroom, such as participating in a consultation, should count towards ECTS credits. Another participant highlighted micro-credentialing as a possibility to acquire skills and competencies. Participants stressed the importance of paid internship opportunities in order to ensure a smooth transition into the workplace.

Theme #3: Who is teaching desirable skills?

Participants discussed potential weaknesses of the education system, including teachers and their teaching methods. They noted that while young people are predisposed for digital skills which are among the desirable skills for the future, many teachers lacked such skills. They hope that policies could be recommended to ensure that teachers, like young people, continue to acquire skills and remain flexible.

Additionally, participants expressed concerns that the education curriculum in some countries pays little attention to teaching soft skills, such as learning and reflection competencies. Given the strict curriculum requirements, some participants fear that fewer young people are interested in choosing teaching as a career path. They noted that without enthusiastic, passionate teachers, students in the future will struggle; and wondered how young people could be incentivised to become teachers.

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

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Theme #4: Flexibility and adaptability during and beyond COVID-19

A takeaway from the COVID-19 pandemic is that it is difficult to develop an action plan when the future is so unpredictable. During the pandemic, many students moved quickly to digitalised education, but some lacked necessary resources. The participants questioned how these barriers could be addressed. They also suggested that policies should be emphasised that teach resilience and adaptability, and allow workers to gain further skills. Young people have many practical and tangible skills, but when a disruption occurs, it may become difficult for young people to remain flexible. For example, the pandemic changed existing jobs substantively, which will require re- and up-skilling of workers.

Theme #5: Sustainability and climate change

Participants stressed the intersectionality of education and other policy areas, in particular climate policy. As “green skills” gain prominence, education should equip students with these necessary skills.

Employment and Jobs

Theme #1: Decent employment

Several participants noted that young people’s employment opportunities are often precarious, and called upon policy makers to ensure decent employment, which some defined as permanent (or long-term) jobs which comply with minimum wage laws. This includes the need to regulate the gig economy and the banning of unpaid internships as well as internships in which young people are used as cheap labour rather than receiving proper training. Young people in general and particularly those with multiple disadvantages such as low skills and health problems should be adequately supported in order to find decent employment. Moreover, one discussant noted that young people should not be ‘confined’ to sectors such as hospitality but be able to enter all sectors; and another noted policies such as tax deductions on enrolment fees should incentivise young people to join or set up youth organisations as collective bargaining tends to work better than individual bargaining.

Theme #2: Professional and geographic mobility

A second topic area covered possibilities for young people to change professions and countries. The discussants cited programmes such as Erasmus+ as positive examples that allowed university students to study abroad. But they noted that it was harder to gain professional experience in a different country, and particularly so for young people with little financial support and those who pursue non-academic careers. At the same time, policies across different areas should help create enough decent employment that no one is forced to move simply for economic reasons who does not want to. Participants also noted that all young people should be able to re- and up-skill, including those who have already successfully entered the labour market. One discussant suggested that creating these possibilities and thereby making it easier for individuals to have a fulfilling job can also have a protective effect against health issues related to unemployment or unsatisfactory work.

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

Prepared for the future?



Theme #3: Corporate and individual taxes, subsidies and benefits

In different ways, the discussants raised topics related to the incentives the tax, subsidy and benefit system exerts on both employers and individuals. On the employer side, some participants noted the danger that incentives for firms to hire young employees in the form of tax rebates or subsidies can lead to a ‘churning’ of youngsters. They noted that some firms kept a young employee only as long as they could receive a subsidy, only to replace him or her by another different young employee. A related point in which one of the discussant saw a need for more regulation concerned start-up incubator programmes that imposed undue use and repayment requirements on the young entrepreneurs who receive their seed funding. On the employee side, participants noted the need to strengthen social protection for young workers and especially those employed in the gig economy and on temporary contracts. One also raised the issue of strong implicit tax rates on young people and student employment that can lead to an important loss of social benefits even when income levels are minor.

Theme #4: Perceptions of young people

On the one hand, discussants noted the lack of agency and power young people often feel at their workplace, which makes it difficult to stand up for themselves and make sure that their rights are respected. Finding a way in which young people are encouraged to speak up at work and in society can help address this issue. On the other hand, participants also stressed that society and employers often too easily dismiss young people’s rights and potential. Employers may sometimes see young workers mostly as cheap labour rather than ensuring good working conditions and development opportunities. Young people have a lot to offer, and by empowering them, these same young people can also contribute to helping others and solving problems. Relatedly, one of the participants stressed that it is important for society’s perception of NEETs to evolve from seeing inactivity as a choice that these young people actively made out of laziness, rather than as an outcome of various factors.

Social Inclusion

Theme #1: Mental health

There was an acknowledgement that while it was good to have mental health mentioned in the updated OECD Youth Action Plan, the existing policy proposals on the topic could be expanded in a number of ways. One participant mentioned that they would like to see further action in labour market policies, including employment services, to better support young people experiencing mental health issues. Another participant echoed the need for integrated approaches, applying the same argument to in the context of education, while also emphasising the need to both raise awareness and increase mental health literacy.

Theme #2: Social protection and employment services

A few participants spoke about the importance of providing access to unemployment insurance and social protection for young people under a certain age, as some countries have minimum age requirements for access.

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

Prepared for the future?



Another participant spoke about how all young people – and not just nationals - should be covered by social protection schemes. On employment services, one participant mentioned that services were not youth-friendly, and that many young people are also not aware of the services available to them. There was an animated discussion on “mutual obligation requirements.” One participant raised their preference for this phrase not to be included, explaining how it may just be punitive, with employment services often operated by for-profit actors pressuring young people into unstable and unfulfilling jobs. Another participant expressed their agreement to this opinion. A few mentions were made to how such requirements may be problematic during the COVID-19 crisis given the lack of employment opportunities available to many young people across the OECD.

Theme #3: Inequalities in opportunities

One participant raised the issue that unpaid internships and underpaid entry-level positions, which are only accessible or an option from young people from privileged backgrounds, yet are still an important step in facilitating entry into the labour market. Another participant spoke about the importance of addressing inequalities in education and employment, especially the rural-urban divide, and how this also relates to the need to ensure labour market contacts and network-building for young people. The participant also highlighted the need to conduct analysis on this topic, and more broadly on inequalities in opportunities.

Theme #4: Housing

Two participants spoke out in favour of a policy of developing new public housing. One participant cited the example of Vienna. This participant also suggested a need for policies such as dereliction taxes and vacant property taxes – and especially through local policies – to bring existing buildings back into use. This participant also spoke about their experience of not being able to afford their own housing due to prohibitive costs.

Theme #5: Data and language

Participants agreed on the need to collect more granular data on young people. One participant, speaking on race and ethnicity as a starting point, mentioned the need to complement the expansion of data on diversity with the implementation of tools and interventions that can help address inequalities (e.g. anonymous application panels) at the working level.

One participant also spoke specifically about language and terminology. This participant mentioned that the climate crisis is already happening now, and so should be talked about the present and not future tense. They also stated that we should be careful not to distinguish between migrants and refugees, and instead, that what mattered was that unmet needs were met, whether they related to security, economic needs, or housing needs.

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

Prepared for the future?



Youth trust, participation and representation in public life

Theme #1: Relationship between young people and public institutions

Participants discussed that governments should improve their communication with young people by employing language that is more accessible and using channels that young people use regularly. They also emphasised the importance of mutual respect between government bodies and young people and the need to raise awareness among public officials of the value added of engaging them. Promoting respect and curiosity to reach an understanding across generations was also raised as an important element. It was stressed that the media and government should talk with young people before talking about young people, to reflect their views, avoid negative public portrayals of young people and to build their trust. Finally, participants recognised that public institutions often do not have the necessary resources to consult and work with young people. To be inclusive, public consultations should be organised in a flexible way to meet the needs of young people (e.g. organising them outside of education or work hours). Governments should also empower youth organisations to act as “bridges” between government and young people, as well as increase their capacity to reach wider demographics, including minority groups.

Theme #2: Youth participation in elections and representation in public institutions

One of the most important barriers for young people to participate in elections, according to participants, is lack of information, civic knowledge and understanding of “how politics works” to cast an informed vote. The role that civic and citizenship education curricula, both in school and outside of school, can play in addressing this barrier was stressed. Such curricula should explain why it is important to participate in public and political life, and not only how, avoiding to overwhelm young people with large amounts of technical information. Platforms such as the Electoral Compass in Canada were mentioned as useful tools to share and disseminate information during electoral cycles. Some participants mentioned that while compulsory voting increased youth participation, these votes were sometimes uninformed and did not necessarily represent genuine civic engagement.

When it comes to young people running for public office, participants highlighted the difficulty of balancing life stage-specific activities, including studies and entering the labour market, with time-consuming campaigning work such as door knocking. Examples of “youth quotas” were shared as ways of promoting youth representation in parliament through voluntary quota by parties, and in the boards of government-owned enterprises through legally mandated quotas. Such measures enable generational perspectives to be integrated across policy areas. Finally, governments should engage with non-organised young people and promote their participation and representation in public life to reduce the need to exclusively rely activism to make their voices heard.

Theme #3: Integrating youth voices in policymaking on issues that matter to them

Participants discussed the intergenerational contrast on how much priority is given to certain challenges, including gender equality, climate change and environmental concerns, across generations, and its implications on the

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

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prioritisation of policy challenges at the government level given the over-representation of certain age groups. There is a need, it was agreed, for more intergenerational dialogue on issues such as environmental and economic concerns and the importance for such dialogue to effectively feed into policymaking processes, rather than remaining symbolic. Governments should make specific efforts to engage young people that do not take part in youth organisations and youth bodies, as they may suffer disproportionately from the impact of climate change and inequality. While youth organisations can be helpful in reaching out to marginalised young people, participants stressed the need to ensure they have the necessary resources for doing so. Participants stressed the value of independent youth advisory bodies whose agenda is not set by the government and highlighted their success in engaging with diverse demographics.

Making Government Fit to Deliver for Youth

Theme #1: Youth-focused public services

The majority of participants mentioned the need to improve public communication and civic education so that all groups of young people in society can be informed about and access public services. Participants stressed that a lack of youth participation in the design and delivery of public services was not always indicative of a lack of interest and instead could be indicative of a lack of access. The need for governments to invest in channels and tools that aim to collect youth voices was highlighted. One participant shared an example of using games to collect the opinions of young people. Participants also emphasised the importance for governments to use accessible language in their communication with young people.

Theme #2: Digitalising public services

Digitalising access to services was highlighted as an important way to reach young people. However, a number of participants emphasised the need to close the digital gap between generations as well as among young people. For instance, participants shared examples of governments providing hardware to access digital services to families experiencing poverty. It was also stressed that government should ensure internet connectivity for all. Finally, participants emphasised the role of government in ensuring the safety of young people navigating online while reinforcing efforts to digitalise their access to services.

Theme #3: Role of youth associations

Governments should incorporate, across all levels, youth councils, regular consultations of youth associations, and regular consultations of harder-to-reach young people in the design and delivery of policies and services. A number of participants pointed to the solidarity displayed by youth associations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as evidence that youth associations should be leveraged as institutional partners in the design and delivery of public services.

OECD YOUTH WEEK 2021

Prepared for the future?



Theme #4: Youth are not a homogenous group

Youth are not a homogenous group. Participants called on governments to consider different identity factors across youth populations (such as young people with disabilities or those experiencing poverty) when designing and delivering public services and measures to promote young people access to them.

Theme #5: Climate Change

Participants expressed concern that governments are deferring action on climate change to both the youngest and future generations and stressed the negative impact this will have on them. Participants called for incentives and accountability measures for governments to act presently on climate change.

Closing

Once the breakout sessions were finished, the five rapporteurs summarised the discussions for the benefit of all participants in the plenary session. Before the end of the meeting, the participants were asked to share their main takeaway from the meeting via Slido, an interaction app for virtual meetings. These takeaways echoed many of the themes that were raised during the breakout sessions. Some concerned labour market opportunities and social protection for young people. Others echoed calls to recognise the heterogeneity of young people through data collection and policy action. Participants welcomed the opportunity to take part in this exercise, and expressed interest in future opportunities to share their perspectives on the work of the OECD on youth.