

Generation D-Liberation

Assembly Toolkit

This is a toolkit to help you discuss your ideas for the future of Europe.

It can be used by classes, in large groups of up to 40 people, or just by a few students who want to discuss together. We've tried to make it as flexible and adaptable as possible.

Why do this?

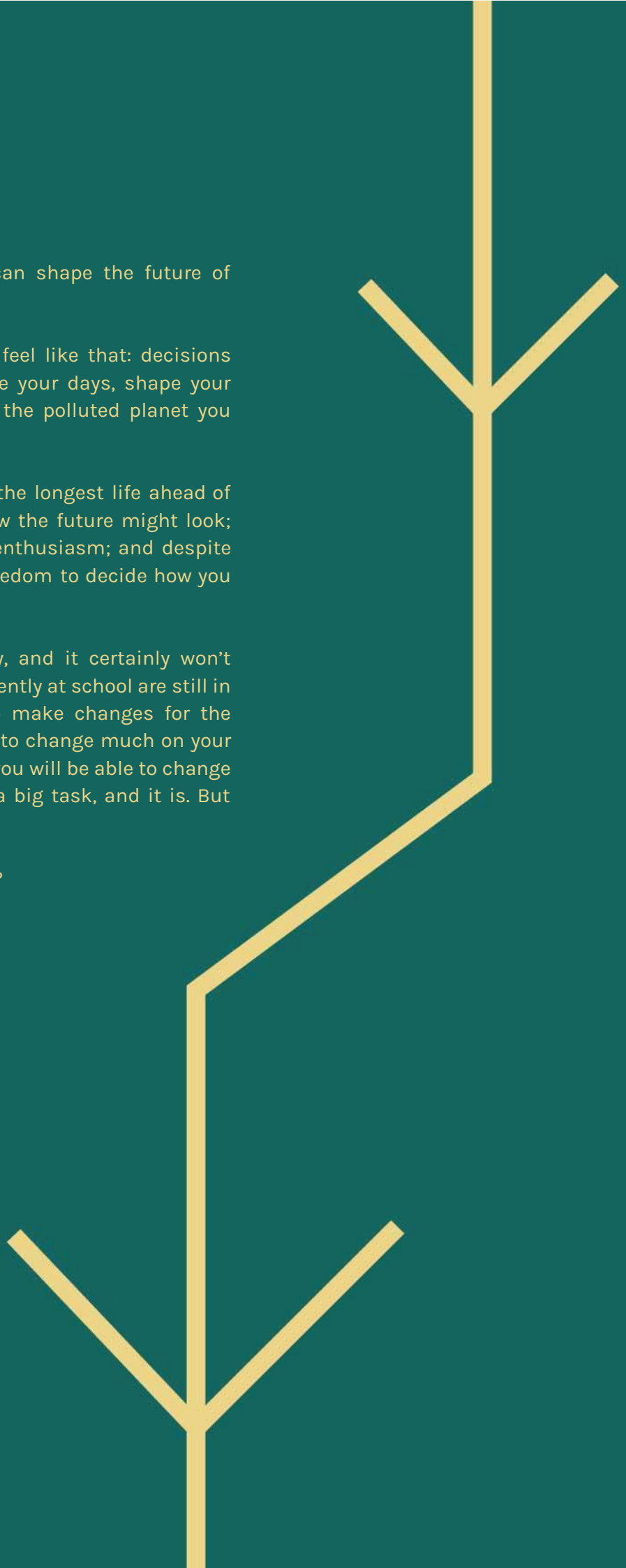
Secondary school students can shape the future of Europe!

For sure it does not always feel like that: decisions taken by others largely shape your days, shape your education, and have shaped the polluted planet you inherit.

But think about it: you have the longest life ahead of you and see most clearly how the future might look; you have energy, ideas and enthusiasm; and despite everything you have some freedom to decide how you spend your lives.

It might not happen quickly, and it certainly won't happen easily, but people currently at school are still in the best starting position to make changes for the better. You might not be able to change much on your own, but by working together you will be able to change everything. It can seem like a big task, and it is. But you are not alone.

So, what are you going to change?



How this works

Running an assembly is easy if you take the time to clarify what you want to discuss, how you will discuss it, and what outcomes from the discussion you want.

Think of all the participants in the assembly as a team: everyone is working together to achieve the common goal of three ideas for improving the future of Europe.

We suggest the following steps for your assembly:

Preparation phase:

Gather together the people who want to take part in the assembly. What topic do you want to talk about? Do you all want to discuss the same thing, or are some of you interested in climate change, others interested in ensuring decent jobs, and others in something else? Each assembly should be on one topic: so either divide the group, or plan to have one assembly on one topic and one on another that everyone takes part in.

Plan a time, date and place for the assembly: it could be in a classroom, in a sports hall, online via video-conferencing or in the public square - anywhere that is sufficiently calm to discuss. At least an hour is required, probably more. Try to be clear about the time you want the assembly to last: knowing when it will end helps keep the discussion focused, and ensures the moderator can move the discussion from ideas to solutions!

Read the resource sheet on the topic that we have prepared in advance of the assembly.

Ahead of taking part in the Assembly, we would like to ask each participant to tell us why they are taking part, and what their experience of Europe has been. We will select some of the stories you would like to publish and share them via the Humans in the EU project. [Please submit your story here at the start of the Assembly.](#)

Running the assembly

- Check if everyone who wants to take part is present, and give a few minutes for people to arrive.
- See how big the group is: if you are more than 12 people, you may want to split into smaller groups of 5 or 6 to hold the discussion.
- In each group, nominate a moderator and a notetaker. These two roles are important to ensure that the assembly runs smoothly.

Whilst these two people should stay the same throughout the discussion, or change half way through for example, everyone else will alternate between being an active speaker and an active listener - you can also read about these behaviours below.

- Invite everyone to take 5 minutes to write a couple of sentences about how they see the future of Europe related to the topic you are talking about, and why they care about this topic enough to come to join the assembly.
- Recap the resource sheet and choose an exercise or two to think about together.
- Plan your time: roughly half the time should be used for exploring the topic, and half the time focused on coming up with ideas that can be solutions.

Don't forget that good ideas for solutions can pop up at any time - perhaps it is the very first thing someone said at the beginning of the conversation! - this is why active listening and the role of the note-taker is so important!

Ensure that everyone has a chance to express themselves, and that no one is dominating the conversation.

- Once you have spent half the assembly exploring the topic, the moderator should move the discussion towards finding solutions.

These could be really big and difficult changes you think are necessary, or really small changes you think could make a big difference. For example, you might think that every student at school should be taught the importance of recycling (a small change that could perhaps make a big difference to carbon emissions), or that Europe should move from being a representative democracy with parliaments to making decisions through e-democracy and holding referenda (a big change, that you might think will make Europe more democratic). These ideas can be local, regional, national or Europe-wide.

Think about how different ideas could be combined. Choose 3 from everything you have come up with. If possible, agree by consensus, finding ideas that compliment each other and cover different aspects of the topic. If you can't agree by consensus, hold a simple vote. If you can't choose between some ideas, it is fine to send us up to 5 ideas.

Once the assembly has finished, think about communicating your results.

- i) write down your top ideas on paper, and upload them to the [website](#)
 - ii) does one or two of you want to talk about the discussion and ideas you had in a short video? You could film this and send it to us or post over social media, including the tags @humansintheeu - on Facebook and Instagram - as well as @obessu - on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. You can also send them via the contact form [here](#)
- i) share the short sentences of each participant that you wrote at the beginning of the assembly, perhaps with a portrait photo of each participant who wants to and send them [here](#).

Once you send your ideas, we will work to:

- a) Send you more resources for reading about the topic
- b) Send you ideas coming from other groups of students around Europe
- c) We will set up online assemblies between your group and other groups of students discussing similar ideas

Roles in the assembly

It can be useful to think about different roles each person plays. Like on any team, each person has an equally important role to play.

At the beginning of the assembly you should ensure two key roles are fulfilled:

Moderator: is responsible for ensuring each person who wants to speak has an opportunity, that the discussion stays focussed on the topic, and that the discussion moves from exploring an issue to coming up with ideas for solutions. We have prepared a specific guidance sheet for the moderator.

Notetaker: this role is important to keep track of what has been said, and particularly useful when trying to come up with conclusions. This role can be played by one person or more, and could rotate through the discussion.

During the assembly, at different times each participant will play the following roles:

Speaker: when you speak try to continue from where the last speaker stopped, so that the conversation moves forward. Share your thoughts honestly and with courage, and don't be afraid to say you are unsure or you don't know - thinking about the future is hard and no one knows exactly what to do or what will happen!

Listener: listening to the person speaking is very important. You may write down what the person is saying, and even help them to fully explain what it is they want to say. When it comes to the end of the discussion, your memory of what you heard and found interesting is going to be crucial for coming up with the ideas you want to propose as a group.

Guardian: the assemblies should take place in a respectful, collaborative way in which each person feels like they can express themselves. Guardians of the assemblies ensure that these principles are respected, and speak up to the group if they feel not everyone is getting an equal chance to speak, or if the discussion is not respectful.

What is going to happen to your ideas?

When you send us your ideas, we will collect them and match them with ideas from other students in other European countries. Then we will send back to you a list of all the ideas we've so far, and if you want you can discuss again to improve the ideas even further, we will create opportunities to discuss with students from other countries online.

This project is running in France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Romania and Hungary, although we encourage students in other countries to organise their own assemblies and get involved.

We plan a conference in France in the Spring of 2022 with some students from all these countries, to present the ideas to the French Presidency of the European Union. You could be invited!

The project is organised by several NGOs from across Europe, which you can read about on the project website [here](#). It is also connected to a large civil society coalition called Citizens Take Over Europe, you can read about [here](#).

We want to encourage and empower you to organise and campaign for your ideas in your home towns, but also across borders in Europe. So we will be in contact with you following your assembly with suggestions, ideas, resources and opportunities!

How would you change Europe to make it better in the future?

Write your top three ideas as a sentence here

1.

2.

3.

Send your ideas via:


1. Tagging @humansintheeu & @citizenstakeover on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and use #GenerationDLiberation #generationdliberation so we can repost them!
2. Send us your ideas back [here](#).

Acting as the moderator of an assembly – a help sheet

The moderator has a crucial role in ensuring that an assembly works well: your job is to help the team have a good conversation in which everyone feels like they can contribute and be heard and which moves from a general exploration of the topic to some practical ideas for what could make the situation better.

Here are some tips which could be helpful:

- You might notice that some members of the assembly are less confident than others. Without forcing anyone to speak, it can help to invite the less confident members to speak early on in the conversation, to encourage others to do so. More suggestions for dealing with people who speak a bit too much are at the end of this sheet.
- Ask people to indicate to you when they want to speak by for example raising their hand. You will keep a list of the people who show they would like to speak in the order they asked to. This should allow you to give priority to people who haven't spoken yet – if you see that the next person to speak is someone who has already spoken a lot, but just after is someone else who hasn't spoken at all, you can say 'Jemima has already spoken three times, but we haven't heard Paul yet, so let's take Paul then Jemima'
- Some people like to listen for a long while to others before they make any contribution. They might listen all the way through and only have something to say right at the end – this is fine, it might be a very good idea! So don't assume that just because someone hasn't wanted to speak until now, they don't want to, and make sure to check with those people towards the end of the conversation. You could even say something like 'I noticed you have been listening very carefully all the way through, what do you think are the most interesting ideas we've come up with together?'

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- If the conversation stops and no one knows what to do, your job can be to make a recap of what has been discussed so far, or ask someone else like the notetaker to do so. Then try to frame a question based on what has been discussed. You might say 'ok, we've explored the issue quite a lot from this angle (eg. The need to cut climate emissions), but what about this other dimension (eg. People might lose their jobs, or let's think about people in developing countries which did not cause climate change)
 - At some point the group needs to move from exploring the issue in general to thinking about practical ideas. This can be hard – it is much easier to share general thoughts than to think what ought to be done. So you might need to move the conversation on firmly by saying 'ok, we've shared a lot of opinions and ideas about our topic now, but let's try to come up with some ideas about what can be done'. You might need to repeat this several times to steer the conversation towards solutions.
 - You also have the right to speak and express your opinions in the assembly. It can help to make it clear when you do this, and say explicitly 'I'm going to stop being the moderator for a moment and take my turn to speak'

What to do about people who talk too much?

In an assembly, everyone should have the opportunity to speak, but it often happens that one or two people speak a lot more than everyone else. Here are some tips to try to ensure a more equal discussion:

- If some people tend to speak more than others, acknowledge what they are saying and make sure they feel heard, for example through repeating the key point of their discourse. Use this summary as an occasion to give the floor to those who haven't spoken yet, by:
 - a) inviting them to comment on what "talkative person" just shared;
 - b) reminding those who haven't spoken yet that you would love to hear from them and get other opinions in the discussion.
- Sometimes it might be helpful to name the dynamic, by saying "I'm noticing that there are only some people talking/only the same people talking". This would help the group become aware of their communication pattern, and help talkative people to be mindful of others and quiet people to take the courage to speak."

A draft timing for the assembly

If you have 1 hour, here is a time plan you could use (to adapt according to how much time you have). It is often useful to remind everyone where you are on the agenda and how long you have been discussing each point, saying for example 'we've been talking about topics for around 10 minutes now, let's give ourselves 5 minutes more then move on to our ideas for solutions!'

1. Introduction of the assembly and Generation d-Liberation/Conference on the Future of Europe - 5 mins
2. Rules and roles setting - 5 mins
3. Presentation of the topic (using the resources from the resource sheet) - 5 mins
4. Discussing one exercise on the resource sheet in the big group or in smaller groups if you have more than 15 participants - 15 mins
5. What solutions do we have? Coming up with ideas in the big group or in smaller groups and presentation of those ideas - 20 mins
6. Deciding on three top solutions using a voting method (multivoting, majority vote, consensus, etc.) - 5 mins
7. Wrapping up - 5 mins

Resource Sheet - Addressing Climate Change

The planet is heating up, and that is causing extreme weather events, the melting of the ice-caps and is causing species of animals to go extinct. It even threatens continued human life on earth.

The Paris agreement made in December 2015 by 190 countries from all over the world aims to limit global warming below 2°C, but there are few binding measures countries are obliged to follow, and progress towards reducing emissions has been slower than the heating up of the planet.

Plenty of young people and others have been calling for the European Union to do more to address this global problem.

So what is it currently doing?

European Green Deal

The EU plans to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. That means that the European Union would not emit more greenhouse gasses (the kind that cause the planet to heat) than it absorbs. It aims to reduce its greenhouse gas emission by 55% lower than the 1990 levels by 2030.


It plans to do this by a combination of:

- An emissions trading scheme: This means that industries that produce a lot of CO₂ emissions have to buy the right to make these emissions by buying credits. Industries have a strong incentive to avoid emissions as much as possible, if the credits are expensive enough. If they 'save' emissions, they can sell unused credits to another industry or factory. This scheme has been applied to factories, power stations, and other highly polluting industries since 2005. Now it is being extended to aviation, the building industry, road transport and maritime transport.
- Requiring EU member states to come up with their own plans to reduce emissions
- Protecting and expanding Europe's forests and protecting biodiversity
- A Climate Social Fund: This will provide money to support people who might lose their jobs as the economy is made more green, and will provide money for countries to invest.
- A Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism: This means that goods produced in countries outside of the EU (for example, China or the US) will be taxed when they are imported into the EU if they have created a lot of emissions.

Points of View

If it is probably fair to say that the EU is currently more ambitious in addressing climate change than any other part of the world, its plans are criticized for many reasons:

- Some critics say that the EU countries have historically created more carbon emissions than anywhere else and have become rich compared with most other countries as a result. Perhaps the EU could go faster in cutting emissions to account for its historical role

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- Other critics say that the target of carbon neutrality by 2050 is misleading: the EU does not plan to reduce its emissions by so much, but rather to use technology to absorb emissions. This technology is unproven, and may require large amounts of land.
 - Some people say the EU has nice ambitions, but when you look at what it actually does it is a different story. A good example could be the Common Agricultural Fund, which gives money to farmers around the EU and accounts for nearly 40% of the EU's budget. Nearly 80% of this money currently goes to very large farms, whereas more sustainable farming is usually done on smaller scales. Attempts to reform the Common Agricultural Fund to limit subsidies to large-scale livestock farms or factory farms, or to introduce conditionality so that farmers are only paid subsidies if they manage to reduce emissions have largely failed.
 - Many people fear that the Green Deal will increase economic inequalities: with people already more at risk of poverty because of lower education levels, being older, those people unable to afford newer cars that have less emissions, or people working in highly polluting industries will lose out with the changes.

In order to address some of these fears, the EU is creating a 'Climate Social Fund' with money generated by the carbon trading scheme. The idea is this fund will provide support to vulnerable people, as well as provide funds for investment by member states in roads, energy efficient buildings and low emission busses and trains. Many people doubt this social fund will be able to address all the problems in a fair way.

Exercises (choose any to discuss in your group)

- A) Imagine you have spent years working as a coal miner, and your adult son does not have a job: where you live there just aren't many other jobs than the coal mine. You understand that climate change is an important issue and that coal is highly polluting, so you know things have to change but you do not want to lose your job and you would like your son to have a job. What would your priorities be for the future of Europe? Think about topics like training schemes for people who move from one job to another, creating new jobs, or even giving money to people who might lose their jobs in order for the economy to become more green.
- B) Imagine you will be 16 years old in the year 2050: when you learn about what people did in the year 2021 to deal with climate change, what would you want it to say?
- C) Imagine you live in a part of the world where there is not enough water, and where it is difficult to make crops grow. What would you think the EU should do to help you?
- D) Do you think that a solution to the climate crisis could be just to reduce the amount we each consume? Eat less meat and only fruit and vegetables grown nearby in season, travel less, buy less things? How would this work to ensure everybody does it?

Resource Sheet - The Right to Quality Education

Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union says that everyone should have access to education and vocational training, that everyone has a right to free compulsory education, and that schools can be founded in accordance with democratic principles to ensure that parents can ensure the teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to education: UNESCO estimates over 85 per cent of all students around the world have been affected by school closures. In the EU, many students had to follow classes online, in a context where many students and teachers were badly equipped and trained for this, and where few clear guidelines and standards were developed, leading to very unequal access to quality education and uncertainty about the value of evaluations conducted online. Concerns have been raised about the reliance of schools on online tools developed by private companies. Both the mental and material health of students has been affected, highly unequally, with those relying on schools to provide food and an alternative to difficult home circumstances suffering most.

If the Covid-19 pandemic circumstances were exceptional, the experience has revealed underlying problems in the education system in Europe. The pandemic is not over, and it is not clear how it will end, and further ecological and public health emergencies may happen in the future.

The European Education Area

The European Union only has limited competences over education, which is largely the responsibility of national governments. Still, the European Union has always tried to promote coordination and learning between countries to improve education and training, often by promoting common standards.

Since 2017, the European Union has committed itself towards building a 'European Education Area' which should achieve 6 priorities:

- Quality: improve basic skills, entrepreneurship, creativity and civic engagement. Promote international exchange, language learning, and a European perspective, and ensure schools are safe, inclusive and free of disinformation
- Inclusive: challenging gender stereotypes, promoting gender equality, and promote social mobility (ie. whatever your background, you can be successful)
- Green and Digital: investing in green education, including learning about sustainability in natural and human sciences, and ensuring individuals have digital skills
- Improve teacher training and recruit more and better teachers
- Promote cooperation between European Universities and lifelong learning
- Address global challenges: promoting international cooperation between schools and universities, and encouraging reform of education systems in the Western Balkans and South Mediterranean

To evaluate the effectiveness of the European Union's Education policy, the Commission plans to publish a report in 2022 and 2025

Points of View

Education is the responsibility of the member states of the European Union; still, many people feel that that European Union did not use the influence it has over the coordination and quality of education effectively during the Covid-19 crisis by for example establishing common standards for online learning, or by targeting resources towards students most at risk of losing access to quality education. Slow progress means many of the details of the European Education Area are still to be worked out, most crucially how the Commission will coordinate between national governments.

Some aspects of the objectives of the European Education Area are controversial with national governments. Disagreements between the EU and national governments have emerged when it comes to the teaching of national history for example, and the inclusion of points of view from other European countries in history textbooks, and also regarding gender, with some governments saying schools should promote a 'traditional family' model, or even, in the case of Hungary, that in order to protect young people there should be no education about LGBTQ rights. These disagreements go beyond the European Education Area and its objectives, and call into question some of the fundamental values of the European Union as such.

Some students and civil society groups have said that the European Education Area does not focus on all the areas that need attention, notably topics like mental health of students, civic education, and student participation in decision-making in schools and in education policy-making are all areas that could need more prioritisation. The European Union also has little to say on the inclusion of refugees in schools and lifelong learning.

Exercises

- A. Do you think all students in Europe should learn the same thing at school? Or it should be different by country, or by region? Why?
- B. Imagine you are a secondary school student called 'Rob' and you find it very difficult to do your homework at home because the house is very small, your younger brothers and sisters make too much noise and your parents are too busy working to help you. You used to go to the local library to do your homework, but it hasn't been open since the Covid-19 pandemic, and you don't think it will ever open again. Some of your friends have it much easier: they have bigger houses, no siblings, and a parent helps them understand their homework. What can be done to ensure you have a fair chance at getting a good education?
- C. Imagine you are just about to finish secondary school in your small town in the countryside. Your teachers tell you you are clever and should go to a university in a big city. But you feel unprepared, and intimidated by the idea of moving far away, so you are thinking of maybe trying to find a job closer to home. What could be done so that you feel you have the same opportunity to go to university as other people coming from the city?
- D. Have you ever been on a school trip to another country, or part of an exchange with students from another country? Do you think online exchanges with students in other countries could be a good idea? How could online and offline exchanges be best combined?

Resource Sheet - Jobs for Young people

According to the EU's statistics, nearly 3 million young people under the age of 25 who could work are currently unemployed in the European Union, which is about 17% of this age group. These statistics only count people who have actively been looking for work in the last four weeks, and not all of those who might have given up looking – so they are almost certainly a big underestimate. This is a much higher rate of unemployment than for other age groups, and the last big economic crisis of 2009 showed that economic crises hit younger people harder than other age groups and they are more likely to lose their jobs, or not be able to find a job.

The European Union was slow to take initiatives to address youth unemployment in the financial crisis beginning in 2009, and youth unemployment in some countries like Spain and Greece reached well over 50% by 2013, and in the EU as a whole the rate got nearly to 25%.

The EU was quicker to act when the covid-19 pandemic hit, by renewing and extending the policy measures that were created during in 2013. Still, in 2021, there were nearly 14 million people aged 20-34 who were not in employment, education or training (so called 'NEET's).

European Youth Guarantee

In 2013 the EU introduced a European Youth Guarantee to address high youth unemployment. This Youth Guarantee was intended to guarantee that any young person in the EU under the age of 25 would receive within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education:

- A good quality work offer that matches their skills and experience
- A chance to continue their studies
- An apprenticeship or professional traineeship

The European Union made a budget of 6.4 billion euros from 2014-2016 as part of the 'Youth Employment Initiative' and then a further 2.4 billion euros from 2017-2020 available to countries in the EU that would apply for funds, on submission of a plan to ensure the youth guarantee in the country.

According to the European Commission's own review in 2016, 14 million young people had entered the scheme, and 9 million took up an offer of employment or training or education. By 2020, the Commission claims there were 1.7 million fewer unemployed young people, and that 24 million young people registered in youth guarantee schemes had taken up an offer.

However, the European Court of Auditors found in 2017 that whilst some progress had been made in implementing the Youth Guarantee, it fell well short of providing a good offer to all NEETs within 4 months, and that the Youth Employment Initiative budget had played almost no role in achieving these objectives.

The court of Auditors, and organisations such as the European Youth Forum, recommended that the Youth Guarantee should be more targeted to labour market gaps, and have a much greater outreach to different young people outside of employment, education or training, appreciating that these young people are very different one from another and not a homogenous group.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in July 2020 the European Commission proposed the reinforcement of the Youth Job Guarantee, and this was adopted by the European Council in November 2020. The major changes addressed some of the critiques of the earlier Job Guarantee:

- to extend the age group that can benefit from the guarantee to 30 years old
- to give more personalized guidance to young people matching their individual needs
- to ensure digital skills of young people and take account of the green and digital transitions of our societies.

Furthermore, the new budget of the EU from 2021 promises to provide more substantial funding for the implementation of the youth guarantee, if member states prioritise this when they apply for funding from European programs such as the European Social Fund Plus and the Recovery Fund.

Points of View

Economies are complicated and difficult to analyse because many factors affect things like how many jobs are available and how well those jobs are paid. So making an evaluation of the contribution of the EU Youth Guarantee to youth employment is difficult. Some people say that the reduced levels of youth unemployment that were achieved before the pandemic arrived were due to economic changes that the youth guarantee had nothing to do with. Other people argue that even if not all improvements in the situation of young people can be attributed to the youth guarantee, those young people who benefitted from it will have improved their skills, education and chances of securing a secure job. Moreover, defenders of the youth guarantee argue that it is one of the most ambitious schemes for youth employment in the world, and one of the most innovative in the way it combines support for job seekers with training, advice and other forms of support.

More generally, the youth guarantee has been criticized for the following reasons:

- Youth unemployment is due to structural factors in the European economy, which depends on poorly paid and easily replaced young workers. Furthermore, the youth guarantee was first adopted in a context of austerity policies across Europe which saw massive cut-backs in state spending. The youth guarantee itself does nothing to address these larger characteristics of the European economy in general.
- the youth guarantee scheme does not pay sufficient attention to the quality of the jobs young people are offered, in terms of pay, and in terms of rights and wellbeing at work, and it does nothing to empower young people to claim higher wages or more rights and health and safety protections at work
- the youth guarantee left too much scope to member states to decide how to try to achieve its objectives. It may be that with the new generation of the program, the EU will have a greater say in how they are run through the recovery program.

Exercises (choose any to discuss in your group)

- A) Despite lots of people not finding a job in Europe, there are shortages of people in many occupations. According to the European Union's survey of employers, these include software developers, engineers, and health-care professionals, but also carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers, cooks and heavy truck drivers. All of these jobs require specific kinds of skills which not enough people have. What can be done to ensure that young people want to learn these skills and do these jobs?
- B) Imagine you are a young woman who left school four years ago. You worked briefly in a hairdressing salon, and then worked as a receptionist at a garage, but for the past year you haven't managed to find work. Your boyfriend is in a similar situation: he has had a few jobs here and there, he is currently unemployed but looking all the time for work. You've decided you would like to have a child together: you've been planning it for years, and although you'd prefer to do it at a moment when both of you are earning money, you decide you don't want to wait forever – who knows when that will be? You are worried that with a baby, you (the woman) will be stuck at home and never have a job, whilst your boyfriend will probably manage to find something. What would help you to feel that you also have the right to work?

C) Imagine you are a young person living in the outskirts of a big city. You don't have the resources or the grades to go to university, but you would like to earn enough money to move out of your parent's house, and pay to go to a cooking school during the day. The only job opportunity you can find is to work as a delivery rider for a platform app – it is exhausting work, not very well paid and you haven't managed to take any holiday all year, but you manage to earn enough to rent a small apartment and go to cooking school. For such a person, do you think the government should do more (for example, paying for the person to be at cooking school?), or do you think this is a fair situation: you work hard, but you get to follow your passion for cooking? Do you think all young people who want to be cooks are in the same situation?

D) One radical idea to address unemployment has been to introduce a guaranteed income for everyone (this is called 'universal basic income'). Whether you work or not, you would receive enough money to ensure you do not live in poverty. This could mean that some people would choose to work less, and that could leave opportunities for other people to work. Because people would not be forced to accept a job, that could mean that work offers would need to be of a high quality, and sufficiently interesting and well paid for people to accept. What do you think of this idea?

E) Employers often complain that it is difficult to find young people with all the skills required for work. Do you think this suggests that schools are not adequately preparing people for work? Or do you think it should be the responsibility of employers to train staff? What could improve this situation?

Resource Sheet - Mental Health in Europe

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that public health has been at the centre of everyone's thoughts and discussions: when will the pandemic be over? Will we have to go back into lockdown? When will I be vaccinated? Are the hospitals able to manage with the number of ill people? All of these questions and many more are discussed on TV news, in social media, and in our everyday discussions in the classroom, at work or at home. These questions are difficult because no one knows the answers with certainty.

Already before the pandemic, around one in every 6 people in European Union countries had a mental health issue, and mental health was identified as the fastest growing public health problem. The World Health Organisation defines mental health as 'a state of well being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'. It is important to notice that mental health is more than just the absence of disorders or disability, it is a positive set of capabilities.

The pandemic has made the mental health situation in Europe considerably worse: studies show that the number of people suffering with mental health problems has increased substantially, particularly amongst young people, and in particular for women (see the box 'Studies to go deeper' for examples of surveys conducted on this topic).

People who were already being treated for mental health had difficulty accessing their treatment, and suffered from lack of face to face contact. Mental health problems have particularly affected people who were already disadvantaged: people with small financial resources, in poor quality housing, or living in isolated places. The mental health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been called the 'silent' pandemic.

Many specialists fear that the mental health impacts of the pandemic will last much longer than the pandemic itself, and the impact the pandemic has had on children and their mental health is still poorly understood.

Studies to go deeper

OBESSU conducted a study of secondary school students across Europe to understand how the pandemic was affecting them. The report includes examples, a specific section on wellbeing and recommendations:

[‘Through School Students’ eyes: impacts and challenges of Covid-19 on education systems in Europe’](#)

World happiness report

International Labour Organisation Global Report on [‘Youth and Covid 19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and well being’](#) argues that the impact of the pandemic on 18-29 year olds has been systematic, deep and disproportionate.

Eurofound report on [Living Working and Covid 19: Mental Health and Trust Decline Across EU as pandemic enters another year.](#)

Mental Health as a Fundamental Human right

Article 25 of the UN charter of human rights says: *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

And article 35 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union says: *Everyone has the right of access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment under the conditions established by national laws and practices. A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all the Union's policies and activities*

In practice, according to the UN Special rapporteur on mental health, nowhere in the world is mental health given the same priority and level of resources as physical health. Health policy is the responsibility of each EU member state individually, but the pressures of the pandemic and the need for countries to collaborate to deal with a cross-border problem have led to increasing talk of an EU Health Union.

The European Parliament and European Commission

In 2020 the European Parliament made a resolution affirming that both mental and physical health a fundamental rights, and calling for an EU action plan 2021-2027 on mental health.

Members of the European Parliament are calling for a European Year of Mental Health

EU4Health Program

During the pandemic the European Commission announced the Next Generation EU recovery instrument – a budget to help Europe recover from the pandemic. As part of it, the Commission proposed the EU4Health Program to boost the EU's capacity to deal with cross-border health threats and improve the health systems in each country. The commission proposed a budget of 10.4 billion euros, but the European Council (representing the member states of the EU), suggested allocating the program with 1.7 billion. The Parliament and the European Council then entered negotiations, and agreed a budget of 5.1 billion.

In March 2021 the regulation was published to establish the EU4Health Program, and it contains specific objectives to promote actions which improve mental health. The program has many other objectives, including supporting disease prevention, improving patients' rights, patient safety, cross-border healthcare, improving management of crises, promoting the digital transformation of health services, and supporting member states to improve their health systems.

Points of View

Whilst few politicians or specialists deny that mental health is a serious problem, there are some differences of opinion about how much the European Union itself should do about it. The cuts in the budget of the EU4Health Program reflect the opinion of some member states that the EU should concentrate resources on some specific areas: for example, in funding research projects or dealing with cross-border supply issues such as ensuring that medicines or masks can travel across the EU. They think the EU should concentrate on these things, and leave mental health to member states to deal with individually.

Other people think that the European Union should prioritise mental health because mental health does not always get the priority that it should from member states. The EU could help to deal with unequal access to mental health services across Europe. Mental health has connections with the EU Green Deal (in terms of securing a stable environment and green spaces for example), and the EU digital strategy (both in the provision of digital health services, and in considering the mental health impacts of increasing online use), so it could be argued that it is very coherent for the EU to be concerned with mental health.

Exercises

- a) Did your school provide any help for students experiencing mental health difficulties during the pandemic? Are there good examples that could be shared across Europe so all schools can implement them?
- b) Imagine you are a secondary school student and one of your parents has a mental health problem – after losing his job during the pandemic, your father is always depressed. It is making you feel sad as well, and even though you would like to help your dad, you don't like spending time at home, so you spend as much time as you can at friends' houses or in the library. What kind of services could help you and your dad?
- c) Do you think that digital technologies, like video calls, social media and gaming, have disadvantages for mental health? Does this worry you, and do you try to limit the amount you use these technologies? Or do you find these technologies are actually good for your mental health? Do you think more should be taught in schools about mental health and online behaviours?

Resource Sheet - Minority rights and Migrant rights

Over the past decade the rights of different groups of people in the European Union have become contested. The rights of migrants and refugees, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer people (LGBT+), women, national minorities, people of Roma ethnicity, people of colour and people with disabilities have all in different ways been at the centre of debates about what rights are guaranteed for everyone in, or arriving in, the European Union.

As this list shows, 'minority rights' can concern different groups of people, and many people may be part of more than one group and so at risk of more than one kind of disadvantage (for example, a woman who has a disability and is also Roma).

The founding values of the European Union, defined in article 2 of the treaty on European Union

human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail."

Almost all European countries have had important ethnic minority groups for a very long time. Slovakia and Romania have sizable Hungarian populations, for example, and both Latvia and Lithuania have Russian minorities. Many of these national minority groups date from the reorganization of Europe after the First and Second World Wars in the 20th century, but some are older, such as the Roma who have been a minority group throughout Europe's history. Other groups are connected with former European colonies, such as Algerians in France or Congolese in Belgium, moved to Europe to work, such as many Turkish in Germany, or have become more numerous with the arrival of refugees, such as Albanians arriving in Italy fleeing the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s or Syrians, Afghans or Iraqis fleeing the recent wars in the 2010s. Many of these groups regularly report racism, discrimination and hate crime, and indications are that such occurrences have increased over recent years.

When it comes to the rights of migrants and refugees, all European countries have signed up to the United Nations convention of 1951, which defines the rights of asylum and requires countries to not push migrants back at the border. However, since at least 2015 many European countries have been accused of pushing migrants away from their borders to prevent the possibility of claiming asylum, of detaining migrants seeking asylum in unacceptable and unsafe conditions, and of not processing asylum claims in the appropriate way.

Some countries have seen advances in the rights of women over the recent period, notably in Ireland where the right to abortion was granted following a referendum. In Poland, on the other hand, the right to abortion has been taken away in all but criminal or life-threatening cases, leading to widespread protests of women in Poland and other European countries. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a significant increase in gender related violence in many European countries.

Whilst acceptance of LGBT+ people has increased in many parts of Europe, and in some countries these people have gained new rights including the right to marriage (such as France), in others their rights and acceptance have come under attack: parts of Poland were declared 'LGBT free zones' by local authorities, and the Hungarian government has attempted to prevent all teaching about LGBT+ people in schools. These countries and others often argue that LGBT+ rights are foreign impositions, alien to the culture or religion of the countries.

What can the European Union do?

If the principle of equality has been a core value of the European Union since its foundation, it has developed different aspects of this at different times. When the European Union was founded in 1957, it required equal pay between men and women, and started to develop its first Equality Directives by 1976, which aim to prevent discrimination between men and women in access to employment, promotion, training and working conditions. Only in 1997 did the European Union gain powers to combat discrimination in a wider range of areas, including sex, race, racial or ethnic origin, region, disability, age or sexuality.

However, despite these increased powers, there are still some gaps in EU anti-discrimination protection: notably, discrimination on some grounds (such as religion or sexual orientation) is still only recognized when it concerns work or access to employment, not when it concerns education, access to goods and services, or social protection.

The European Commission proposed a directive to fill in these gaps in 2008, but it has been blocked by some member states of the European Union ever since. The current President of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, has said she will introduce new anti-discrimination legislation. Where the European Commission believes that a country is not respecting anti-discrimination law, it can start infringement proceedings against a country, which can lead to severe punishments. The European Commission frequently starts, or threatens to start, such proceedings against all countries in the European Union, both founding members and newer members.

Whilst the EU forbids discrimination on the basis of nationality for people with EU citizenship (ie. People with citizenship of an EU member state) it does not forbid discrimination on the basis of nationality for people without EU citizenship. This means, for example, that a country can restrict access to some jobs to only people with EU citizenship, or charge non-EU citizens more for education. It is also much often more difficult to move between EU countries for people without European citizenship. Immigration policy is still largely the responsibility of individual member states, although the European Union has for many decades been trying to develop a common asylum policy. In face of the increasing difficulties to make progress with this, and the refusal of some member states to agree to the resettlement of asylum seekers to their countries, recent initiatives of the European Commission have focused on making return of people who fail to secure asylum status quicker and easier.

The difficulties of the European Union countries to agree how to welcome migrants and refugees since 2015, increasing threats to the rights of some minority groups in different EU countries and the impression that some governments in the EU seek to undermine protections and equality for some minority groups, has led the European Commission, some member states and the European Parliament to focus on how to reinforce common European values.

The European Union has increased funding for civil society organisations working to promote equality, non-discrimination and encourage citizens engagement through the EU's 'Rights and Values program'.





As part of the Conference on the Future of Europe, there is a specific working group on values and fundamental rights, although the Conference has been criticized by many civil society organisations working with minority groups for not being inclusive enough or ensuring adequate voice for all minorities. Distinct from the European Union, the Council of Europe is an important actor in enforcing human rights and fighting against discrimination.

The Council of Europe has developed the European Charter of Human Rights, which is enforceable in the European Court of Human Rights and to which all European Union countries have signed up. The European Union as a whole is also committed by the Lisbon Treaty to sign the Charter, which will mean the EU institutions also need to abide by its provisions, but has not yet done so.

The Council of Europe has developed a Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, in which the principle of self-identification is central: a person should be considered to belong to a minority they identify with. Some European countries have not adopted the Convention at all including Belgium, France and Greece.

And the Council of Europe developed the 'Istanbul convention' on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence. Almost all European Union countries have signed the convention, but Poland has started the process of withdrawing and Hungary has refused to sign. Turkey has also recently withdrawn from the Charter.

Different viewpoints

Many people in Europe see the respect of human rights and of minority rights as part of the reason the European Union was created following the Second World War. They tend to see the European Union as working with other international bodies like the United Nations and Council of Europe to try to ensure greater rights for more and more people.

Other people think that the European Union is hypocritical: that it talks a lot about human rights, but when one sees the way some migrants arriving at the border are treated, or discrimination against people of colour, one sees that it does not live up to its own words.

Arguments explicitly against the respect of rights of minorities and migrants often go in one of the following ways

:

- European countries should look after **their own people** first, before looking after others
- It is alright for rich people in rich countries who do not have to live with the problems that ethnic diversity or many migrants arriving can cause – we are fed up with it!
- We have the right to protect our traditional way of life, conception of the family, language and customs from new ideas and other ways of life

Arguments in favour of the rights of minorities and migrants include:

- Every person has the same rights: it is unacceptable to discriminate against anyone on the basis of aspects of their identity they cannot do anything about. The EU should have strong legal protections for everyone.
- Europe is one of the wealthiest parts of the planet, and there should be more than enough resources to go around. If it seems like there are not enough resources to welcome newcomers, perhaps the problem is not the newcomers, but the way the resources are distributed. The EU should work to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources between rich and poor.
- Europe has always been highly diverse, and people have always moved between countries: this is what makes the richness of the continent and we should embrace diversity.

Exercises

- a) In countries which have seen a lot of refugees arrive in recent years, such as Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, it is estimated that around 70% of school age children have been integrated into schools. Amongst the reasons that make it difficult for 100% of children to be able to go to school include language difficulties, lack of transport to school from asylum facilities, and opposition from parents of other children at the school. What could the European Union do to ensure every refugee child can go to school?

- b) Imagine being a young person growing up who only recently realized she is a lesbian. She has not yet told her parents, and only a couple of her friends know. But she is afraid of telling many people, because most people in her community seem to think there is something wrong with being a lesbian, and sometimes they make jokes about it. She plans not to tell anyone, and to leave for another European city when she is old enough, but she feels sad and lonely. What could the government, or the European Union, do to ensure that this young person feels more support in her local community?

- c) Have you ever witnessed hate crime? This could be either violent speech against a person or group because of their skin colour, language, way of dressing, customs or other aspects of their identity, or could even be violent acts. How did it make you feel? What do you think the government and the European Union could do to stop such things happening?