

## European Youth Forum contribution to the Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of young people

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is the largest platform of youth organisations in Europe. We represent over 100 youth organisations, which bring together tens of millions of young people from all over Europe. YFJ welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the study conducted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' study on the impact of COVID-19 on young people.

Our submission is based on our 2021 research paper "[Beyond Lockdown: the 'pandemic scar' on young people](#)", which analyses and identifies the youth-specific medium and long-term impacts of COVID-19 in Europe, and gaps in the response of institutions and national governments. The three areas of educational loss, economic loss and poor mental health now form a long-term 'pandemic scar' on young people and may follow them for the rest of their lives. Our submission presents best practice examples and recommendations to address these.

### Best practises on education and learning<sup>1</sup>

1. **Financial relief for students** - Hungary has offered interest free loans to students. Armenia has paid compensation equivalent to half a year's tuition fees and partial compensation of student loans to those in their final year at university. Turkey has provided cash transfer to primary and secondary school students (75 TRY for girls, 50 TRY for boys, 150 TRY for orphans).
2. **Outreach initiatives** - In Slovenia, the project 'Together for knowledge' has focused on ensuring provision of education for all Roma. They worked on maintaining regular communication with Roma students and parents, distributing electronic devices, and ensuring that distance education reached all students. In Germany, social pedagogues called 'transition coaches,' who support school dropouts, provide advice to young people by phone. Students in refugee camps in Greece, who could not connect to the internet, received weekly homework packages. The Portuguese Government has provided laptops and internet access to some students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, working with Post Office Services and the National Scouts Group, a mechanism was implemented allowing students who lived far from schools or without internet access to receive physical copies of lessons and tasks from schools. Collection and return of homework to the teachers was also organised.
3. **Distribution of electronic devices** - The Government of Slovenia and The Government of Portugal have put in place initiatives to provide access to laptops and digital devices to

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<sup>1</sup> Eurofound (2020c), [Interest-free student loans case HU-2020-18/717 \(measures in Hungary\). COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin](#); ILO (International Labour Organization) (n.d.), [COVID-19 and the world of work: Country policy responses](#); Eiropas Sociālais Fonds (2016), [Roma: Education for better integration in Slovenia](#); CEDEFOP (2020), [Note on lifelong guidance and the COVID-19 pandemic](#); OECD (19 November 2020), [OECD policy responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: Supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings](#).

vulnerable groups. Partnering with private corporations seems to have been a common factor.

4. **Increased funding for educational programmes** - Norway, Sweden, Turkey and Spain are all identifiable as having committed to providing additional national funding or financial relief for education. Bulgaria has provided 30 million BGN specifically for remote education. The Netherlands has developed one of the most comprehensive packages, providing around €300 million to help students to catch up on the backlog caused by COVID-19. This can be used for tutorials, 'autumn schools,' catch-up programmes, extra staffing or to provide students with laptops or tablets.
5. **Retaining physical access to schools** - Several countries have retained physical access to schools for the most vulnerable, such as disabled people or people at risk of violence. Others have allowed access for those whose parents work in essential services or those who do not have internet access. These countries include France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Portugal and Norway.

## Best practises for young people's work and income

- **Iceland** is aiming to create 3,000 temporary summer jobs for students aged 18 and over and to provide support for summer schools.
- **Sweden** has created grants worth a total of €17 million for municipalities to create summer jobs for young people and to fund green jobs.
- **Lithuania** has offered subsidies to make workplaces accessible to disabled people under 29.
- **The Russian Federation** has worked on expanding access to paid sick leave, including young workers.
- **Portugal's** ATIVAR. PT programme has developed financial support measures to incentivise businesses to hire young unemployed people. There are also incentives to create internships to support integration of young workers in the labour market and the vocational conversion of unemployed and inactive workers. The scheme also incentivises the creation of permanent contracts, job creation in inland territories and top up for vulnerable workers. It sits alongside the 'Jovem+Digital' programme, which develops digital skills in young people.
- **The Netherlands** has developed a national social package worth €1.4 billion. A significant part of the package is focused on youth unemployment and preventing school leaver drop out by encouraging young people to extend their education.
- **Cyprus** has developed incentive schemes for hiring of unemployed people and for recruitment, occupational rehabilitation, employment of young people and training of young people.
- **Turkey** is prioritising young people in a scheme donating public land to farmers.

## Best practises to support young people's mental health<sup>2</sup>

- **Iceland** is focusing on mental health in remote medical services being strengthened and a new campaign against domestic violence.

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<sup>2</sup> ILO (International Labour Organization) (n.d.), [COVID-19 and the world of work: Country policy responses](#) (accessed 13 May 2021); Eurofound (2020e), [Online mental health service launched for frontline workers, case IE-2020-48/1522 \(measures in Ireland\)](#); Eurofound (2020g), [Psychological counselling line - SNS 24, case PT-2020-14/547 \(measures in Portugal\)](#); McCartan, C., Adell, T., Cameron, J. et al. (2021), *A scoping review of international policy responses to mental health recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic*. *Health Research Policy and Systems* 19: article 58; OECD/Hanusekk, Eric A. and Woessmann, Ludger (2020), [The economic impacts of learning losses](#).

- **Belgium** and **Ireland** are providing additional mental health support for frontline caregivers.
- **Cyprus** is offering a national 'Telecare' psychological services phone helpline to provide mental health support for those affected by the pandemic.
- **Portugal** is providing a national mental health helpline giving support to citizens dealing with isolation and the related mental health problems.
- **The Netherlands** has established a single online portal to promote mental health.
- The **Danish Youth Council** and **Romanian National Alliance of Student Campaigns** have undertaken campaigns providing practical advice for young people on how to cope with working and studying during the pandemic.

## Policy recommendations

There is a high degree of support amongst young people for further policy responses to reduce the impact of the pandemic. In the survey<sup>3</sup>:

- 85.5% of young people were in favour of income support (e.g. unemployment payments, cash transfers).
- 85.9% were in favour of employee support (e.g. extra leave, worksharing, flexible work arrangements).
- 81.5% were in favour of opportunities/subsidies for training and learning.
- 79.6% were in favour of company support (e.g. tax breaks, wage subsidies).

Based on the outcomes and further policy analysis, the recommendations below are made.

### To reach and support all young people, governments and institutions should:

- Heed the lessons from the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis by making sure that policy responses are not limited to addressing immediate needs, but aim to protect and fulfil young people's rights in the long run.
- Ensure the meaningful participation of young people and youth organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes at all levels aimed at responding to the short- and long-term impacts of the crisis.
- Develop policy responses with a strong intersectional dimension to ensure that they adequately address the situation of different groups of youth, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised. Policy-makers should increase efforts to collect disaggregated data on youth on the basis of factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, health and immigration status.
- To ensure the full rights of young people are respected, promoted and protected, the adoption of a legally binding International Convention on the Rights of Young People with an accompanying monitoring mechanism would set a standard for youth to be active rights-holders and prevent any occurrence of age-based discrimination.
- Youth rights should be mainstreamed across all human rights reviews and a UN Special Procedure on the human rights of young people, such as an Independent Expert or Special Rapporteur, should be established.

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<sup>3</sup> The original survey was undertaken as part of a partnership between the European Youth Forum, the International Labour Organisation, the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, AIESEC, the United Nations Major Group on Children and Youth, and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Data from the survey was reanalysed to produce results based solely on the 4,450, 18–34 year olds living in one of 32 European countries: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Czech Republic, The Netherlands, The Republic of Moldova, The Ukraine, The UK, and Turkey.

## **Our recommendations on work and income:**

- Prioritise quality job promotion in policy responses. Governments and institutions should not relax labour legislation to stimulate high employment or make cuts to vital social welfare programmes that protect young people from precarity and poverty.
- Ensure all young people, regardless of employment status, have equal access to social protection and income support, and remove age-based eligibility that excludes many young people from accessing benefits.
- Secure the access of young people to quality entry-level jobs through better regulation that ensures adequate wages and fair working conditions, to support smoother school-to-work transitions.
- Invest in quality job creation targeting youth, including by providing incentives to employers to hire young people. Financial support should be conditional to the compliance with minimum quality standards that can set youth on a path towards relevant and stable employment.
- Adopt new national Implementation Plans for the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, in consultation with young people and youth organisations, and make sure they are meaningfully involved in the implementation and monitoring stages. Ensure sustainable and adequate funding for Youth Guarantee schemes through national and EU budgets, beyond recovery funds.
- Improve the outreach of existing local, national and European employment support measures by focusing on particularly hard to reach young people and engaging with youth organisations that work with these communities.
- Protect young people's fundamental labour rights and secure their rights to collectively bargain. Encourage education on workers' rights amongst young people in formal and non-formal learning settings, including within job centres, so that young people can have the knowledge to claim their own rights with employers. Provide accessible opportunities for redress for young people when their workers' rights are violated.
- Ensure that the possibility to work from home is not used by employers as a reason to refrain from adapting workplaces to be accessible to people with disabilities and chronic illness.

## **Our recommendations on education and learning**

- Reform welfare systems to ensure students have access to adequate income support in case of loss of student jobs. This would ensure that all young Europeans can continue to access their right to education without risking falling into poverty.
- Invest in greater opportunities for tutoring, catch-up classes, or academic support for young people who have fallen behind on their learning or who feel they have learned less as a result of remote learning.
- Provide career guidance through public employment services, but also through schools, universities and training centres in order to support young people through the transition from education to employment in light of today's emerging challenges.
- Provide financial support to ensure all students in all levels of education have access to ICT tools, and can equally participate in digital learning and home working outside of school hours. In this context, also invest in strengthening digital literacy both for all students and teaching staff.
- Ensure that the activities in the 2021–2027 Digital Education Action Plan<sup>4</sup> consider the specific accessibility and mental health implications of widespread online learning for

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission (n.d.), Education and training. [https://ec.europa.eu/education/content/digital-educationaction-plan-2021-2027\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/content/digital-educationaction-plan-2021-2027_en) (accessed 13 May 2021).

young people. This would help ensure young people who are most vulnerable are not side-lined in the digital transformation.

- Develop digital accessibility standards in education for adoption at the national level and implementation by educational institutions. These should ensure that all digital tools and platforms used in education are perceivable, operable, understandable and robust, and can be accessed by all people, including people with disabilities and additional communication needs.

### **Our recommendations on mental health and wellbeing:**

- Commit to the provision of and access to information and quality formal and informal youth-focused mental health services in every educational institution, youth centre, jobcentre, cultural centres and other non-medical service points where young people seek support, to ensure that the most vulnerable young people are reached.
- Invest in mental health literacy and provide training and resources to teachers, administrative staff, job centre staff, youth workers and other non-health related professionals that work with youth, to recognise mental health challenges, provide basic support and referral to medical mental health services when needed.
- Support the right to disconnect of workers, but also of learners and educators. This would promote healthy digital usage and manage the rapid intensification of both online working and schooling to mental health.
- Equip public employment services to provide training, support groups and resources on keeping mentally healthy despite an uncertain economic climate and throughout the challenges of a job search.
- Implement a holistic approach to mental health by recognising the link between socio-economic factors, such as unemployment, housing insecurity, and academic pressures and wellbeing. Address health inequalities to provide adequate support to vulnerable groups of young people who might be at greater risk of mental distress.

Without measures such as these it is clear that the pandemic will have lasting effects on young people's inclusion and youth rights. A youth-inclusive recovery is now crucial for a group that has still not fully recovered from the 2008 financial and economic crisis.

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