

European  
Universities  
Community

The voice of European Students

#ESA23  
2<sup>nd</sup> Edition



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

OF  
THE EUROPEAN STUDENT ASSEMBLY 2023

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*Think before you print.*

# 01 Project

## Our initiative

### European Universities Community

The main objective of the European Universities Community (EUC) is to give an opportunity to students to learn more about the European Union and to make their voice heard and shape their future. This grassroots initiative gathers students from European Universities alliances and has come out of the ground in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, launched jointly by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council in 2022, and decided to continue and develop its activities afterwards.

## Our Project

### European Student Assembly

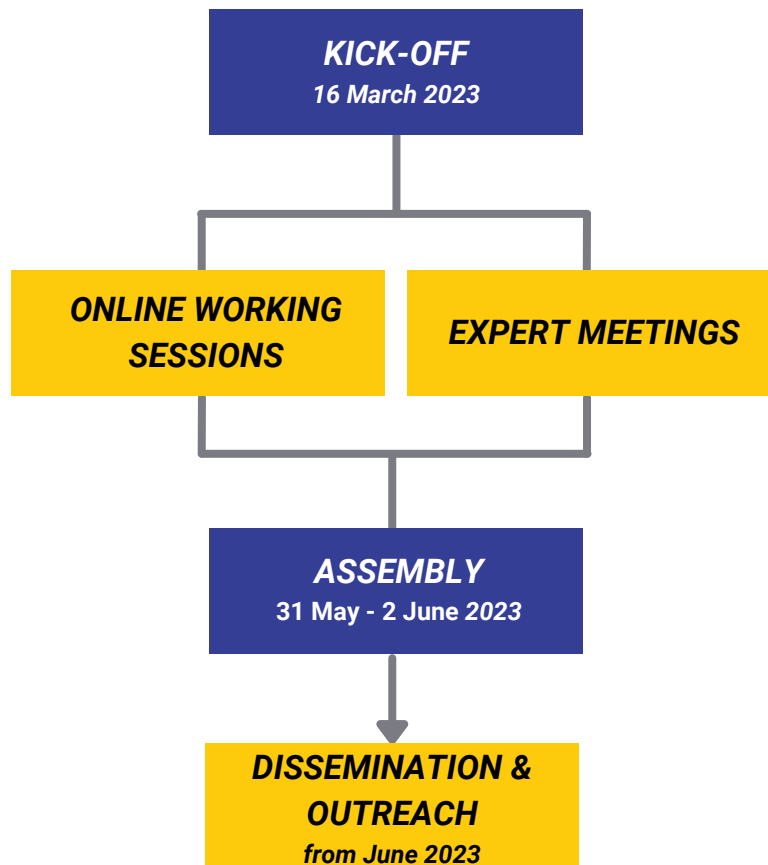
In 2022, the inaugural session of the European Student Assembly (ESA) marked the beginning of a series of assemblies that is providing students with an opportunity to meet and express their opinions within the European Union and advocate for innovative political solutions.

For the second edition of ESA, after a competitive application process and an intensive online preparation phase, a pool of students coming from European Universities Alliances (EUAs) has been invited to come to the European Parliament in Strasbourg and finalise their proposals on a series of European topical issues.

EUAs have been extremely efficient to reach and bring together students from all over Europe (and beyond) who are interested to learn, meet and debate about their common future. Thanks to EUAs support, as well as the Franco-German University and France-Universités, all travel and accommodation costs were covered.

**From 31 May to 2 June 2023, the second edition of ESA brought together 230 students coming from 40 EUAs and 28 countries.** The assembly centered around the critical topic of advancing the strategic capacities of the European Union in a sustainable and cohesive way, and was organised around 10 Panels.

This publication of the students' Policy Recommendations reflects their state of mind, expectations and determination to have a concrete impact on their future that could lead to political responses at local, national and European level. It serves the purpose of giving a voice to students and it aims to be disseminated at a larger scale, starting within the universities' communities.



The 230 students have been selected out of more than 1400 applications across Europe.

The selection process was based on motivation and academic excellence. It ensured the best representation of genders, ages, countries, levels and fields of study.

As a result, the ESA managed to unite students from Bachelor to PhD, 60% of whom were female, with a common interest to debate on the future of Europe.

The Participant's onboarding session was held online on 16 March 2023.

Each of the 10 Panels has met several times between March and May 2023, with the help of two Panel Coordinators and a Panel Referent. The 20 Coordinators have participated in dedicated training sessions in parallel to work meetings, to help them facilitate the work of their panel.

Other activities have been organised such as a policy drafting workshop and an online visit of the European Union's Court of Justice to help panelists in drafting impactful recommendations.

Experts have been invited to help students to identify the stakes and issues their Panel had to deal with. Online working sessions were held to let students exchange their ideas and work on their recommendations.

During the three days spent at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, students finalised their recommendations. They eventually presented 79 Recommendations (4 of which were rejected) in front of the Assembly and voted them individually.

From June 2023, our main aim is to disseminate these recommendations to the largest number of students, citizens, decisionmakers and stakeholders at local, national and European level

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### **PANEL 1 : DELIBERATIVE VERSUS REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY. HOW TO REDUCE THE GAP BETWEEN CITIZENS AND POLICY-MAKERS AND CREATE A MORE UNITED EUROPE?**

#### **Executive summary**

The EU currently experiences a gap between its institutions and citizens, resulting in a lack of trust, understanding, and meaningful participation. We believe that elements of deliberative democracy can contribute to fighting this development, by increasing the direct contact between citizens and EU institutions. Even though the EU is based on representative democracy, the EU founding treaties offer the means of contacting the EU Ombudsman, of submitting petitions and of launching the European Citizens Initiative as elements of deliberative democracy. Thus, we don't observe a lack of deliberative elements in the democratic framework of the European Union, but rather their appropriate application. Challenges arise in the areas of petition submission, the ECI process, public outreach, youth engagement, and the response to successful petitions, unequal access to democracy. These issues hinder democratic representation and limit the influence citizens could have on shaping EU policies by deliberative means. To overcome these obstacles, we suggest recommendations in the following areas: participatory tools, information campaigns and access to democracy. By putting into practice these proposals, the EU can strengthen its democratic foundations and bridge the gap between its institutions and its citizens.

#### **Problem Statement**

Imagine a Union where every European citizen feels heard. Imagine a Union where every European citizen feels empowered. Imagine a Union where every European citizen feels represented. Is this the Europe we live in today? Unfortunately, we can all agree that it is not. A record high number of EU voters showed up at the polls in the European Elections in 2019, after they had been told that their vote would matter. Yet their vote, our vote, – that of more than 200 million EU citizens– had little direct impact on the political direction of the current EU administration. This is why, for the past months, we have been focusing on understanding how to make that vote matter. Our focal question has been how to close the gap between the European citizens and the European institutions and what form of deliberative democracy, if any, is suitable for this. For the past 10 years, the participatory instruments in the hands of European Citizens have been included in the treaties of the Union: petitions, European Citizen Initiatives, request to access the documents, the European Ombudsman... a growing will of integrating the citizen's participation in the policy process is present. And yet all these instruments, even after 10 years, are still unknown, unadapted and largely unused by the average European citizen. And even when they are used, they fail to address the real problem and they are not intended to be integrated in the daily decision-making process of the Union, distancing the European people even more from the Institutions.

The Conference of the Future of Europe was an unprecedented exercise on this. An amazing and powerful exercise. But this is all it was: an exercise, set in time, very vague and without a concrete field of application. The challenge for the European Union is to be able to encompass such initiatives in day-to-day life, intensifying a greater involvement of citizens of the European Union and approaching Europe to every local reality. How can we do that? We don't have a perfect solution yet, but we are sure that only reforming these mechanisms will not be enough for the EU to assume that all citizens will feel equally engaged. In fact, to unleash the true potential of participatory democracy and really close the gap, we need to first grant all citizen the same access to electoral and participatory opportunities within and outside of the voting time and starts with granting every citizen the same level of rights, same level of protection, same level of dignity. Participatory tools are important and need to be at the center of the agenda, but focusing only on them, without focusing on reducing inequalities, is getting only half the job done. If we continue to look the other way when talking about inequalities, we will only proceed a pale version of what a participatory Europe could be.

As Schuman said: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which first create a de facto solidarity." This is one of those concrete achievements. So let's continue to build a better Europe, more suited for its citizens, for the challenges of today and for the future.

## Recommendations

**1.1 Tell Us about (E)U! - Organising an Annual European Citizens Assembly.** In order to bridge the gap between policy makers and citizens a dedicated platform is needed. We suggest embracing the idea of an annual European citizen's assembly, providing a space for dialogue and collaboration between citizens, civil society organisations, and policymakers. Based on the role model of ESA 2023 conference participants should be selected randomly and be prepared on their topics by experts meetings. Participants shall come from all member states after the principle of degressive proportionality as set out in Article 14 (2) TEU. Every year people should come together to discuss the most vibrant topics of EU politics. In order to boost the active engagement and allow everyone, including the vulnerable groups, to participate, participants shall be compensated the related income. Following the idea of rotating the Presidency of the Council of the EU, the conference shall be organised yearly in a different member state in order ensure a diverse range of perspectives and promote inclusivity within the EU MSs. The EP, the Commission and the Council of the EU shall publish reports how they want to realise the deliberations of the assembly. The Citizens' Convention on Climate in France from 2019 can serve as an example. Such a yearly assembly shall be also organised as well for young European people aged from 16 to 21.

**1.2 | Empower(E)U! - Unleashing Citizen Power for Change.** The current state of the petition process in the European Union (EU) requires significant improvements to ensure timely and effective responses to citizen concerns. Taking into account the average of the last four years of publicly available data, it emerges that 28.6% of procedures remain



open after one year, indicating a backlog of unresolved petitions. Furthermore, approximately 31.7% of petitions are deemed inadmissible, limiting citizens' ability to engage effectively in public action. This proposal focuses on the following key areas:

1. **Increase PETI Budget and Staff:** Insufficient budget and staffing contribute to the backlog of pending petitions and significant response delays. To overcome this, we recommend allocating higher resources to the Committee on Petitions (PETI), enabling timely and comprehensive responses.
2. **Simplify Petitions and ECIs using AI via Opt-In:** A significant number of petitions and European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs) are deemed inadmissible due to complex rules and lack of clarity. To address this, we propose leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to provide real-time assistance and guidance to petitioners if wanted, particularly in determining the subject's relevance to EU competencies. Implementing AI-supported systems can enhance clarity and accessibility, increasing the number of admissible petitions.
3. **Strengthen Response to Petitions:** Petitions often lack substantial follow-up, limiting their impact and leaving petitioners feeling unheard. Granting petitioners the opportunity to speak before the PETI and requiring the Parliament to codify which petitions it follows up on, shall be the ordinary procedure for admissible petitions. PETI's denial to hear the petitioner shall be justified by objective reasons. This approach recognizes the value of successful petitions, fosters meaningful dialogue between petitioners and policymakers. With a higher budget the PETI shall normally exercise a fact-finding visit for petitions presenting a high number of supporters or treating considerable breaches of EU law. This will improve the understanding of the PETI for the situation of the petitioner and will more likely lead to an appropriate treatment of the petition.

**1.4 | EU goes 2 U! - Bring the MEPs closer to their electorate.** The big majority of the EU initiatives involving citizens lack inclusion and accessibility, since they are mostly directed to the youth through digital means and this defect excludes a big part of the population. Indeed, more than 70% of Europeans, according to a recent research, expect a more regular and meaningful involvement with the EU level of government. To close this distance, we suggest "town halls" meetings organized with municipalities/regions or any other levels of local representative bodies between MEPs and the direct electorate, therefore reaching a local audience, and including even secluded cities and rural areas. In a sort of road trip, throughout their constituency, visiting cities and villages, the European Parliament representation and the MEPs would be responsible for providing the information and kindle the debate, not on the future, but on the present of Europe, involving citizens directly on the heart of the European decision-making, increasing transparency and gathering more inputs for a more democratic representation. To achieve such objectives, we suggest regular Q&A sessions with the MEP in their constituency, with an inclusive audience and interactive presentations on what's going on in the EU. Indeed, involving the MEP is crucial for people to put a face to who represents them at the European level, increasing awareness on topics treated by the MEP and on the other hand,



increase accountability for MEPs towards their electorate and creates a relationship between elected officials and their voters, developing a larger participation in European matters. Increasing the role of local governments with debates, tertulias, round tables and participation of the MEP's is essential for people to feel involved and listened to, creating a bridge between representative and deliberative democracy.

### **1.5 | InformEU! - Empowering European Democracy**

In this era of pervasive digital technology, the speed of information is rapidly increasing and because of the high volume of inputs, it is challenging to control the quality of information flow. This allows misinformation to spread more easily, and hampers access to fact-checked, reliable news. According to an MIT study (2018), "falsehoods on Twitter are found to spread about 10 to 20 times faster than facts". Moreover, these complications go hand-in-hand with the post truth era, posing a huge threat to healthy democracy that is defended with logic and facts. Post-truth indicates the growing distrust of facts, expertise and merit. According to Professor Western, if voters feel that they do not have enough reliable information to assist them to understand how to vote, they will vote according to their personal convictions and on the basis of their emotions. Therefore, it is a necessity to provide correct information that is accessible for each EU citizen. Also, to counter these phenomena, we must complement online fact-checking filters (such as in the Digital Services Act) with a positive approach, highlighting accurate news. To this effect, we propose instituting a new official EU media service, "InformEU", with TV channels, websites and social media pages available in all 24 official languages. On this platform, in addition to current affairs coverage, experts on member-state specific topics would feature on their respective platform and clear up doubts about EU powers, in order to foster informed awareness on the Union. Recognizing that each group has distinct needs, interests, and visions of the EU they aspire to shape, we aim to bridge the awareness gap and ensure equitable access to information and participation for all. Insufficient awareness and limited knowledge about the petition and European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) processes also often hinders public engagement, particularly among underrepresented demographic groups. Consequently, this lack of information perpetuates a polarisation between views and increases voter apathy, hampering participation in the democratic process. Our campaign seeks to address these barriers by providing inclusive and accessible information, including media content catered to different demographics, to encourage broad and diverse engagement. 'Negative institutional information/advertising campaign. In order to effectively engage different demographic groups, we also propose implementing a 'negative' institutional information/advertising campaign, across and beyond InformEU. This approach aims to capture the attention and interest of specific target audiences, by highlighting potential negative consequences that may arise from a lack of active participation and information, or the benefits of EU membership. For instance, targeting young people, we can emphasize that their failure to actively participate and stay informed may compromise the benefits they could gain from the Erasmus+ programme, funded by the EU. By presenting the potential drawbacks of not engaging with the European Union, we aim to evoke a sense of urgency and demonstrate the tangible value of their involvement.



This 'negative' campaign strategy seeks to motivate young people to take an active role in shaping the EU by making them realize that their non-participation could result in missed opportunities and reduced access to valuable services. By effectively communicating these potential consequences, we aim to stimulate their interest and drive them towards seeking more information, engaging with EU initiatives, and actively participating in decision-making processes.

**1.6 | EU Citizenship in Schools: How to foster “European Citizenship” among younger generations through education?** The lack of participation in EU democracy stems from a lack of EU education in school’s curriculum. This can be seen in the turnout of EU elections in the younger generations. If the youth is not informed, we cannot expect them to act. This is why there is a need to implement EU education in all member states’ instruction systems. The aim is for all secondary school graduates to have the same knowledge of the EU. Therefore, the programme should start at an early age, in primary school. We go further than Panel 2’s proposal for a translated booklet since we wish to create a whole 3-levels continued education programme set in primary, middle, and high school. The EU would introduce measures such as the introduction of curricular recognition of school training in member states as well as workshops held in the context of the EU and its institutions and policies. The teaching would encompass teaching on the EU, its institutions, and its citizenship to sensitize the youth about the EU. Educators should be enabled to carry out the programme. There should be an assessment of the methods and results of EU education at the end of each cycle by means of tests given to students but also assessments of teachers. All EU students should have at the end of their curriculum similar knowledge about EU functioning and citizenship.

**1.7 | Inclusive Access to European Democracy** According to the most recent Eurostat, there are 23.8 million non-EU citizens in European society (5.3% of EU’s total population) and 38 million were born outside of the EU (8,5% of all EU inhabitants). These impressive numbers imply that, in order to ensure a truly inclusive European democratic process, it is essential to embrace the participation of all individuals, including minority groups such as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. If recognizing that every vote matters, consequently every person’s voice matters. To grant protections and representation to these people, we suggest two propositions according to the person’s legal status. To non-EU citizens who are long-term residents (permanent residence permit holders), we suggest the establishment of a legal framework to grant political participation, ensuring voting rights in European elections in their constituency of residence by the creation of a special registry, the same used for EU-member states citizens. To non-EU citizens who are temporary residents (temporary residence permit holders, including refugees and asylum seekers..), we recommend to encourage their representation in political institutions such as the European Parliament, establishing a special body in the EP, with the name of “Council for Migrants in the EP”, with a number decided on the same proportionality that the EP has per its Member States. It is important to note that this body, operating under an advisory role in the European Parliament, plays a crucial role in providing recommendations and guidance on matters concerning these minority groups. While not endowed with direct voting capabilities, its expertise and insights contribute significantly to informed decision-making within the European Parliament.



## **PANEL 2 : LESSONS FROM THE PAST. HOW CAN THE FRENCH-GERMAN HISTORY OF RECONCILIATION SERVE AS A MODEL TO OVERCOME CONFLICTS AND BUILT UNITY?**

### **Executive summary**

With the reality and continued threat of war on the European continent, disparities between regions of Europe, and the rise of nationalism along with euroscepticism, there is now more than ever a need for unity within Europe. The past, and especially the Franco-German past, shows that reconciliation is possible. These policy proposals offer suggestions in order to strengthen ties by mobilising all generations and populations of the European Union in building bridges over chasms of cultural and political divide. Learning from the successes of the historic Franco-German model of reconciliation, these policies will be integral to navigate the challenges of the 21st century.

Through the expansion of programmes and facilitation of activities and educational interventions, these policies will connect individuals from different European countries, fostering mutual understanding and cultivating an open-minded European identity. Successful implementation of these initiatives will create the space necessary for meaningful and enhanced civic engagement on a pan-European scale.

### **Problem Statement**

With these challenges in mind, the question remains: are these challenges better met alone or together? The Franco-German couple, the historical heart of the European Union, provides a compelling answer: One can learn from the past, overcome historical differences, and establish the cooperation necessary for a more cohesive future. Following the Elysee Treaty, initiatives specific to these two states, such as the Franco-German University (FGU) or the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO) were founded and have since promoted bilateral exchanges between students going beyond the ERASMUS programme which makes the couple unique. It is a way of managing a common past that, though not applicable to every case, provides a starting point for dialogue and enhanced cooperation. Each country will have its own solutions and that diversity is an asset that must be preserved.

The simultaneous protection of these differences whilst maintaining the integrity of the EU is critical, as it is an institution that can only act autonomously through cooperation. In this context, the unique collaboration that exists between Germany and France should not be taken for granted, as it is the product of continual efforts to establish mutual understanding, acceptance and interculturality. Policies must be implemented that provide the political and cultural space for such interaction to take place amongst all member and candidate states. The aim is to enrich the soil to promote the growth of a pan-European identity and citizenry prepared to face the challenges of the 21st century with an enhanced identification with the European idea.



Therefore, the question is: How could the French-German history of reconciliation serve as a model to overcome conflicts and build unity?

This proposal answers the question by focusing on the measures already in place between France and Germany and by proposing policies that are facing the differences challenging the unity of the EU at the moment. It is not a question of curtailing the authority of the member states, but of strengthening our unity through the EU.

## Recommendations

### **2.1. | Mosaic of Memories: Traveling Exhibits on Europe's Historical Experiences.**

Facilitates a "living" memory exhibition which will build bridges between different historical perspectives amongst the European community. By providing funding for member and candidate states and researchers to curate travelling exhibitions, this policy will create the opportunity for public interaction in memory dialogue through collaborative means, such as oral histories. This policy will empower creative and interactive ways to confront the past by adding various historical perspectives. This initiative expands upon the EU's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) program, and the successful memory practices that were essential to Franco-German reconciliation.

**2.2. | The Enforcement of the European infrastructure cooperation.** Expand the *Interreg* programme, providing regional funds for infrastructure projects, to ensure it continues fulfilling its vital objectives, with a more specific emphasis on rural and poorly connected regions so that borders do not remain a barrier and impediment to the ultimate collaboration of the European community. The aim is to facilitate greater cross-border interactions and connections between member states, and to ensure that the proper policy focus is in place when the current *Interreg* programme expires in 2027. This project should be renewed in 2027 on a European scale, whilst still being funded by the European regional development fund.

**2.3 | Establishment of a centralised and accessible European Youth Office** as a coordinating unit increasing the visibility and accessibility of all the initiatives and offers for the European youth inspired by the Franco-German Youth office. The office would aim to communicate and market the opportunities for the youth effectively including European initiatives already in place such as the Talking Europe-App, which ensures open channels of youth dialogue. It allows the broadening of cultural initiatives such as Pass Culture for all people who come of age which would promote one of the first contacts with the office.



**2.4. I Creating European Youth Summer Camps** for young Europeans and young people from EU candidate countries, inspired by the Franco-German holiday camps and organized around shared interests (music, sport, etc.). This initiative will provide a better understanding of European diversity and an intercultural experience. This programme should be accessible to all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, through funding from the European Union and participation fees proportional to parents' income.

**2.5 I Dissemination of a European textbook among secondary education students.** Developing a common framework of basic European knowledge for secondary education students to spread a wider understanding of the EU and its institutions. To implement this framework a textbook (printed and digital) containing the primary aspects and roles of EU institutions to promote awareness of the technical work of the EU would be distributed amongst European students. This will enable a new generation of student leaders to not only support the EU, but play an informed, active role in it. This textbook could be readily implemented in the framework of existing member-state curricula, and draw inspiration from the French-German history school book used in the Abibac-classes. Moreover, the policy will provide a virtual workshop for instructors to effectively utilize this resource within their own classrooms.

**2.6 I Enlarging the competences of the Alliances.** Developing the partnerships and promoting their role among students. Following the Franco-German University model and within the frame of the European Universities Initiative (EUI), encourage the European university alliances to establish partnerships between their member universities, including the ones from candidate countries. Leading to the delivery of double degrees, these programs will need to be coherent and follow requirements beforehand established by the Alliances. To achieve this, the role of the Alliances and the opportunity they represent for the students have to be further promoted. Indeed, the success of the alliances depends on their ability to gain popularity among students and to be inclusive, thus ensuring diversity and multiculturalism.

**2.7 I The European practical Handbook.** Creating a common database of practical living information and resources to ensure that those arriving in a new member state (both EU citizens or otherwise) have transparent access to the materials needed to effectively integrate. Pulling from the success of the HandbookGermany website, this database will provide a comprehensive guide to integration, from the pension system to acquiring civil legal certificates. All information on the database will be provided in the official 24 European languages as well as the language of all official EU candidate states. This policy will constitute a database of the resources already provided by each country in a uniform, centralized format.



## PANEL 3 : ENERGY. HOW TO SECURE FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE ACCESS TO ENERGY IN EUROPE AT DIFFERENT LEVELS?

### Executive Summary

Proposals aim to improve energy efficiency, security and decarbonization in the EU. Recommendations include enhancing accuracy and consistency of Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs), allocating renovation loans and subsidies to incentivize deep renovation, preventing Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) contradictions with environmental law, implementing a risk assessment plan for energy supply, setting targets to phase out fossil fuel subsidies and introduce minimum carbon prices, reducing bureaucracy through digitalization and harmonization, mapping public engagement with energy, and enforcing low-energy district heating from waste heat. Implementation will optimize resource allocation, promote energy savings, ensure environmental compliance, secure energy supply, and enhance decarbonization efforts.

### Problem Statement

In 2023, Europe was plunged into a profound energy crisis, made all the more violent by the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has culminated in strong economic headwinds, compounding the economic woes that have seen soaring inflation plague all member EU states. To this point, Europe has been battered by an oil crisis and gas crisis, with gas and electricity prices rising steadily since the outbreak of the Ukrainian war on February 24, 2022. Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed the European Union's dependency on Russia coal (50%), gas (40%) and oil imports (30%). This energy crisis has been coupled with a profound crisis in the security of Europe's energy supply, calling into question the EU's ability to control its decarbonization trajectory, given the use of coal and oil to compensate for the lack of gas, and the construction of multiple regasification terminals. This has blurred the legibility of the EU's ambitious decarbonization policy. Moreover, this also jeopardises the competitiveness of European industry and erodes the purchasing power of households and businesses, already threatened by the resurgence of inflation. Ultimately, this crisis poses a political risk for Europe, threatening the very principle of European solidarity.

A credible energy policy must therefore strive to reconcile three objectives:

1- Controlling prices - by legal means but also by technical means such as measures to increase energy efficiency - implies taking into account the purchasing power of households and the competitiveness of European industry, but more generally it implies that the energy transition must have both a social and a democratic aspect, essential in the very interest of its acceptance and credibility. The social aspect underpins the implementation of targeted, redistributive policies to protect the most vulnerable from the ecological transition. democratic aspect must lead to a high level of transparency in the ecological and energy transition process, and to citizen participation.



2. Secondly, securing the short- and long-term supply of Europe's energy policy means putting energy policy back at the heart of European construction, and integrating the geopolitical dimension by focusing on the challenges of the future: mastering the value chains of low-carbon technologies - essential to the energy transition, and today largely dominated by China - and building new partnerships by diversifying sources of supply, both geographically and in terms of the components of the energy mix and their vectors.

3. The construction of a European energy policy finally implies its decarbonization, and we have drawn up several technical, legal and political solutions to enable the adoption of alternatives to fossil energy sources and overcome technical difficulties such as the intermittency, transport and storage of renewable energies. However, the high cost of these technologies and the lack of expertise require forward-looking policies and long-term investment, particularly in research and development. Our recommendations reflect the reconciliation of these three objectives.

## Recommendations

**3.1 | Improve the Accuracy and Consistency of Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) by Reviewing Current Assessment Methodology and Setting the Requirement to Update EPC Every 5 Years.** Recognising inconsistencies in EPCs' accuracy, we propose a policy to revamp the EPC assessment methodology in the EU, focusing on integrating comprehensive energy simulations instead of relying solely on basic formulas. This change aims to account for internal heat gains from appliances, occupants, and solar influence that significantly affect energy consumption. Further, to ensure up-to-date energy efficiency evaluation, we propose a mandatory requirement to renew EPCs every five years, aligning them with evolving energy consumption trends and technological advancements. These reforms will optimise resource allocation for renovation loans and subsidies, ensuring more efficient energy utilisation and aligning with EU's broader energy efficiency objectives.

**3.2 | Allocating enhanced renovation loans and subsidies to households to encourage opting for deep renovation, assuring them offsetting the cost by the energy savings accrued post-renovation.** Encouraging the concept of deep renovation requires a strategic approach highlighting such an investment's long-term benefits. The significant energy savings achieved from deep renovation could effectively counterbalance the initial costs involved. This is where precise forecasting of potential savings comes into play. By providing clear, customised predictions of their potential monthly energy savings following the renovation, homeowners can better understand how these savings can be directed towards repaying any grants or subsidies over time. This method positions the cost of renovation not as an expense, but rather as a long-term investment, with the payoff being reduced energy bills. Promoting the idea of the deep renovation as a strategic approach could be to showcase how the potential energy savings from deep renovation could offset the cost of investment over time.



**3.3 | Prevent Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) application from contradicting with Environmental Law by establishing a parliamentary commission and a mechanism to allow public access to all cases and documentation under the ECT.** Reform the Energy Charter Treaty by establishing a parliamentary commission tasked to ensure that the application of ECT does not contradict with the International Environmental Law, in particular with the Paris Agreement. This commission will oversee ECT's application and prevent contradictions with environmental obligations. Revise the ECT to make investor-state dispute settlement cases public and transparent. Provide public access to ongoing and past cases, relevant documents, and hearing dates to address concerns of unfairness and lack of public access.

**3.4 | Implementation of a risk assessment plan at the European level concerning the securing of higher- and low-carbon energies in the short term, and the mastering of the value chains of low-carbon technologies in the longer term.** To ensure the coherence of the European decarbonization strategy and the securing of supply, Member States should base their 10-year national energy and climate plans (NECPs) on a 10-year European energy and climate plan (EU-ECP) containing binding commitments valid for all EU Member States on projects of high relevance to the EU. The EU Commission can be tasked to ensure NECPs are compatible with the provisions and the spirit of the EU-ECP and settle transborder disputes among Member States. In the short-term, EU Member States should limit gas demand based on what is absolutely necessary and invest in low-carbon energy sources. This includes a careful assessment at the European level of strategic partnerships in energy supply which should be in accordance with European values of democracy. The EU should be committed to develop an industrial base that would secure autonomy by adding an EU-level incentive package to the Critical Raw Material Act. Member States should remain committed to their climate targets. Energy efficiency should be an integral part of EU strategy to achieve self-sufficiency.

**3.5 | Further incentivize decarbonization by setting European targets for phasing out subsidies of fossil fuels and a minimum carbon price for ETS allowances trading in maritime, road and air transport sectors.** Even though the EU has made international commitments to rationalise and phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, there is not yet a specific EU target for the complete elimination of state aid to fossil fuels industries. In 2020, Germany, France and Italy altogether spent around €73.3 billion in fossil fuel subsidies, and the figure is even greater if we consider all activities and projects related to fossil fuels. Furthermore, in many EU countries, those subsidies rose significantly instead of decreasing between 2015 and 2020. Therefore, we strongly encourage the setting of EU targets to achieve the complete phasing out of such mechanisms at the latest by 2030, as they undermine the efforts of the EU system as a whole towards reaching a net-zero economy. Furthermore, even though the EU has already in place some successful carbon price mechanisms, specifically the ETS, we propose to render them more effective for those sectors which are still highly reliant on fossil fuels, namely maritime, road, and air transport. Specifically, we suggest introducing a minimum carbon price for the trading of ETS allowances so that the mechanism can be more efficient in pushing decarbonization.



**3.6 | Reducing bureaucracy via digitalisation while harmonising member state energy regulations.** Digitalisation should be a priority, with the EU supporting the development of digital infrastructures and providing training to personnel at national and local levels. This will enable faster, secure, and widely accessible digital permit-granting procedures that can adapt to local circumstances. Creating a website which provides general renewable energy information, incentives, available funds and also the permitting process on a national level with good outreach. While digitising a legal structure should be established that creates a comprehensive standard and regulations for grid infrastructure, enabling nations to formulate clearer regulations and companies to develop standardised products.

**3.7 | Create a directive that develops a mechanism to map public engagement with energy to inform policy-makers.** We suggest a directive to map public engagement with energy at the EU level. This directive would set the goal of creating an organisation that tracks, traces and tests societal engagement with energy. The findings and research conducted by this organisation would then be used to inform the decisions of policy-makers about energy policy. This would be based on the UKERC Observatory for Societal Engagement with Energy (SSE) in the United Kingdom. The current UKERC observatory seeks to map the many complex and diverse ways that people engage with energy, climate change and net zero on an ongoing basis to ensure that wider systems of public engagement are more just, responsive and responsible.

**3.8 | Enforce compulsory adoption of low-energy district heating from waste heat, where technically possible.** We propose making low-energy district heating systems a legal standard in the EU to maximise the use of waste heat from factories and data centres. This sustainable solution, connecting houses to a centralised heating network, ensures consistent and eco-friendly district-wide heat supply. Drawing inspiration from successful implementation in the Netherlands, we recommend mandating waste heat utilisation in specific projects, like large-scale residential or commercial developments when technically possible. This proposal aligns with the EU's environmental goals, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting energy efficiency. Successful implementation necessitates comprehensive guidelines, a legislative framework, financial support, awareness campaigns, and monitoring mechanisms.



## PANEL 4 : THE TASTE OF EUROPE – IMPROVING THE FARM TO FORK PLAN

### **Executive summary**

In the frame of the current European food system, we are not capable of facing the present threats, such as: unhealthy food choices, intensive agriculture practices, overfishing, misleading labels, soil problems, inequality in the food system and biodiversity law.

### **Problem Statement**

The Farm to Fork strategy is one of the core elements of the European Green Deal, aiming to make the food system sustainable, resilient and empowering, contributing to strategic autonomy of the European Union.

With the deadline of 2030 for the Sustainable Development Goals approaching soon, the Farm to Fork strategy plays a crucial role in achieving the goals of zero hunger, good health and well-being, responsible consumption and production, and marine life. However, many barriers remain before these goals can be achieved.

For instance, with 59 million tonnes of food waste generated annually, the environmental and economic impact is evident, because it accounts for 132 billion euros in cost and about 7% of total EU greenhouse Gas emissions. Additionally, according to IFAW, more than 50% of shark species are threatened or near threatened with extinction, and the protection of these species is indispensable for the protection of the environment as well as fighting against climate change. Moreover, small farms make up the majority of farms in the EU and are the most susceptible to climate change while also globally accounting for 32% of GHG emissions. To reduce emissions and increase resilience, small farms need funding and expertise to transition towards agroecology. Furthermore, the EU faces issues of unhealthy soils (60-70% of soils) and soil loss (an area equivalent to the size of Berlin lost annually), along with power asymmetries in food systems due to heavy reliance on subsidies (70% of farmers' incomes come from subsidies) as well. On top of that, farmers' avoidance of governmental bodies due to bureaucratic procedures leads to self-solving practices and limited awareness of government agricultural policies. , the overconsumption of high-sugar and carbonated products in the European Union accounts for over 60 million diabetes cases and sugar-related diseases. Moreover, Lack of clear identification and consumer awareness about products with harmful ingredients, confusion caused by complex ingredient lists.



## Recommendations

**4.1 | Forbid food retailers to destroy and discard unsold food products.** The aim of this proposal is to extend the Garot Law across all EU members to tackle food waste and increase fair access to nutritious food for all. This will be achieved by mandating food retailers to donate food to the public, food charities and other organizations, encouraging them to distribute excess food. Additionally, this initiative will provide relief to individuals and families experiencing access challenges to meals and alleviate their financial burdens. Therefore food retailers should be incentivised to donate their excess to limit the amount of food waste. A penalty scheme with fines of up to €75,000 would be implemented depending on the amount of food waste. In addition, the EU member-states have to promote food waste transparency across food retailers. This includes promoting education on the way in which expiration dates mean, allowing the public to understand that the food is nutritional and edible for longer than stated by the 'expiration date'. The success of this proposal relies on national governments for regulating and food retailers for implementing. Starting with assessment of the Garot law within France, following with the creation of a roadmap to define how and when this law can be implemented across member states.

**4.2 | Strengthen biodiversity protection and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).** The purpose of the policy is to expand and improve the number of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in European waters. MPAs contribute to the overall health and resilience of marine ecosystems by safeguarding vulnerable species such as sharks and turtles, protecting habitats, and providing essential sanctuary for fish populations. Thereby, we must determine MPA networks, amplify them and strengthen enforcement mechanisms to prevent illegal activities. Moreover, we must enhance ecological corridors' connectivity between MPA's to safeguard fish populations' migration and recovery. The one responsible for implementing this policy is the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) in the European Commission, more specifically the MARE.B division. Finally, the European Institutions should give foremost importance to implementing measures and initiatives that safeguard European maritime areas in line with the United Nations Agenda 2030, particularly Goal 14, with the aim of achieving its targets by 2030.

**4.3 | Funding and Expertise for an Agroecological Transition for Small Farmers Scheme (FEAT SFS).** The objective of the Funding and Expertise for an Agroecological Transition for Small Farmers Scheme (FEAT SFS) is to facilitate small farmers' adoption of sustainable agroecological practices by providing both funding and expertise on transitional measures. Small farmers will become more sustainable and resilient while facing environmental challenges and meeting consumer demands. The responsibility for implementing the recommended action lies with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), especially the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

First, to facilitate the transition towards sustainable agriculture practices, it is necessary to re-allocate the existing funding sourced from the CAP and the EAFRD to establish the FEAT SFS in the next upcoming Farm to Fork strategy timeline. It consists of an easily accessible range of funding mechanisms, including grants, subsidies, and low-interest loans for small farmers. Second, organise education programs and training of agricultural researchers and consultants to share the best practices towards small farmers. Concurrently, co-create guidelines and financial incentives with industries to provide farmers with information on the cultivation, management, and market potential to ensure a stable demand and fair pricing. In the Q1 2024, the focus is on agenda-setting and objectives for the FEAT SFS. The Q2 of 2024 involves the first stage of securing funding approval and the allocation of resources. Afterwards, the policy can be implemented in Q3 of 2024 with expert-led education programmes, guidelines and financial incentives to adopt the recommended varieties and methods. In Q4 of 2024, the focus shifts to consultation, monitoring and reflections, allowing for policy maintenance or alterations in Q1 of 2025.

**4.4 | Empowering Consumers through a Comprehensive Sustainable Food Labeling Framework at EU level.** The objective of the policy is to enhance consumer awareness and protection through the implementation of a Common Comprehensive Labeling Framework for products at the European Union level. This framework consists of various measures aimed at providing important information to consumers and ensuring product compliance with health and safety standards. The policy aims to introduce a Front of Pack warning label to identify products with harmful ingredients. A black label will serve as a clear warning to consumers about potential health risk and a simplified ingredient list is included to prevent confusion and deceptive practices. To spread awareness about these labels, it is necessary to develop a dissemination strategy utilizing social media, education and training. To ensure compliance with the new labeling policy, a centralized EU-level whistleblower system and hotline should be created for reporting non-compliant products. The policy highlights the specification of products from local producers to support local economies, promote transparency, and enable consumers to make informed choices, fostering trust and sustainability.

**4.5 | Harmonized taxation regime of excise duties on sugar and carbonated products.** The European Union already has a strong harmonized framework regarding excise duties on harmful substances like alcohol, tobacco and hydrocarbons. Thus, it stands to reason that the taxation of sugar is feasible through the European procedures. The policy aims at creating a common framework and harmonizing unilateral decisions taken by Member States, forming a unified front against diabetes and sugar-related diseases. Following Directive 92/12/EEC, to ensure the establishment and functioning of the internal market, the chargeability of excise duties should be identical in all Member States. The current measures taken regarding the soda and sugar tax are important to ensure shifting the focus of taxing policy on sugar, from levying units to levying sweetness concentration (sweetness per G or L), to encourage manufacturers and consumers to look for healthier goods and benefit from the use of less sweeteners or more responsible options.

Besides, it is important to pay attention for artificial sweeteners and “sugar-free” products, that account for high sweetness with low quantity and the disruption they may have on the tax framework, considering the scientific negative effect they have on health. Just like in the case of excise duties on alcohol, special categories and tax benefits must be acknowledged depending on the origin of the ingredients and of the manufacturer, to favor unrefined and natural sugar and, specially, independent small producers and traditional and local manufacturers. Excise duty shall be assessed and paid in accordance with the procedures laid down by each Member State, bearing in mind that Member States shall apply the same assessment and payment procedures to domestic products as to those from other Member States.

**4.6 | Rewarding farmers for soil health: Diversifying revenue streams of farmers to incentivise environmental regeneration and mitigate power asymmetries in food systems.** The proposal establishes a framework empowering farmers and reducing their dependence on subsidies by incorporating soil health regeneration as an income stream. Through this framework, farmers can generate income via regenerative practices, fostering a more self-sufficient, economically viable, and environmentally sustainable farming system. The proposed key actions involve establishing a dedicated European Soil Health Incentive Program to incentivize farmers to engage in soil conservation and regeneration practices. Additionally, collaboration with transdisciplinary experts would be pursued to develop standardized soil health assessment metrics tailored to European soils, considering factors such as organic matter content, soil structure, nutrient levels, erosion rates, water holding capacity, and biodiversity. A tiered reward system would be implemented, offering financial incentives based on demonstrated improvements in soil health indicators, prioritizing farmers who have implemented sustainable soil management practices. Supporting farmer education, fostering collaboration and partnerships, and implementing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework are also essential. Monitoring and periodic evaluations would be conducted to optimize outcomes. The EU Commission, specifically the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and the EU mission “A Soil Deal for Europe” would be responsible for this directive. Implementing a soil health incentive program in the EU can empower farmers, reduce subsidy dependence, and promote sustainable agriculture, advancing the EU's commitment to sustainability.

**4.7 | Local agricultural consulting centres for sustainable/regenerative practices and transition support.** Farmers often avoid engaging with governmental bodies due to time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. As a result, they tend to handle issues independently, which can lead to the adoption of inaccurate practices and a lack of awareness regarding agricultural policies. The aim of this proposal is to bridge the gaps between agricultural stakeholders and promote sustainable and regenerative practices within the farming community. By creating Local Consulting Centers (LCCs) and facilitating collaboration between farmers, researchers, and local governments, we can enhance soil quality, responsible chemical use, and efficient land utilisation. LCCs should be set up in collaboration with already existing agricultural organisations. ..

Local officers should be assigned to groups of farmers in long term contracts. LLCs will provide consulting services for farmers to improve soil quality, responsibly use chemicals, employ proper practices, efficiently use their lands either by changing crops or using their lands for different financial purposes. Officers can communicate necessary policy changes to farmers and likewise farmers can report the issues they face to them. This prevents farmers from being discouraged by bureaucratic procedures. They will play a role to promote sustainable agriculture not only for farmers but also for consumers by organizing engagement events (competitions, hackathons, festivals, etc.). This will motivate the young to be a part of this transition, attract innovative projects and educate the consumers. LCCs' collaboration with laboratories/universities will ease the transmission of the requests from farmers for soil health assessment. This will contribute to creation of a database for the government to better oversee the soil quality



## PANEL 5 : TAKING BETTER CARE OF EACH OTHER. WHAT SHOULD BE THE EUROPEAN APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH?

### Executive summary

The prevalence of mental health issues among EU citizens has become a significant concern, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there has been a notable rise of 25% in depression and anxiety cases. To tackle this emerging mental health crisis, our proposals aim to present a range of multidisciplinary solutions with a focus on prevention, inclusion, and regulation.

### Problem Statement

In January 2023, almost 60% of young Europeans described their mental health as “not great” or “poor.” This number has rapidly increased, and the number of young people suffering from mental health conditions has drastically risen since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mental health is a concern as three young Europeans lose their lives every day due to suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among 18 to 35-year-olds.

Younger people also reported poorer mental health than other age groups, significantly impacting their activity. Among young Europeans, 70,5% feel they could have accomplished more without mental health issues. In light of this, the impact of mental health on people’s capacities significantly affects the economy.

Despite the high prevalence of mental health issues among European youth, almost 60% reported not seeking mental health support in the past year. Leading causes of this problem are the difficulty of talking about mental health issues and the stigma surrounding mental health.

Some policies have been put in place to counter these problems, such as The Youth Mental Health Initiative launched in 2020 as a part of the EU’s broader mental health strategy. The initiative focuses specifically on the mental well-being of young people. However, the policies implemented are insufficient, and efforts to tackle mental health problems are underfunded. Therefore, more could be done to improve young Europeans’ mental health. It is in the hands of the political leaders to take action to ensure that the future of Europe is healthy and that young people feel empowered by the actions taken by their leaders.



## Recommendations

**5.1 | Prevent the negative psychological influence of mass media on the individual, by implementing media literacy programmes that educate and inform society.** This can be achieved by fostering collaborations with mental health professionals and organisations to develop and implement media literacy programs. These programs aim to educate individuals on critical evaluation techniques, and focus on revealing the principles, goals, and strategies underlying the functioning of mass media. By empowering individuals to discern harmful narratives and misinformation, these initiatives will contribute to the reduction of anxiety levels in society.

**5.2 | Implement a comprehensive mental health educational framework for all schools in the EU.** This framework will focus on promoting psychological well-being, providing early diagnosis tools, and teaching students coping mechanisms. This policy intends to ensure consistent mental health education across the EU to reduce stigma and provide adequate care. This eight-week programme can be implemented by school counselors for one hour per week.

**5.3 | Reduce the gap in accessibility of sports facilities for people with disabilities to foster an inclusive and equitable environment.** People with disabilities face barriers to accessing sports and physical recreation due to factors like functional limitations, extensive expenditure, and a lack of nearby facilities. The creation of a framework incorporating best practices throughout member states would provide a more inclusive and supportive structure. The inclusion of people with a disability into sports provides them with a sense of belonging in their community, thereby increasing their overall mental health and well-being and thus empowering them and raising self-esteem.

**5.4 | Create measures to ensure the privacy and security of confidential and sensitive health data collected through technology.** Technologies, such as video conference apps, are already being vastly used for online therapy. Moreover, artificial intelligence (AI), being a free tool, is used all the more in therapy and mental health. However, privacy and security have not yet been regulated in regard to the use of AI, creating the possibility of data breaches and leaks of confidential information. Therefore, the policy proposes the creation of a Safety Criteria Certificate to be awarded to video-conference apps that comply with a list of requirements regarding security and privacy. As well as an establishment of a list of mandatory prerequisites in regard to privacy that all AI will have to follow.

**5.5 | Foster the creation of mentoring programs in marginalized communities through the creation of a framework.** The role of these mentors is to provide support and guidance, develop relationships, increase awareness for mental health issues, inform, and act as a stepping stone toward mental health care. It is key to ensure the inclusion of mentors from diverse ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and age groups. Mentors would be trained with the necessary skills to provide youth with competent role models with whom they can relate. The community would be involved through the support of local businesses, schools, and community organizations to provide meeting spaces and potential mentors, thereby creating lasting partnerships. This framework aims to be continuously adapted by best practices derived from the implementation of projects across the Union.



**5.6 | Provide a holistic approach to mental health to create an effective individualised treatment, focusing on the needs of the individual.** Exhibiting a “whole person” mental health approach that integrates interdisciplinary mental health services into primary care. From 2020, the EU considers mental health as a fundamental human right. Therefore, societies should ensure equitable, person-centered, and recovery-focused mental health care services by adhering to the guiding principles of respect for human dignity, non-discrimination, the right to mental health care, and informed consent. To achieve this, the training of medical staff and mental health practitioners should also be person-centered and rights-based. The policy also recommends the creation of a European framework to implement the best practices in all countries, adapting them to the national contexts and needs. Furthermore, incorporating training on evidence-based practices in the curricula of healthcare professionals, focusing on the five main pillars of human right-based approaches: 1) respect for legal capacity; 2) promotion of non-coercive practices; 3) active participation in society; 4) community inclusion; 5) recovery-oriented approaches.

**5.7 | Keep the awareness of mental health stigma high on the European agenda.** The stigma associated with mental health problems is one of the main barriers preventing young people from seeking help. It affects all aspects of life, reduces social acceptance and self-esteem, and contributes to social inequalities. This policy primarily emphasizes the need to fully understand the extent of mental health related stigma, which should be done through endorsing more research in this area. It also suggests the development and implementation of evidence-based and culturally sensitive campaigns targeting stigma via the following channels: social media platforms, podcasts, and poster campaigns. Lastly, it encourages active involvement of young people in the cocreation of diverse projects, and youth-led initiatives.

**5.8 | Create informational resources addressing eco-anxiety and stress related to climate change.** Eco-anxiety is a relatively new concept, describing the distress associated with negative perceptions and awareness about climate change and its consequences. Chronic fear of environmental doom is having an impact on the mental health of younger generations, which leads to an increase in general anxiety, impairment of daily life and projection of the future. This policy suggests the creation of new support services, such as, online multi-platform containing an interactive app, a community platform and e-learning modules. The informational content of such services should derive from experts’ evidence-based recommendations on climate change and eco-anxiety, hence providing a multidimensional approach to the issue.



## **PANEL 6 : SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL TRANSITION. RESPONDING TO A TRANSFORMING WORLD**

### **Executive summary**

The following proposals address the EU issue of Sustainable Digital Transition based on three pillars: Education, Legislative Adjustments and Sustainable AI, Ethics and the Future of Work from the youth perspective.

### **Problem Statement**

The global shift towards technology as a driver of economic growth presents challenges for the production of digital hardware, relying on limited critical raw materials. Projected 500% increased demand by 2050 underscores the need to address supply chain resilience. Concerns arise from raw material sources concentration in specific regions, highlighting overreliance on few dominant players. Environmental impact, including energy consumption and resource extraction, raises ecological footprint concerns.

Prioritizing certain pillars in digital transition steers economies towards an inclusive and environmentalall conscious digital future.

### **Recommendations**

#### **6.1 | Disassemblable Products and Recycling of Critical Raw Materials**

In order to improve raw material waste management, it is essential to establish a European Norm (EN) on the design and production of disassemblable products. This would enable efficient recycling and recovery of valuable materials. As such, we propose mandating manufacturers adopt this standard to facilitate easy disassembly and promote recycling at the end of a product's lifecycle. This requirement will promote closed-loop production, reduce waste generation, and encourage responsible consumption. Consumption of repaired, reconditioned, and reused consumer products will be facilitated with a reduced VAT tax compared to new products. By 2030, all products containing critical raw materials must include at least 50% recycled critical raw materials. Critical raw materials play a crucial role in numerous industries, yet their extraction and disposal pose significant environmental and geopolitical challenges. To address this issue, we propose funding research initiatives within the Horizon Europe programme aimed at advancing the technological capabilities for recycling critical raw materials.



**6.2 | Tax Benefits for EU-resident Companies in the Raw Materials Sector and Higher Ceilings of EU Funds for Areas with Lower Percentage of Digitalization.** The actual set of actions just proposed in the Critical Raw Materials Act, aiming to create a Single EU Market setting benchmarks for domestic capacities along specific criteria based on the % of extraction, processing and recycling, is focused on how to ensure a secure, diversified and sustainable supply chain of critical raw materials. However, to encourage the individual companies to embrace the idea of a European simultaneous digitalisation, preventing them from being dismissed because of the art. 107 (prohibition on state aid) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), we propose to have tax breaks for companies which operate in the sector of extraction, but with constraints on the localization (both physical and tax office). Also, in the view of a proper and equal digital transition, we propose to identify the areas with lower percentage of digitalization and elevate, for these, the ceilings of EU funds.

**6.3 | Enhancing Interoperability of the EU Digital Public Administration Sector in order to Reduce Inefficiency.** While there is an abundance of digital systems in the field of public administration, a considerable level of inefficiency has long been diminishing the efficacy we may benefit from. This created an urgent need for higher interoperability between the member states and their digital administrative system. The coverage of this interoperability ranges from daily-life matters such as transportation pass and digital identity documents to administrative procedures such as city hall registration and tax declaration. This interoperability mechanism differentiates itself from a mere online wallet as it will be legally recognized as an official source of authority in all member states.

**6.4 | Fair Distribution of the Benefits of Digital Transition in the Workplace.** Following the European AI Strategy, it is to be ensured that the benefits of a digital transition are distributed equally across European citizens. As such, the EU is to provide funding to private companies, NGOs and Public Institutions alike (research, education, governments...) to apply new automation and AI technologies where deemed convenient. Local small institutions would be prioritized in the distribution of these subsidies. Funding would be conditional on the compliance to a set of criteria set by an expanded Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI, established by the already existing High Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence. These criteria are to include, among others:

- The company must not make any head count redundancies for a specified period following the implementation of the new technologies.
- Workers are to be fairly compensated for the increase in productivity brought by these new technologies, whether it may be with a salary increase or with a reduction in working hours, and a digital workplace skills plan budget that enables workers to adapt to the future of work across the EU.
- All workers whose task is replaced with a new technology must be offered several opportunities to be reskilled and rehired within the same company or trained to perform system administrator tasks to oversee the automation of the task.



**6.5 | Subsidize Research Projects Focusing on Building Sustainable and Responsible AI.** The environmental impact of AI, with energy consumption in particular, is a key challenge in the sustainable development of new technologies. In order to ensure that AI development will be conducted in an environmentally-responsible manner, we need a holistic sustainable approach tackling all aspects: from hardware storage to data usage and model design choices. More funding should be allocated to research projects that focus on building sustainable and responsible AI, going beyond the maximization of model accuracy and performance. With this, we encourage researchers to seek innovative and efficient ML model architectures, use data in a minimalistic way, and substantiate access to supercomputers. Besides that, AI researchers should be transparent in their energy usage by explicitly computing their energy and CO2 consumption when publishing their work.

**6.6 | AI as a Tool to Improve Both Sustainable Processing of Raw Materials and Use of Resources in Different Sectors.** Decoupling digital innovation from CO2 emissions is paramount to accelerating the transition toward sustainability. This can be achieved by using AI as a tool to enable substantial improvements through initiatives such as implementing clean energy grids, adopting precision agriculture, enhancing smart mobility, and improving water management. As far as raw materials are concerned, we recommend using AI to provide accurate data on price fluctuation while improving the tracking and use of resources. For example, we recommend working on waste management processing to identify patterns that may facilitate the adoption of more sustainable practices in raw materials extraction and conversion. By facilitating the adoption of innovative digital solutions, we can enhance efficiency, traceability, and transparency in waste management operations, leading to improved resource utilization and reduced environmental impact. This would also foster the development of Mining 4.0, which integrates high-tech solutions in extraction practices. Finally, machine learning techniques could optimize the drilling process and the analysis of geological layers. Yet, the use of AI should be conditioned by the implementation of an environmental impact audit to make sure that using AI will not be counterproductive in terms of energy consumption.

**6.7 | Smart Use of Resources for Enhancing Power Usage Effectiveness in Data Centers** Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) alternatives should be more researched and used efficiently in data centers for Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) metrics. It should be further enhanced with the use of Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) programs and modeling tools, which can decrease energy consumption in storage used for hardware equipment. Better airflow and cooling can be supplied with the use of CFD in order to improve the facility's effectiveness. Moreover, data centers can use renewable energy sources in countries with beneficial weather conditions. Solar panels can be installed on the roof of buildings in sunny countries. Geothermal systems for energy can be set up underground. Additionally, wind power stations can be built close to the data centers. All actions would be taken to provide more diverse sustainable energy sources for consumption.



**6.8 | Establishing an EU Supervisory Authority Issuing Guidelines on the Development of AI Software while Subsidizing Complicit Domestic Alternatives and Mandating Transparency of Those Headquartered Outside the EU.** The Analysis and Research Team of the Council of the EU warns that large language models like ChatGPT are "black boxes", with proprietary source codes making it difficult to identify and address potential biases and discrimination. Attempts to curate training data manually has also proven to reflect creator biases. The EU lacks competitive open-source alternatives to address these concerns, and current AI regulations like the proposed AI Act do not adequately tackle these issues and barely scratch the surface. Accordingly, our proposal suggests mandating transparency of data and criteria used to filter datasets of AI-creators headquartered outside the EU but wishing to remain present in the market. We further suggest establishing an EU supervisory authority tasked with issuing guidelines on the development of AI systems. Additionally, subsidizing domestic alternatives developing AI software would provide a much-needed acceleration to OpenAI competitors.

**6.9 | Ensuring Human Preservation and Acceptance to AI and Digital Changes.** To ensure lifelong learning and bridge the gap between education and society. We suggest that the EU offers training and reinforcement in digital literacy and social and emotional skills with follow up, especially at a very young age (primary). It is important to prioritize digital literacy and skills development among students. This could include offering training programs and courses on digital tools and technologies, as well as encouraging the development of soft skills (critical thinking, collaboration, communication, self-awareness, interculturality, ect.) and ethical considerations related to digital technologies. For example, analyzing and teaching how to use the internet of things while developing the skills, so future workers and citizens can function in the digital world without facing alienation.

**6.10 | Courses Offered by the EU for a More Sustainable and Resource-efficient Approach.** Although the EU has initiatives such as Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE), Directive regarding protection of wasted and damaged digital materials and Circular Electronics Initiative, Individuals still need to gain knowledge and skills in circular design principles and technologies. We suggest that the EU offers courses and programs that teaches adults how to integrate eco-design, product life extension, and material recycling concepts into their work area, fostering a more sustainable and resource-efficient approach. For example, students in fields like engineering should learn more about approaches on how to design sustainable and eco-friendly materials. Another example is the creation of new hardware that should be lightweight and implemented with as little raw material as possible. The goal is to promote a circular economy through practices such as repairing, reusing, and recycling.



## **PANEL 7 : SECURITY AND DEFENCE INTEGRATION TO CONFRONT GLOBAL CHALLENGES**

### **Executive Summary**

Increased EU member state cooperation in the defence and military sectors is paramount for the European Union of the 21st century in the light of the current international political landscape. To this end, we recommend increased joint defence planning, including collaboration of intelligence services and national armed forces. Preparing the EU to effectively react to new, hybrid warfare threats and cybersecurity issues is another key goal of this proposal. Lastly, a more active foreign policy and strengthening democratic participation in the EU's security policy through changes to the EU's voting system are of great importance. Solidarity, cooperation and burden-sharing build the backbone of this new, ambitious EU security policy proposal which aims to position the EU as a peaceful beacon of democracy in an increasingly complex world.

### **Problem Statement**

The European Union faces political and institutional challenges in addressing global security threats. The EU's security and defence strategy fails to effectively develop full cooperation in military programming and funding between member states. It cannot support collaboration between member states, including in intelligence and cybersecurity, which fails to position the EU as an actor for security and defence in the international arena.

The military systems of EU member states often operate as if they were independent entities, lacking effective communication and mutual trust, which has proved inadequate when faced with growing security threats. This lack of joint procurement has resulted in a fragmented defence landscape, increasing the overall costs but decreasing overall efficiency.

The EU requires cohesive and coordinated actions to respond to these threats effectively. Recent data has shown that the vast majorities of EU citizens in all member states support further EU integration in defence. The EU needs more cooperation in its security and defence architecture to address growing multi-domain threats.

Looking at the current geopolitical context, these issues are more relevant than ever, and the European Union and the divergences between its member states need to allow for an adequate response. To anticipate and react cohesively to global challenges, such as the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the EU must further its integration in security and defence to ensure the safety of its citizens and become the global force for peace that it strives to be.



## Recommendations

**7.3 | Encourage the collaboration between the intelligence services of each Member State.** The EU Intelligence Analysis Centre (INTCEN) could benefit from increased financial, technical, and human resources, as this would enhance its capabilities in collecting, analysing and disseminating intelligence. We suggest the further development of mutually associated projects. We recommend creating EU classification levels, defined by the Member States, whereby the intelligence services are obliged to share the information with INTCEN.

**7.4 | Strengthen the data protection and transparency for the Swedish initiative.** We observed that information exchange between the EU member states presents a problem considering the national interests dominance and security concerns. To enhance the implementation of the COUNCIL FRAMEWORK DECISION 2006/960/JHA, commonly referred to as the 'Swedish initiative', we recommend introducing new data protection measures, clarifying already existing directives and enhancing transparency. We consider it would be effective to implement additional data protection measures such as advanced encryption techniques, strict access controls, and secure storage infrastructure. Additionally, to maximise the impact of the Provisional Agreement on Law Enforcement Information Exchange Directive (2022), it is necessary to provide clarity regarding the proposed measures. This includes comprehensive documentation and communication of the agreement's provisions, ensuring that member states have a clear understanding of their obligations and the benefits of compliance. Enhancing transparency also involves making the information accessing procedure more easily understandable and accessible, such as by digitising the process and providing comprehensive training for personnel.

**7.5 | Increase Societal and Institutional Resilience in Response to Hybrid Warfare Threats.** This includes educational programs for citizens on disinformation detection, as well as resilience to manipulation and propaganda. Critical infrastructure like national energy grids must be well protected against attacks, both physical and cyber in nature, and greater interoperability between national emergency plans is needed. Public-private cooperation is strongly encouraged. We recommend the creation of expert bodies focusing on different aspects of hybrid warfare threats to ensure a quick and effective rollout of emergency action plans. Building up European strategic reserves and resilient supply chains of food, medicine, energy sources and defence capabilities is encouraged. The National Emergency Supply Agency (NESA) of Finland could serve as a good example for an integrated and holistic approach to hybrid warfare threats.

**7.6 | Coordinate cybersecurity efforts towards citizenship security.** We recommend creating a European Cybersecurity department in each Member State defence Ministry to establish a secure communication channel to share information on cybersecurity threats and common standards. To coordinate these efforts, we propose that the European Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) coordinates information exchange, infrastructure building and joint training as well as joint operations of the respective cybersecurity departments.

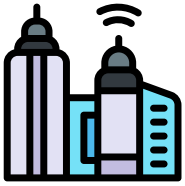


We also recommend that public entities strengthen their cybersecurity teams, as those entities constitute the most vulnerable point on citizenship security. Actively raising public awareness about the risks and reach of cybercrime and promoting good cybersecurity practices are equally vital.

**7.7 | Support the European Sky Shield Initiative.** Missile attacks pose a threat to security in all of Europe, with the effects not being limited to national borders. However, air defence is still organised on a national level, making it less effective and more expensive - cooperation on all of European territory is indispensable. We therefore recommend that the European Parliament invites all European states to join the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) and thus shows political support for the initiative. This could also signal that the European Parliament would approve an enhanced cooperation in this field if necessary. In addition, to facilitate the planning of such an air defence network, we recommend that the European Defence Agency conduct research on possibilities of coordinating joint Air-to-Air and Land-to-Air defence systems. Equipment for the ESSI cooperation should be purchased following the procedure described in point 7.2.

**7.8 | Diversify and Strengthen Alliances.** The EU should reinforce reciprocal political dialogue on issues of mutual interest to elevate security partnerships and generate pragmatic strategic defence policies. This includes the renewal and continuation of a mutually beneficial ASEAN-EU relationship for increased information-sharing and extending security coalitions in the Indo-Pacific. The EU should also increase its presence in the Arctic region in cooperation with other current Arctic States to sustainably secure and extract resources for the green transition and supporting energy security. Furthermore, the Global Gateway programme can be made more efficient by considering the strategic value of investments for European security. Within the framework, the EU should enhance leadership opportunities, make funds more accessible, and place higher priority on the strategic value for Europe when allocating the investments.

**7.9 | Improve EU representation in the UN Security Council.** At the moment the EU is not directly represented at the UN Security Council. However, to have an effective security and defence policy it is important to increase the influence of the EU on global security issues. EU member states represented in the Security Council should be obliged to consult with the European Council before voting on Security Council resolutions. This consultation means that the European Council will discuss the Security Council resolution at hand and vote on it using Qualified Majority Voting. The outcome of this vote will serve as a non-binding advice to the EU Member States seated in the Security Council.



## PANEL 8 : CITIES OF THE FUTURE. HOW COULD SUSTAINABLE CITIES CONTRIBUTE IN EUROPEAN AUTONOMY AND PEOPLE WELFARE?

### Executive Summary

As environmental sustainability has turned out to be one of the most burning challenges of our times, cities are both part of the problem and part of the solution. According to the European mobility framework, 70% of the European population live in cities, generating 23% of transport-related greenhouse gas emissions. Investment in more ecological cities and urban planning figured in the report of the Conference on the Future of Europe as levers for a more sustainable Europe. Participants in the 2022 European Student Assembly most specifically mentioned the need to foster more sustainable, smarter and healthier urban mobility. Urban planning is a matter of sustainability, territorial equity and strategic autonomy. How to create cities that fulfil the needs of their inhabitants and interact with their environment in a way that does not endanger the life of future generations?

### Probleme Statement

People live in cities. But not only do they live there. They travel from one to another. Historical and cultural cities, as well as modern and multicultural ones, are constantly crossed by a multitude of people, who experience, breath and take active part of many different urban realities. Everyone has to deal with cities almost on a daily basis, and our panelists, being from different cities, small and big, helped with bringing their ideas and experiences, thus creating a perfect melting pot to build up their ideal city.

“Cities are seen as both the source of and solution to today's economic, environmental and social challenges. Europe's urban areas are home to over two-thirds of the EU's population [...] urban areas are the engines of the European economy and act as catalysts for creativity and innovation throughout the Union.” ([https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/themes/urban-development\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/themes/urban-development_en)). In the light of this, addressing a topic as the city of the future is a real challenge, but also an opportunity to bring up innovative and cutting-edge ideas. The United Nations, as well, recognized the importance of investing in cities and dedicated to them one of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG11, with a title that is self explaining “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. In a well defined environment of policies and with the consciousness of the existing and concrete involvement of big actors, the work of this panel is aimed at pointing out what is missing in terms of European autonomy and people welfare as far as cities are concerned.

The policies that are hereafter shown are treating the topics of urban mobility, housing, social inclusion, sustainability and more, accessing from various sides to the theme of the Panel.



## Recommendations

**8.1 | Cities of the future increase the availability of free indoor public spaces.** Free or affordable public spaces play a crucial role in enhancing community well-being and promoting social inclusion. Investing in these spaces not only strengthens urban resilience but also fosters equal opportunities and cultural enrichment for all city residents, regardless of their income. They offer a secure and accessible environment for individuals who may not have suitable indoor spaces of their own. However, current EU proposals predominantly focus on green areas, which are not always accessible due to weather conditions. Therefore, this proposal recommends the establishment of a fund aimed at financing and co-funding existing public spaces by repurposing underutilised buildings and partnering with municipal entities to transform vacant spaces into hubs of community interactions. Expanding and upgrading public libraries represents a good starting point of the policy.

**8.2 | Cities of the future renovate existing buildings to make them more energy-efficient, sustainable and accessible.** The sustainability of residential construction and its energy consumption has improved tremendously by taking advantage of new materials, innovative technologies and efficient use of resources. However, a critical point that persists is older constructions, which consume more energy and resources. In order to tackle this issue, the EU should mandate a specific deadline before which older buildings must be renovated. This process could include strategic approaches to energy preservation, such as improving external insulation, as well as the reusing of resources. Specific solutions should include the installation of solar panels and the implementation of smart home applications. In addition, a part of the process should be dedicated to removing accessibility barriers in old buildings for people with reduced mobility.

**8.3 | Cities of the future cultivate locally financed mining hubs – facilities which manage waste, innovate and can support the rights to repairs and refurbishment of the equipment, in order to reintegrate it into the economy.** By mandating the EU Member States to do so, the European Parliament can significantly bolster resource recovery efforts, create a sharing culture, generate jobs, establish more public-private partnerships, and ignite sustainable and circular economic growth, all while minimising the environmental footprint in a democratic, open to all manner. It is vital to establish a proper governance structure that would manage and promote equitable access to shared resources and knowledge. We propose that hubs are also connected to the online platform that was proposed by Article 7 of the Directive Of The European Parliament And Of The Council On Common Rules Promoting The Repair Of Goods, further fostering the circular economy principles.

**8.4 | Cities of the future introduce comprehensive measures to ensure free and accessible drinking water for all urban residents and visitors.** Access to clean drinking water is a human right and promoting water accessibility should be considered a critical measure to address environmental challenges and ensure the well-being of all citizens.



Moreover, in order to combat plastic pollution and align with the EU's commitment to reduce single-use plastics, any proposed strategies should minimise plastic waste associated with drinking water consumption. Therefore, the objective of this policy proposal is to introduce an urban water management framework focused on facilitating increased access to free drinking water in urban areas in order to enhance public health, reduce plastic pollution, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Steps included in this framework should be the introduction of legislation mandating the installation of public water fountains in urban areas, alongside measures inspired by successful practices in countries like Italy and France, where restaurants are required to offer free tap water upon request.

**8.5 | Cities of the future introduce community programmes for vertical gardening in the European Urban Areas.** Due to the urge for clean grounds for agriculture, highways, and homes, modern towns are gradually facing a process of devegetation. Integrating gardening and agriculture into urban contexts is crucial to address food security, environmental sustainability and community well-being. As traditional farming methods are hindered by the limited space in urban areas, this policy proposal advocates for the implementation of vertical farming through aeroponics as an innovative solution to optimise land use efficiency within the already available areas that could be suited for vertical farming and gardening (company rooftops, residential community open spaces). This policy also encourages the establishment of community programs implemented by the EU for the creation of vegetable gardens for citizens to maintain with the assistance and guidance of community specialists. The combination of these solutions would allow to increase local food production, minimise the carbon footprint associated with traditional farming methods, optimise the use of electric energy and ultimately, foster community engagement and well-being through active participation in urban gardening.

**8.6 | Cities of the future limit urban sprawl through the development of mixed use neighbourhoods.** Urban populations are increasing, and with them the need for housing. Natural landscapes outside city limits are continuously destroyed to meet this demand. Additionally, the roads to these areas take a toll on the environment. To combat this, it is necessary to develop accessible mixed-use communities, where services such as healthcare and education can be reached within walking distance. Thus, a mechanism is proposed to use grants from the European Regional Development Fund to redevelop single-purpose commercial and disused industrial areas into densified, technologically advanced neighbourhoods, which must be accessible by public transportation which meet the needs of all citizens. The ultimate goal will be to ensure that all new urbanisation takes the form of redevelopment. This will both increase the cohesiveness of Europe's urban spaces and encourage more limited, more accessible and thus ecologically sustainable urban development.



### **8.7| Cities of the future develop and modernise bicycle and public transit infrastructure.**

The environmental and climate crisis the world is faced with require cities to take decisive action seeking out ways of limiting pollution, providing citizens with alternative modes of transport, and improving the existing public transport infrastructure. In order to make urban spaces more livable and accessible, the EU should legislate that investments in public transportation must match or even exceed those dedicated to motorways. Additionally, the European commissioner for Mobility and Transport should promote multi-modal integration in European cities by encouraging municipalities to facilitate seamless integration between bike and rail networks, with bike parking at rail stations, allowing convenient transitions between biking. Rail travel should also consider people with reduced mobility by installing for example wide sidewalks, ramps, handrails and benches. Another step should include enhancing safety measures in order to encourage citizens to switch to sustainable modes of transportation. This would include mandating the implementation of safety standards for bike lanes and rail infrastructure.

**8.8 | Cities of the future are easily accessible to one another by means of an efficient, affordable and fully harmonised railway network.** Connecting cities means connecting people. To enhance social and economic integration, and in order to improve the practicality of interurban rail travel, it is proposed that the EU Agency for Railways should be given the mandate to coordinate interurban travel across the Union through the harmonisation of ticket vending and scheduling logistics. This will allow rail travel to compete with less environmentally sustainable methods, such as air travel. Furthermore, it is proposed that more investment is made to improve and standardise rail infrastructure in the member states, through a fund created by a Fifth Railway Package. Mechanisms such as flat rate tickets in the spirit of Interrail, an improved network of night trains and favourable tax regimes should also be introduced in order to remove barriers to the economisation of rail travel.



## **PANEL 9 : EXCELLENCE VERSUS INCLUSION? HOW CAN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OFFER A MORE INCLUSIVE ACCESS TO SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE?**

### **Executive summary**

The following policy recommendations aim to enhance various aspects of higher education institutions and improve the overall educational experience for students. These recommendations address social and sustainability initiatives, students' mental health needs, assistance for students with disabilities, embracing transdisciplinary education, expanding the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters program, providing vacancies for students in R&D projects, inclusion of vulnerable non-EU students, and the establishment of an EU scholarship program. Implementing these policy recommendations will contribute to a more socially responsible, inclusive, and sustainable higher education system in the EU. These initiatives will empower students, support their well-being, enhance academic quality, foster innovation, and provide equal opportunities for all.

### **Problem Statement**

We believe that inclusion and excellence are not two separate topics, but are strongly interrelated, as one results in the other. Over the past few years, we have all witnessed many substantial changes on our planet, namely climate change, energy waste, COVID-19 pandemic etc. We now need to re-evaluate the enormous capacity of our universities, as some of the greatest knowledge creators, to cultivate more sustainable and socially responsible citizens in order to ultimately save the planet. On the other hand, a fundamental reassessment of educational methods regarding higher education is inevitable and seems necessary to not only cultivate such responsible citizens, but also to allow transdisciplinary thinking to flourish. According to “European Parliament resolution of 12 June 2018 on modernisation of education in the EU (2017/2224(INI))”, many areas of higher education were designated for improvement. The Parliament stated that, among others, there is a need for implementing transdisciplinary education (56, 87), inclusion of migrants and refugees at European universities (100), cooperation between educational institutions and the world of work (158), highlighting the research-based education (59), and providing ECTS for students’ volunteer work (155). These issues were also addressed in “Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) (2021/C 66/01)” where one of the Priority Areas was higher education (Strategic priority 4). Although the recommendations have been proposed, we, the students, feel that not enough effort has been made to enforce them. It has been decided to take a step back and investigate the concepts to finally come up with more practical and innovative ideas and actions to make EU higher education more inclusive and excellent. We will shortly encounter a lack of qualification and motivation within the European workforce. Students will not see the benefits of continuing their education at the Higher Education Institutions, therefore the intellectual and technical development of the society will be inhibited.



We thus strongly urge the members of the European Parliament to consider the following recommendations. Taking into account the crucial role of higher education in social and economic development, as well as in facing up to the challenges of the modern world, our recommendations aim to provide inclusive, transdisciplinary and responsible higher education. We also emphasize the need to promote, and thus increase, cooperation between universities and external stakeholders.

## Recommendations

**9.1 | Social and sustainability initiatives.** There is a need to reinforce the social responsibility of higher education institutions and involve universities in more societal actions. It is, thus, recommended that the EU incentivises and promotes the use of university facilities and resources with the aim to provide spaces for students to collaborate with organizations focusing on social, environmental, sustainable, and volunteering initiatives. This will raise awareness about student proposals that can have an impact on today's society. At the same time, giving students easy access to EU initiatives, and defining their participation as educational activities, granting ECTS or other forms of recognition, will enhance student empowerment, quality and relevance of higher education.

**9.2 | Addressing students' mental health needs through capacity-building for academic staff.** More than 40% of higher education institutions' students have suffered from symptoms of mental health issues during the completion of their studies. To support the wellbeing of students it is necessary to provide or to improve capacity-building to aid academic staff in being responsive and adaptive to the needs of students equitably. To address this need at the European level, a Curriculum of Training for academic staff is required to provide them with the requisite knowledge and skills to better identify students struggling with their mental health where it is negatively impacting their ability to study. This will allow academic staff to better respond to these challenges and contribute to a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, this calls upon the establishment of a mental health office within each higher education institution where students can be referred to but that also provides support to educators faced with these issues. The aim is, therefore, to ensure their integration into the entire educational process and university life.

**9.3 | Assistance for students with disabilities.** Students with disabilities face significant disadvantages resulting from chronic illnesses and physical impairments. Consequently, it is essential to provide adequate resources and tools to universities so as to ensure that these students have equal access to all essential equipment and facilities for a comfortable and conducive learning environment. This recommendation urges the adaptation of pre-existing infrastructure, such as elevators, toilets, dormitories, classroom materials. Similarly, it is advised to strengthen the adoption of a comprehensive disability policy that guarantees equal access and opportunities to education for all students to succeed in their studies. Therefore, eliminating barriers and encouraging mobility within the EU will foster an inclusive and supportive educational environment that will facilitate their academic and professional pursuits.



**9.4 | Embracing transdisciplinary education. Students are often confined to studying only one subject without much exposure to other disciplines.** To enable students to have a more holistic view they should have the opportunity to have a transdisciplinary education. By combining different fields of studies, it is possible to create new and exciting fields of research that will lead to more innovative, creative and adaptive individuals. To make this happen, the EU has to support European universities to actively promote transdisciplinary education. This means encouraging universities to create an environment where students can collaborate and learn across different subjects by seeking partners with different specializations and integrate interdisciplinary approaches into their educational programs.

**9.5 | Expanding the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters program to the Bachelor level.** Expanding Erasmus+ programs to include joint Bachelor's degrees will provide students with international experience, knowledge enrichment, and improved job prospects. It will foster collaboration among universities, making them more efficient and engaged globally. Joint Bachelor programs will cultivate multicultural perspectives, essential for addressing contemporary challenges. This institutional expansion will create interconnected universities, allowing specialization and capacity sharing among partners. Overall, the proposed expansion will enhance education quality and opportunities for students while strengthening European universities in their global competitiveness.

**9.6 | Providing vacancies for first and second cycle students in R&D projects funded by the EU.** Students entering the labor market frequently encounter the challenge of lacking prior experience in research or project development. Enabling students to participate in research and development projects depending on their discipline can enhance their theoretical knowledge acquired during higher education and foster the acquisition of practical skills. Additionally, collaboration between universities and the private sector stimulates innovation and offers mutual benefits. It is recommended to incorporate a requirement of engaging at least one first or second cycle student in the R&D projects financially supported by the EU. It is crucial to promote the establishment of partnerships between higher education institutions, businesses, and industry to offer students valuable real-world learning opportunities.

**9.7 | Inclusion of vulnerable non-EU students.** To address the challenges faced by refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants across and around the EU, it is imperative to establish EU-wide initiatives to include them in European higher education systems. Several universities have already demonstrated the feasibility of an inclusive approach. The EU must build on initiatives such as the UNESCO qualifications passport program, which facilitates the recognition of refugees' and vulnerable migrants' previous academic qualifications. This is needed to achieve a more inclusive approach to provide programs that focus on the coexistence, personal, and professional development as well as programs that provide language and cultural education, entrepreneurship skills, and access to necessities such as psychological care, physical activity, sports, physiotherapy, and legal services to those in need.



**9.8 | Establishment of EU scholarship program.** Several countries have restricted or eliminated the fundings that were aimed to support students from low socio-economic backgrounds. It is recommended to allocate EU fundings by a dedicated program directly to higher education institutions. This will provide them with the necessary resources to minimize the financial differences and close the gap among the students by the establishment of EU scholarships, not interfering with the national budget and national social support systems.



## **PANEL 10 : EUROPEAN YEAR OF SKILLS – WHAT ROLE CAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS PLAY IN REDUCING THE SKILLS GAP IN EUROPE?**

### **Executive Summary**

Although the EU is taking steps to tackle the skills gap, there are still challenges that require immediate attention: rapid technological advancements, mismatch between education and industry needs, recognition of skills, qualifications and learning. The EU faces significant challenges in recruiting employees with the essential skill set, with more than 75% of businesses encountering difficulties in finding qualified candidates. Also, unforeseen events, such as the War between Russia and Ukraine, Covid-19 pandemic, or the earthquake in Türkiye highlighted the need for new skills and the constant change in trends of skills requirements, which are not delivered by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). To address the issue of a skills gap, collaboration is essential among governments, employers, individuals and HEIs.

### **Problem Statement**

Reduced productivity, unfilled job positions, increased unemployment, and slow innovation : these are just some of the consequences of the skills gap in Europe. A skills gap is a disparity between the skills possessed by job seekers and those demanded by employers. Technological progress continues to shape industries and create new skills gap. The issue is particularly pronounced in digital literacy, where 4 out of 10 adults and every third worker in Europe lacks fundamental digital skills. Migration and mobility within the EU also contribute to the skills gap, as mismatched qualifications, language barriers, regional disparities, and cultural adaptation challenges impede the full utilization of migrant skills. Many individuals acquire skills through non-formal learning experiences, such as work experience, volunteering, or self-study. However, these skills are often not formally recognized or valued by employers.



## Recommendations

**10.1 | Search the Gap: A Comprehensive Skills Survey.** To help higher education institutions (HEI) effectively address Europe's future skills requirements, we should be aware of the existing and potential skills gap. We recommend creating dedicated research working group from various sectors to design and conduct a comprehensive survey to assess the current and future skills gap in the EU.

**10.2 | Talent without Borders: Innovative Scholarship and Mobility Programmes.** We recommend HEIs to support specific talent migration of critical skills aided by scholarship and mobility programmes, aimed at tackling unforeseen events and EU challenges (such as migration, climate change, pandemic events). Providing financial grants to EU and non-EU students, and academic staff may help create more diverse innovative skills to address the issues. Educational programmes may be implemented into the universities based on the results of a Skills Gap Survey.

**10.3 | AI to Qualify: Implement Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Educational Processes.** To help HEIs reduce the skills gap in Europe, we should allow students to personalise their educational experience. We suggest that HEIs to implement AI in every phase of the educational process, to analyse and predict student needs: personalised study plans, skills identification, curriculum development, and career guidance.

**10.4 | ESA is a Skill: Create and Implement a Framework for Skills Recognition.** Students should gain certified skills recognition for their non-formal and formal activities outside of their academic programme. We suggest that HEIs introduce a skills recognition framework for students to qualify their skills obtained through participation in conferences, assemblies, boards, working groups, societies, workshops, training, and volunteering activities, etc.

**10.5 | Boosting Curriculum: Compulsory Internships for Students.** To support HEIs to reduce the skills gap in Europe, students should have the opportunity to enhance their skills through implementing their theoretical knowledge into practice. We recommend HEIs to adapt their curricula to include compulsory internships. These internships should last for a period of at least 3 months and completed during their studies in order to receive the degree. The criteria of the internship will depend on the field of study.

**10.6 | HEI + Industry = Partners. Agreements for Internships.** For HEIs to reduce the skills gap in Europe, students should have easier access to internships. We suggest that HEIs establish agreements with relevant industry partners to offer equal opportunities of internships to all students, facilitating the development of skills that are indispensable for professional success in an increasingly competitive job market.

# Voting Procedures

## Submission of Recommendations:

The voting process started with the submission of recommendations by the participants. All recommendations were required to be submitted by 5 PM on Thursday, 1st June to be eligible for consideration. This ensured that all proposals were received within the designated timeframe. These "to be voted" recommendations were sent to the MEPs present on the following day and to the rest of the Assembly. It was emphasised that participants should review the set of recommendations from the Assembly to address any constructive objections.

## Writing of Objections:

Participants were given the opportunity to express objections until midnight, Thursday 1 June. It is important to note that objections are distinct from amendments as they presented arguments against the adoption of a recommendation. To be eligible, objections needed to be supported by at least 10 participants from a minimum of 2 panels. The objections, along with the names and panels of supporting participants, were recorded in a shared Excel file. Only one objection per panel's package was accepted, and the objection with the highest support (i.e., the highest number of supporting participants) was considered. All the objections, eligible or not, are recorded in the section below.

## Voting Process:

During the voting process, the panel coordinator was allotted up to 5 minutes to present the recommendations of their respective panel. Eligible objections were allowed to be expressed during this time, with each objection limited to one minute per author. Participants were restricted to expressing only one objection each.

Recommendations were then voted upon individually, employing a simple majority of the expressed votes to determine the outcome. A rejected recommendation was indicated by a red light, while an adopted recommendation was indicated by a green light. The results of the vote are recorded in the section below.

## Final Recommendations:

Following the voting process, the adopted recommendations were compiled in this document. The results of the vote is also published in this document. This document will be used for dissemination purposes.

# Voting Results

Panel	Policy Proposal	In Favor	Objection
<b>Panel 1 :</b> <i>Deliberative vs representative democracy</i>	1.1 Tell Us about (E)U! Organizing an Annual European Citizens Assembly	96%	
	1.2 .Empower(E)U: Unleashing Citizen Power for Change - Improving the petition instrument	95%	
	1.3 Engage the Youth! Lowering the Voting Age for ECI's to 16 Years Old in all Member States	45%	
	1.4 .EU goes to YOU! Bringing the MEPs closer to their electorate	90%	
	1.5 InformEU! - Accessible and Accurate Media a stronger European Democracy	77%	A policy package combining EU fact checking, major pro EU media coverage and large scale negative information campaigns blurr the line between informing and spreading propaganda, this unnecessarily strengthens the image of an undemocratic super state
	1.6 EU Citizenship in Schools: How to foster "European Citizenship" among younger generations through education	83%	
	1.7. Inclusive Access to European Democracy	88%	
<b>Panel 2 :</b> <i>French-German relationship</i>	2.1 Mosaic of Memories: Traveling Exhibits on Europe's Historical Experiences	94%	
	2.2 The Enforcement of the European infrastructure cooperation	94%	
	2.3 Establishment of a centralised and accessible European Youth Office	90%	
	2.4 European Youth Summer Camps	81%	
	2.5 Dissemination of a European textbook among secondary education students	72%	
	2.6 Enlarging the competences of the alliances: developing the partnerships and promoting their role among students	89%	
	2.7 The European practical Handbook	80%	
<b>Panel 3 :</b> <i>Energy</i>	3.1 Enhance the accuracy of Energy Performance Certificates (EPC)	97%	
	3.2 Use savings from renovation to repay the loans	84%	
	3.3 Prevent Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) contradicting with Environmental Law	92%	
	3.4 Implement risk assesment plan for securing value chains of low-carbon technologies	96%	
	3.5 Set European targets for phasing out subsidies of fossil fuels	92%	
	3.6 Reduce bureaucracy via digitalisation	84%	

Panel	Policy Proposal	In favor	Objection
<b>Panel 3 :</b> <i>Energy</i>	3.7 Create a directive that develops a mechanism to map public engagement with energy to inform policy-makers	86%	
	3.8 Enforce compulsory adoption of low-energy district heating from waste heat, where technically possible.	82%	
<b>Panel 4 :</b> <i>From farm to fork</i>	4.1 - Forbid food retailers to destroy and discard unsold food products	80%	
	4.2 - Strengthen biodiversity protection and marine protected areas (MPAs)	98%	
	4.3 - Funding and Expertise for an Agroecological Transition for Small Farmers Scheme (FEAT SFS)	92%	
	4.4 - Empowering Consumers through a Comprehensive Sustainable Food Labeling Framework at EU level.	90%	
	4.5 - Harmonized taxation regime of excise duties on sugar and carbonated products	60%	Sugar is already a popular drug, no doubt about that. But wouldn't a "sugar tax" incredibly increase euro-scepticism? There is no advantage by implementing a "sugar tax" on EU level, as it is not more efficient; instead it would make sense to adopt it on a national level, as also health systems are managed on a national level. An EU "sugar tax" however would be welcomed by populists eager to use this polarising idea!
	4.6 - Rewarding farmers for soil health: Diversifying revenue streams of farmers to incentivise environmental regeneration and mitigate power asymmetries in food systems	97%	
	4.7 - Local agricultural consulting centers for sustainable/regenerative practices and transition support.	91%	
<b>Panel 5 :</b> <i>Mental health</i>	5.1 - Prevention and education about mass media influence on individuals mental health	93%	
	5.2 - Ensuring mental health education in schools across EU	97%	
	5.3 - Creating solutions for disabled youth in society	93%	
	5.4 - The role of technology in mental health care	83%	
	5.5 - Creation of mental health mentoring programs in marginalized communities	88%	
	5.6 - Creating holistic and person centered mental health care services in all European countries	90%	
	5.7 - Fighting stigmas associated with mental health problems	90%	

Panel	Policy Proposal	In favor	Objection
<b>Panel 5 :</b> <i>Mental Health</i>	5.8 - Creating informational resources addressing eco-anxiety and stress related to climate change	75%	
<b>Panel 6 :</b> <i>Digital</i>	6.1 Disassemblable Products and Recycling of Critical Raw Materials	96%	
	6.2 Tax Benefits for EU-resident Companies in the Raw Materials Sector and Higher Ceilings of EU Funds for Areas with Lower Percentage of Digitalization	70%	
	6.3 Enhancing Interoperability of the EU Digital Public Administration Sector in order to Reduce Inefficiency	90%	
	6.4 Fair Distribution of the Benefits of Digital Transition in the Workplace	85%	
	6.5 Subsidize Research Projects Focusing on Building Sustainable and Responsible AI	90%	
	6.6 AI as a Tool to Improve Both Sustainable Processing of Raw Materials and Use of Resources in Different Sectors	76%	
	6.7 Smart Use of Resources for Enhancing Power Usage Effectiveness in Data Centers	89%	
	6.8 Establishing an EU Supervisory Authority Issuing Guidelines on the Development of AI Software While Subsidising Complicit Domestic Alternatives and Mandating Transparency of those Headquartered Outside the EU	75%	
	6.9 Ensuring Human Preservation and Acceptance to AI and Digital Changes	79%	
	6.10 Courses Offered by the EU for a More Sustainable and Resource-efficient Approach	74%	
<b>Panel 7 :</b> <i>Defence</i>	7.1 Reinforce the defence procurement instrument act (EDIRPA)	46%	Reducing VAT on armies and putting it at 0 implies they are an essential commodity, at the same level as education and health and that is extremely problematic
	7.2 Increase the frequency and quality of joint military training and personnel exchange programs	41%	This policy leads to an increase in military spending and militarisation of the EU as well as a reduction of national sovereignty.
	7.3 Encourage the collaboration of all intelligence services from each Member State	58%	Although there might be some common economical and political interests in foreign policy, there are still sensitive aspects for the countries from the same region that would result in aggravation of the conflict and unstable relations at the moment.
	7.4 Strengthen the Data Protection and Transparency for the Swedish Initiative	80%	

Panel	Policy Proposal	In favor	Objection
<b>Panel 7 :</b> <i>Defence</i>	7.5 Increase Societal and Institutional Resilience in Response to Hybrid Warfare Threats	76%	
	7.6 Coordinate cybersecurity efforts towards citizenship security	88%	
	7.7 Support the European Sky Shield Initiative	61%	
	7.8 Diversify and Strengthen Alliances	69%	
	7.9 Improve EU representation in the UN Security Council	67%	
	7.10 Implement the option to use Qualified Majority Voting in areas of military and defence	29%	
<b>Panel 8 :</b> <i>Cities of the Future</i>	8.1 Cities of the future increase the availability of free indoor public spaces	96%	
	8.2 Cities of the future renovate existing buildings to make them more energy-efficient, sustainable and accessible	96%	
	8.3 Cities of the future cultivate locally financed mining hubs - facilities, which manage waste, innovate and can support the rights to repairs and refurbishment of the equipment, in order to reintegrate it into the economy.	94%	
	8.4 Cities of the future introduce comprehensive measures to ensure free and accessible drinking water for all urban residents and visitors	96%	
	8.5 Cities of the future introduce community programmes for vertical gardening in the European Urban Area	90%	
	8.6 Cities of the future limit urban sprawl through the development of mixed use neighbourhoods	90%	
	8.7 Cities of the future develop and modernise bicycle and public transit infrastructure	96%	
	8.8 Cities of the future are easily accessible to one another by means of an efficient, affordable and fully harmonised railway network	96%	
<b>Panel 9 :</b> <i>Education</i>	9.1 Make higher education institutions visible agents of social and sustainable initiatives through the inclusion of partnerships with civil society actors in academic curricula.	87%	Academic excellency also means to only grant ECTS for academic achievements which are largely related to the relative degree. If you grant ECTS for any participation in any EU-initiative (as is written in your proposal), this link is not guaranteed anymore
	9.2 Capacity-building through training, in order to aid academic staff in being responsive and adaptive to the mental health needs of students, during the completion of their studies.	86%	The implementation of similar practices in universities have been tried and proven to be ineffective in the near past, and it leads to unnecessary workload and time constraints.
	9.3 Adaptation of all pre-existing infrastructure in member-states' universities in order to facilitate access to people with disabilities.	92%	
	9.4 Embrace transdisciplinary education to train more creative and multiskilled students for future challenges.	91%	

Panel	Policy Proposal	In favor	Objection
<b>Panel 9 :</b> <i>Education</i>	9.5 Expand the Erasmus Mundus to the bachelor level to strengthen European universities in their global competitiveness.	92%	
	9.6 Incorporate a requirement of engaging at least one first- or second-cycle student in R&D projects supported by EU funds.	82%	
	9.7 Foster more inclusive institutions and better care for those in need by broadening access to higher education for vulnerable non-EU students	94%	
	9.8 Establishment of EU scholarships to support students from low socio-economic backgrounds	95%	
<b>Panel 10 :</b> <i>European Year of Skills</i>	10.1 Search the Gap: A Comprehensive Skills Survey	93%	
	10.2 Talent without Borders: Innovative Scholarship and Mobility Programmes	95%	
	10.3 AI to Qualify: Implement Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Educational Processes	69%	
	10.4 ESA is a Skill: Create and Implement a Framework for Skills Recognition	88%	
	10.5 Boosting Curriculum: Compulsory Internships for Students	58%	A compulsory internship for every student will create problems for poorer students, who might need a paid internship, while richer student can accept every kind of internship, even those who are not paid. This creates some form of class society.
	10.6 HEI + Industry = Partners. Agreements for Internships	87%	

# WHO WE ARE

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