

Reaction to Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development

Executive Summary

Generation Climate Europe (GCE) welcomes the “Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development” that was adopted on 16 June 2022 by the Council of the European Union. It follows a Proposal for a “Council Recommendation on Learning for Environmental Sustainability” of the European Commission from January 2022.

GCE is especially pleased to see that the adopted Recommendation repeatedly **highlights the role of young people** and recognises the **European Year of Youth** as an opportunity to involve young people in the implementation of the Recommendation. However, we emphasise the need to **uphold these commitments beyond the European Year of Youth**, as the transformation of Member States’ education systems will likely take more time.

We also welcome the renaming of the Recommendation to **better align it with existing policies** such as the European Green Deal, as we acknowledge the interconnectedness of climate and environmental issues with social and economic issues and the need for education to support sustainable and immediate action on climate change. Additionally, we are pleased to see a strong emphasis on training formal and non-formal educators to equip them with the knowledge and skills to provide the format and content to implement the vision outlined.

However, we regret that the adopted Recommendation **falls short with regard to transformative education and the transformation of education systems alluded to in the proposal outlined by the European Commission**. Furthermore, we are disappointed that the **urgency of the matter of education for a green transition was played down** in the adopted text, disregarding the fundamental role of education in tackling the climate crisis and its consequences.

Therefore, we conclude with **three key recommendations** that we believe to be crucial to ensuring that EU education systems are fit for an authentic green transition with young people at the centre of its implementation.

1. Ensure *young people are involved* in the implementation of the Council Recommendation beyond the European Year of Youth.
2. Understand and underscore the need for *transformative* education to truly achieve a green transition in which learners connect their learning to actions.
3. Acknowledge and emphasise the *urgency* of overhauling Member States’ education systems given the immediacy of the climate and ecological crises and the important role of education in empowering active citizens.

Introduction

Generation Climate Europe (GCE) is Europe's largest coalition of youth-led networks focusing on environmental and climate issues. At GCE, our mission is to empower young people to meaningfully engage in EU decision-making processes on climate, environmental and sustainability issues. We fight for intergenerational justice and a system that respects human rights and the planet, that includes youth voices, and that acknowledges our common responsibility to create a livable world for all. We see young people, who are most affected by the consequences of and inaction against climate change, as key actors to achieve a green and just transition.

One of the issues we advocate for is the integration of climate and sustainability education into all levels and forms of learning to achieve intergenerational justice. In this statement, we critically reflect on the new Council Recommendation which aims at this integration, establishing learning for the green transition and sustainable development as one of the priority areas in education and training policies and programmes in EU Member States.

The Council of the European Union adopted the “Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development” on 16 June 2022. This is following a Proposal from the European Commission from 14 January 2022, which focused on learning for environmental sustainability. In the lead-up to this, GCE held an 'Intergenerational Dialogue on Learning for Environmental Sustainability' on 8 June 2022 to create a space for a meaningful exchange between European youth and policymakers about the involvement of young people in the implementation of the Recommendation.

As UNESCO already highlighted: **“Long-term sustainable development can be achieved only if individuals and societies change the way they think and act. Education is key to achieving this transformation”.** With a war in Europe, intensifying climate and ecological crises, visible erosion of democracies, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasing poverty and inequality, this Recommendation comes at a time when a fundamental transformation of our education systems has never been more important. That is because education for sustainable development is perceived to act as a catalyst to empower active citizens to critically engage with the causes and consequences of the climate crisis and to innovate just solutions. Education and training across all ages and in all forms are necessary to equip people with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to critically assess and address the magnitude of crises, such as the climate crisis, and become active agents in building resilience to their impacts.

In a global context, the Recommendation provides an overdue and relevant building block to fulfil the European Green Deal, but it also makes strides towards fulfilling goal 4.7 “Education for sustainable development and global citizenship” of the Education 2030 Agenda adopted by world leaders in Paris in 2015. It follows the “Berlin Declaration” from May 2021, which was adopted by 2,800 stakeholders from 161 countries at the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development. Commitments were, inter alia, to *“ensure that ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) is a foundational element of our education systems at all levels, with environmental and climate action as a core curriculum component”* and to *“empower young people as change agents for sustainable development, by creating opportunities for learning and civic engagement, and providing them with the competencies and tools to participate in ESD as co-creators of individual and societal transformation”*.

The role of young people has been acknowledged in the EU through the European Year of Youth, and we are pleased to witness an increase of youth engagement across policy areas. Young people also have a key role to play in education for sustainable development both as learners with first-hand experience of the current failures of our education systems and as drivers of change. The Recommendation recognises that *“there is a growing awareness and desire among young people to engage in sustainable development issues, particularly environmental and climate issues,”* and that young people are very aware of the climate crisis, but not all *“feel a sense of agency to make a real difference”* (p. 6). Education and places of learning are critical to bridging this gap between desire and ability to take action for change, by empowering learners to become active participants and *“agents of change”* in decision-making processes around climate education (p. 11, p. 14).

Below, GCE has formulated a critical reflection on the Council Recommendation and its suitability to help the EU fulfil the Education 2030 Agenda, paying specific attention to intergenerational justice.

Evaluation Council Recommendation

1. The Role of Young People

GCE welcomes that the Recommendation calls for all learners to be co-creators of “*what, how and where they learn*” (p. 11). It is encouraging to see that the Recommendation makes several specific references to young people and the importance of involving them in embedding learning for sustainable development, using clearer and stronger language throughout than in the Proposal text. Crucially, the concept of ‘meaningful engagement’ of young people is expanded to call for “*education and training systems and institutions*” to “*involve young people in designing solutions related to learning*” (p. 6). This language mirrors the demands that arose from GCE’s Intergenerational Dialogue, in which it was highlighted that young people must be involved in implementation of the Recommendation from the outset.

GCE’s Intergenerational Dialogue found that, while important, it is not enough to only bring in youth voices at the stage of learning – truly meaningful engagement means that young voices must be part of the process of defining, designing, and creating transformational education systems that embed education for environmental sustainability. The strength and specificity of the language used in the final Recommendation regarding youth engagement is significant as ‘meaningful youth engagement’ **lacks clarity** and, all too often in policy, leads to empty promises.

In addition to involving young people in designing and supporting change at the institutional and local level, the Recommendation acknowledges the importance of strengthening youth engagement through existing mechanisms such as the EU Youth Strategy, EU Youth Dialogues, and the framework of the European Year of Youth 2022. Again, this demand was echoed in GCE’s Intergenerational Dialogue as youth organisations argued that young people should be motivated to share their views and take a stance on the implementation of the Recommendation in formal spaces designed to reduce the barriers to doing so. However, while the European Year of Youth is a good starting point for embedding youth engagement in decision making, **mechanisms for engaging young people must extend beyond 2022 and more permanent, long-term structures should be created for facilitation of the co-creation of deeply embedded education for sustainable development.**

Additionally, **GCE welcomes that the Recommendation calls for Member States to cooperate with youth workers and youth organisations**, “*to ensure that the opinions, views and needs of young people and youth organisations are fully taken into account*” (p. 19). On the matter of stakeholder engagement, the Recommendation importantly emphasises the creation of partnerships and networks between key actors, including youth, and across sectors, to promote collaboration, knowledge sharing, and to align plans and strategies in education and training. This was highlighted in GCE’s Intergenerational Dialogue as key to facilitating implementation. However, as was discussed during this event with policymakers and youth representatives, **for successful implementation greater communication is needed between different scales, from the regional through to the EU level, to share best practice and key learnings.** This should be facilitated by networks of students, educators, and policymakers. Existing structures and programmes, such as ERASMUS+, should be optimised to achieve this.

2. Urgency and Transformative education

“Transformative learning for people and the planet is a necessity for our survival and that of future generations. The time to learn and act for our planet is now.”

This was the motto of the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in May 2021. The statement reflects two crucial elements: urgency and transformative education. As a key global player with disproportionately greater access to resources and historic contribution to climate change, Europe has a responsibility to take these two elements seriously and recognise their validity. We are therefore disappointed to see that urgency as well as transformative aspects of education were rarely mentioned in the final adopted Recommendation. In the adopted Council Recommendation, the urgency of learning for the green transition and sustainable development is absent from the text, whereas it was referenced several times in the Commission’s Proposal (see Table 1). Similarly, fewer references are made to transformative education in the Council Recommendation than in the Commission’s Proposal (see Table 1).

While the Commission’s Proposal aimed to articulate a vision and shared understanding at the EU level of the deep and transformative changes needed in education and training for the green transition, the final text adopted by the Council communicates a much weaker call for transformational change, treating it as an option to be employed at the discretion of policymakers.

Table 1: Mentioning of urgency and transformative aspects of education in the Commission’s proposal and the Council’s adoption

	Transformative	Urgency
<p>Commission Proposal (January 2022)</p>	<p>Section focused on :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moving to deep and transformative change (p. 2) <p>Commission’s Proposal aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘articulate a vision and shared understanding at EU level on the deep and transformative changes needed in education and training for the green transition’ (p. 3) <p>‘Support educators to facilitate learning for environmental sustainability by considering the following measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and enable transformative and interdisciplinary teaching and learning using both traditional and innovative learning approaches, including hands-on learning, the STEAM approach, hackathons and gamification’. (p. 11-12) 	<p>The Proposal recognised that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘Given the urgency of the climate and biodiversity crises, it is time for a step change and to move beyond isolated initiatives to deep and systemic change in education and training.’ (p. 2) <p>Demands to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘Urgently step up efforts to support education and training systems to take action for the green transition so that learners of all ages and from all backgrounds can access high-quality and inclusive education and training on climate change, biodiversity and sustainability.’ (p. 10)

<p>Council Adoption (June 2022)</p>	<p>The Recommendation demands that Member States: 'Further support educators to facilitate learning for the green transition and sustainable development by considering the following measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage and enable, <u>where appropriate</u>, transformative and interdisciplinary teaching and learning using both traditional and innovative learning approaches, including hands-on learning, the STEAM approach, hackathons, service learning and gamification.' (p. 15) <p>And that they: 'Consider the following measures at the level of the system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes of learners of all ages to live more sustainably, promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, adopt healthier and more environmentally-conscious lifestyles and contribute individually and collectively to the transformation of our societies.' (p. 10) 	<p>Reference to the urgency of learning for the green transition and sustainable development is absent from the Council Recommendation.</p>
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We are pleased that the Recommendation makes specific calls for **taking a whole-institution approach to developing and embedding education for sustainable development** and directly engaging with learners to shape this. This dictates that everything from rooting curriculum in education for sustainable development, minimising the carbon footprint of campus infrastructure and integrating sustainability into all departments, through to reimagining pedagogies to centre the learner experience and link learning to real-world experiences is considered for change, and the whole system of learning is transformed. It is important to note that **there is not one way to achieve this transformation - each educational context is unique** and will require its own approach, but the principle of transformation is one that must be embraced by all.

However, despite highlighting SDG 4.7, the final text of the Recommendation has a diluted focus on the concept of **transformative education**, which is important for bringing the whole-institution approach to the level of the education system, and for educating learners in a holistic, interdisciplinary way that recognizes the interconnections of global citizenship, human rights, and sustainable development, as delineated by UNESCO. **Transforming education systems is about intergenerational justice** – it is our duty to “give learners of all ages” who belong to current and future generations “the knowledge, skills, values and agency to address interconnected global challenges including climate change, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources, and inequality,” to empower them to take action (UNESCO, Education for Sustainable Development).

The [UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development 2030 Roadmap](#) highlights the **importance of education in changing values and attitudes, alongside developing knowledge and skills**, “to shift to a sustainable future” and “enable us all to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action on local, national and global urgencies” (p. 8). The mention of values underscores the importance of **reconnecting people with nature**, by fostering the development of a greater appreciation for the interplay between natural and human systems, as well as of **developing empathy** through understanding how our actions in one place can affect people in other parts of the world. In this sense, the Council Recommendation is too focused on the role of education in fostering a sustainably-minded workforce and, whilst it is acknowledged, does not give enough attention to how education is central to foregrounding the nexus of the climate crisis with social and economic dimensions and the importance of approaching policy from a climate justice lens.

Additionally, we are concerned by the **removal of references to the urgency of transforming education systems**. Whilst achieving [SDG 4.7](#), which calls for “all learners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development” by the year 2030, is referred to on page four of the Recommendation, there is no acknowledgement of **the urgency in which this must be achieved**. This coming decade is crucial to make the deep and transformative changes to our societies and economies that are needed to combat the climate crisis. Education underpins everything, and as we move toward 2030, change is urgent. Therefore, **education for sustainable development should be the priority area in education**, especially considering the interconnectedness of the climate crisis with other parts of society.

The [IPCC special report on Global Warming of 1.5°](#) indicates that we can expect to see irreversible damage to whole ecosystems in the coming decades if we exceed 1.5° of warming (p. 5). [This means we must take immediate, deeply transformative action](#). Yet, young people are not currently being adequately prepared to face the effects of these changes, or being empowered to innovate solutions. Publications focusing on the European Green New Deal determine fighting climate change and transforming our societies to be “*this generation’s defining task*” in this “*make or break decade*”. This demonstrates an awareness of the need for urgent and deeply transformative change, and GCE would like to see this language and intention replicated in the Recommendation.

Recommendations and action points

- Going forward, the **implementation** of the Council Recommendation must be as strong as the language it uses, particularly with regard to **youth engagement**. GCE welcomes the strengthening of calls for youth participation in co-creating educational futures, but **this needs to carry forward into practice**. GCE will be closely monitoring this process, seeking to support youth organisations to participate in decision-making around the transformation of education systems.
- The Recommendation acknowledges that “*young people in the EU consider ‘protecting the environment and fighting climate change’ to be one of the key priorities of the European Year of Youth (2022) should focus on*” (p. 6). However, while the European Year of Youth serves as an important catalyst, **this work must continue beyond 2022** and become a permanent feature of education policy in Member States.
- **Transformative education must be at the heart of the green transition**, going beyond transforming places of learning, but also transforming the systems in which education is embedded. Education policies following from the Recommendation must be part of a **strong constellation of policies at the EU and Member State levels that support the green transition** across thematic areas. While transforming our education systems is vitally important, this is just one element of **transforming our societies**.
- Though the Recommendation does not explicitly discuss the urgency of the climate crisis, it positions itself “*in line with the European Green Deal, the Sustainable Development Goals and the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development Roadmap 2030,*” demonstrating some **awareness of the immediacy of the climate crisis and the necessity of swift and resolute policy action** that supports the transformation of our societies (p. 21). We now demand to see language and, more importantly, action befitting the scale of the issue at hand.