



Youngsters and the EU: Perceptions, Knowledge and Expectations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



European Economic
and Social Committee



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General information

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Objectives and Methodology

Carried out at the initiative of Group III – Diversity Europe, the study aims to provide insights into the perceptions, knowledge and expectations of school pupils between 14 and 18 years of age towards the EU, as well as their openness to European diversity while comparing national schools with European Schools.

In order to achieve this aim, existing research was analysed and a survey of school pupils of the above-mentioned age group was conducted in 5 EU Member States - France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Romania - as well as pupils of the same age group in the European Schools in Brussels in the language sections corresponding to those countries. From the comparative analysis, the samples are composed of 501 pupils from national schools and 95 from European schools.¹

As the general mission of European Schools is to create a multilingual and multicultural environment, it is expected that pupils enrolled in those schools are prone to having more open attitudes towards the EU and its diversity than pupils enrolled in national schools. The study seeks to explore this hypothesis.

¹As the survey response rate for Sweden did not reach the minimum target of 100 responses, Sweden – along with the Swedish language section of the European schools – are excluded from the aggregated datasets used for the comparative analysis.

Main Findings

Youngsters and the EU: Perceptions, Knowledge and Expectations in European Schools

French section

- ▶ 62% report understanding to at least a certain extent how the EU institutions work.
- ▶ They mostly learn about the EU from family, internet research and social media.
- ▶ Guaranteeing the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU is perceived as the main goal of the institutions while protecting the environment is considered main priority for the future.
- ▶ 33% consider themselves European in first place.

“For me ‘being European’ means belonging to a community of people who don’t necessarily share the same culture, way of life or speak the same language, but who seek to discover these other cultures and build a community looking after the well-being of all ‘Europeans’.”

German section

For me, being a European is the luck to be part of a community of different countries, working together

- ▶ 56% of the German pupils consider themselves to have an at least fair understanding of how the EU institutions function.
- ▶ They learn about the EU at school sometimes, although the most common channels are family, written materials and social media.
- ▶ To ensure lasting peace in Europe is perceived as the main goal of the institutions, which matches their expectations.
- ▶ 53% would describe themselves as European in first place.

Italian section

- 45% of the pupils report that they have a fair understanding of how the EU institutions work, while a further 21% report having a good understanding.
- They learn about the EU at school sometimes, although the most common channels are family, written materials, internet research and social media.
- Guaranteeing the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU is perceived as the main goal of the institutions while protecting the environment and promoting

social equality are considered main priorities for the future.

- 17% would describe themselves as European in first place.



“I think that any topic of study should be taught in a way that interests students. So I would promote interactive, fun and creative teaching”

Romanian section



“For me to be European means that I have an important citizenship where I can be free and I can discover different cultures, where I can express myself”

- 70% report having an at least average understanding of the functioning of the EU.

- The most frequent channels to learn about the EU are school and family. However, social media, internet and written materials are also recurrent.

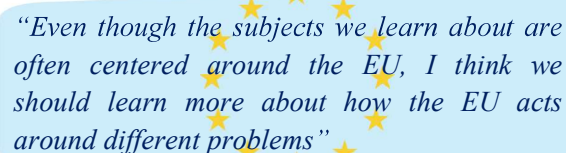
- According to Romanian pupils’ perceptions, to guarantee the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU is the main goal of the Union and this answer matches their expectations.

- 22% would describe themselves as European in first place.

Swedish section

- 76% claim to have at least a fair understanding of the functioning of the EU.
- They learn about the EU sometimes or often at school, although they get more information through family, social media or their own internet research.
- Swedish pupils perceive “to guarantee the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU” as the main goal of the Union. However, most of the respondents think that the environment should be the biggest priority.

- 62% would describe themselves as European in first place.



“Even though the subjects we learn about are often centered around the EU, I think we should learn more about how the EU acts around different problems”

Youngsters and the EU: Perceptions, Knowledge and Expectations in the Member States

France

“This year we had a visit from a Member of the European parliament, it was very interesting and I would like more young people to have this opportunity, as well as to have study visits abroad and visit institutions. I think we should address this topic in language classes as well, particularly during exchanges, as I did myself this year”

- ▶ 62% consider their knowledge about the EU rather fair or good.
- ▶ Pupils chose school, social media, internet research and written materials as the main sources of knowledge on the topic.
- ▶ Although promoting economic prosperity is perceived as the main goal of the EU by most of the respondents, the majority think it should be to promote social equality.
- ▶ 9% would describe themselves as European rather than French.

Germany

- ▶ 56% consider their knowledge about the EU fair at least.
- ▶ 11% would describe themselves as European rather than German.
- ▶ Pupils learn relatively often about the EU (in civic education class mainly) at school. Social media and internet research are also common sources.
- ▶ To promote social equality and justice is perceived as the main goal of the EU by most of the youngsters. However, they think that to ensure peace in Europe and to protect the environment should be the biggest priorities.

“If I first of all had a better and larger view of how the EU works and functions, it would be much easier to get involved. In my opinion, this is the key”.

Italy

“Unfortunately, our school doesn’t care about current events, never mind the EU. Overloaded curricula don’t leave us any time to discuss extra-curricular topics, including current events”

- 47% consider their knowledge about the EU to be at least fair.
- Pupils learn about the EU at school and via social media and internet research mainly.
- Youngsters perceive that to promote economic prosperity is the main goal of the EU. Nevertheless, they consider that the priority for the Union should be to promote social equality and justice.
- 13% would describe themselves as European rather than Italian.

Sweden

- 45% consider their knowledge about the EU to be average at least.
- Social media and internet research appear once again as the most used tools to learn about the EU, being the civic education class also a popular choice.
- Swedish pupils perceive guaranteeing the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU as the current main goal of the EU along with ensuring lasting peace in

Europe. However, they claim that protecting the environment should be the EU’s biggest priority.

- 11% define themselves as European rather than Swedish.

“The EU is a major part of our civic class, as it is an institution, and plays a role both in democracy and in economics”

Romania

“Whether through social media or face-to-face discussions, I believe the opinion of any young person is a new way of thinking very different from the ones before us...”

- 65% consider their knowledge about the EU to be average or better.
- Pupils rarely learn about the EU at school. However, social media and

internet research appear as their favorite channels for this.

- To guarantee the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU is perceived as the main goal of the EU at the moment. Romanian pupils consider that promoting social equality and justice should take that place as the main goal.
- 14% would describe themselves as European rather than Romanian.

Comparative analysis



Perceptions

Pupils in European schools perceive the benefits of the EU both personally and in their local communities to a bigger extent.

Both pupils in European and national schools tend to perceive the EU as moderately effective in **tackling global challenges**, with no significant difference between them.



Knowledge

European school pupils claim to have a **better understanding of the functioning of the EU**. And they prove it right in the quiz-style questions.

Even if a difference cannot be observed in how much they learn about the EU at school, the study shows that **youngsters in European schools learn more about the EU from their families, friends and written materials**.

Concerning the **perceived usefulness of learning more about the EU** at school, this is shown to be the same (rather high) for both groups.



Pupils in the Member States think that the EU institutions should have as their main goals **promoting social equality and justice, ensuring lasting peace in Europe and protecting the environment**, while the pupils in the European schools **think a similar way but in a different order**: protecting the environment, promoting social equality and justice and ensuring lasting peace in Europe.

Expectations



All pupils – EU and national schools - consider it important to learn other languages and about other cultures It is shown that **pupils in the European schools are more likely to have travelled to other EU countries, to speak other languages and to have friends of other EU nationalities**. Moreover, these pupils are **more prone to define themselves as European** ahead of their nationality than pupils in the Member States.

Openness to European diversity



Overall conclusions

The key positive outcomes can be summarised as follows:

- ▶ Pupils tend to consider that **belonging to the EU benefits them personally**.
- ▶ Pupils learn about the EU outside school, in particular through **social media** and their own **internet research**.
- ▶ Pupils generally appreciate the importance and usefulness of learning more about the EU and how its institutions function. **They are curious to learn more and consider this a necessary first step to becoming better involved in the EU.**
- ▶ Pupils are **very open to the importance of learning other languages and about other cultures**, and to have friends of other EU nationalities.
- ▶ Many pupils consider themselves to be “European” to a greater or lesser extent. Pupils in European schools are more likely to define themselves as European above their nationality.
- ▶ Pupils in European schools appear to **explicitly associate being European with openness towards other cultures** when considering answers to the open question “What does it mean to you to be European?”
- ▶ Pupils in France and Germany appear to learn about the EU at school sometimes or relatively often.

Shortcomings

In addition to the above positive outcomes, the study highlights a few shortcomings:

- ▶ In general, **the EU is perceived as only moderately effective in tackling global challenges** such as terrorism or climate change. The desk research and survey findings tend to show action on climate change high among the goals that young people think the EU should be pursuing.
- ▶ Pupils do not feel that they have **adequate opportunities to acquire knowledge about the EU** at school, including in the European schools. In most cases, they claim to have at best only an average understanding of how its institutions function, even if European schools compare favourably to national schools.
- ▶ Pupils across all groups tend to express **dissatisfaction with how they learn about the EU at school**. Where pupils learn about the EU, the inference is that the **teaching and learning methods are not sufficiently dynamic or interactive** as recommendations on improving this aspect appear often in the responses.
- ▶ Pupils in Romania and Italy tend to report that they rarely or never learn about the EU at school.
- ▶ Pupils tend to think that **the EU institutions do not listen enough to the opinions of young people face-to-face** as it is often emphasised in the responses that they should do more in this regard.

Recommendations to address shortcomings

In terms of how to address the above shortcomings, some possible actions are:

1 **More communication** from the EU institutions about what they are doing to address global challenges.

Mainstream learning about the EU into school curricula and in general provide more information to young people - inside and outside school - about what the EU is doing. Without these steps, young people do not feel they can be adequately involved.

3 **Exploit social media and the internet for sharing more information directly to young people** but with caution that this cannot be relied upon as a way to engage them in decision-making or hear their views - they still wish to and need to be consulted directly in person.

Adopt a more learner-centered approach to education about the EU, including through the use of **visual and interactive methods** (e.g. debates, guest speakers, watching and making videos) and taking inspiration from non-formal and informal learning methodologies, as highlighted by the recently adopted EESC Opinion on Education about the European Union.

5 **Create more fora for face-to-face exchanges** between young people and representatives of the EU institutions.

Investigate further how the European schools promote a more open and positive attitude towards the EU with a view to **sharing good practices with national schools**.



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