GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

2026



LEAD WITH YOUTH

YOUTH REPORT

unesco

Sustainable Development Goals

United Nations Youth Office

Global Education Monitoring Report

This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (https://www.unesco.org/open-access/cc-sa).

Images marked with an asterisk (*) do not fall under the "https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/" CC-BY-SA license and may not be used or reproduced without the prior permission of the copyright holders.

UNESCO is an Open Access publisher and all publications are made available online, free of charge through UNESCO's documentary repository. Any commercialization of its publications by UNESCO is for cost-recovery of nominal actual costs for printing or copying content on paper or CDs, and distribution. There is no profit motive.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material In this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

This publication can be referenced as: UNESCO. 2026. *Global Education Monitoring Report: Youth report – Lead with youth*

Published in 2026 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 7, Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France and the United Nations Youth Office, 333 E 45th St, New York, NY 10017, United States.

© UNESCO and the United Nations Youth Office, 2026



ISBN: 978-92-3-100844-3

https://doi.org/10.54676/ELTQ3060

Graphic design by UNESCO

Illustrations: © Aaron Lopez-Barrantes

Printed on recycled, PEFC certified paper, with vegetable inks.

For more information, please contact:
Global Education Monitoring Report team
UNESCO, 7, place de Fontenoy 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
Email: gemreport@unesco.org
Tel.: +33 1 45 68 07 41
www.unesco.org/gemreport
https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com

Any errors or omissions found subsequent to printing will be corrected in the online version at: https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en

This report and all related materials are available for download here: Bit.ly/2026youthreport

Youth Reports of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* series:

2024	Technology in education: A tool on our terms!
2022	Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?
2020	Inclusion and education: All means all
2019	Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls
2017/8	Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments
2016	Education for people and planet

The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action specifies that the mandate of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is to be 'the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on SDG 4 and on education in the other SDGs' with the responsibility to 'report on the implementation of national and international strategies to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments as part of the overall SDG follow-up and review'. It is prepared by an independent team hosted by UNESCO.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* team is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this book and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization. Overall responsibility for the views and opinions expressed in the report is taken by its Director.

THE GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT TEAM

Director: Manos Antoninis

Daniel April, Marcela Barrios Rivera, Madeleine Barry, Yekaterina Baskakova, Michael Cairney, Mariana Contreras, Aruem Cho, Anna Cristina D'Addio, Rafaela Maria Da Silva Santos, Dmitri Davydov, Francesca Endrizzi, Anja Flottmeier, Tuamanaia Foimapafisi, Pablo Fraser, Lara Gil Benito, Emily Goldstein, Pierre Gouëdard, Priyadarshani Joshi, Maria-Rafaela Kaldi, Josephine Kiyenje, Jodi Klue, Camila Lima De Moraes, Kate Linkins, Kassiani Lythrangomitis, Aurélia Mazoyer, Anissa Mechtar, Yuki Murakami, Judith Randrianatoavina, Kate Redman, Maria Rojnov, Divya Sharma, Laura Stipanovic, Aziah-Katiana Tan, Dorothy Wang and Shifeng Zhou.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* is an independent annual publication. The GEM Report is funded by a group of governments, multilateral agencies and private foundations and facilitated and supported by UNESCO.

SHORT SUMMARY

Youth and students need to be trusted to play a leading role in education decision-making

While young people and students are not well represented in formal politics, they are a politically active group who demand good governance and social justice. They want their voices to be heard and to be engaged meaningfully on issues that affect their present and future, notably on education. Youth and students' demands for meaningful engagement in decision making in education is part of a global movement for youth agency that has grown in the past three decades.

In 2022, the Youth Declaration at the Transforming Education Summit called upon national decision makers to invest in youth and student leadership and support their representation. This report provides a snapshot of the current situation to urge governments to put more effort in that direction. Based on two surveys – directed at governments and at youth and student organizations, respectively – it tracks the characteristics of youth and student engagement in education legislation and policymaking around the world, with reference to specific examples, as well as the challenges that this engagement encounters. It also proposes an indicator measuring government efforts to engage youth and students in education legislation and policy making.



Responses from 93 governments, a representative global sample, show that one in three report having a formal requirement in place to engage youth or students in education decision-making with the involvement of formal bodies. However, consultations are more prevalent - three in four countries have consulted with young people on education legislation and policy in the last three years. Formal mechanisms are found mostly in wealthier and ageing countries while the rest of the world either has loose consultation processes or none at all. Some consultation feedback is acknowledged to have influenced education policies on inclusion, well-being, safety and curriculum reform.

Responses from 101 youth and student organizations, a sample where European countries are overrepresented, show that fewer than one in three felt they were frequently engaged and just one in five felt valued or in a collaborative relationship. Surveyed organizations expressed strong aims to influence education policies and represent the voices of students and youth, but often feel their voice and visibility are limited. Even when organizations have a seat at the table through formal mechanisms, they often perceive a lack of genuine will to listen to them. Moreover, they face short time frames and struggle with engaging their members and finding sufficient resources to participate.

Stronger youth and student engagement in education decision making requires formal mechanisms and a seat at decision-making tables, representative and inclusive participation, institutional support and resources, and appreciation of their feedback.

GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT



LEAD WITH YOUTH

YOUTH REPORT

Foreword

Youth participation in policy and decision making on education is deeply personal to me. My journey into public service began in the student movement at my university in my home country, Uruguay, where I experienced first hand the transformative power of meaningful youth participation. Those early lessons shaped a lifelong conviction: when we create real spaces for young people to engage in policy and decision making, we do not only empower individuals. We strengthen institutions and drive positive change for society as a whole.

Since my appointment as Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs and Head of the United Nations Youth Office, that conviction has only grown stronger. Young people are not passive beneficiaries waiting to inherit the future. They are rights holders and partners who must help design it, together with other generations. Working ***with*** young people is not about appeasing them; it is a moral imperative and a practical necessity in a world facing deep, interconnected crises that require urgent actions and innovative solutions.

This youth edition of the *Global Education Monitoring Report*, focused on *leading with youth*, arrives at a critical moment. Across the globe, there is growing recognition of the role of young people as agents of change, but recognition alone is not enough. Too often, youth participation remains symbolic, with no clear structures to ensure accountability or influence. We need institutionalized and mandated pathways for meaningful youth participation in policymaking and decision-making processes, grounded in clear principles and sustained over time. It is not only about consulting young people, but about working with them at every stage. By building a strong body of evidence and concrete examples of the education sector, this report helps clarify how meaningful youth participation can move from aspiration to responsibility.

The education sector is a particularly powerful place to examine this, because education sits at the heart of young people's lives. Education equips young people with civic literacy, critical thinking skills and the agency needed to participate effectively, while schools and universities can also serve as spaces where democratic engagement is practiced, not merely taught. Across the world, young people and students are already leading — from global advocacy efforts to local organizing, grassroots campaigns and community-based action. Yet these initiatives too often remain marginal and under-resourced. Greater visibility, sustained investment, intergenerational solidarity and genuine political will are urgently needed.

As we enter the final stretch toward 2030, this report issues a clear call to action: education policies cannot be designed ***for*** young people without being shaped ***with*** them. If we are serious about building inclusive, resilient and just societies, leading with youth must become the norm, now and beyond 2030. The future of education – and of our world – depends on it.

Felipe Paullier
Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs, United Nations

Foreword

The voices of young people have never been more critical to shaping the future of education. As we approach the final years of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and begin to envision what comes next, we must recognize a fundamental truth: education policies designed for young people must be shaped with their active participation.

The 2022 Transforming Education Summit marked a watershed moment in this recognition. I am particularly proud that the Summit enabled the coming together of a truly global youth movement. The Youth Declaration that emerged was a clear demand for systemic change. Young people called for decision makers to move beyond consultation toward genuine partnership, to invest in youth and student leadership, and to embed their voices in every stage of policy development.

The Pact for the Future, adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, reinforced this commitment. Action 36 specifically calls on countries to strengthen meaningful youth participation in education through national mechanisms. These global commitments reflect a growing understanding that young people are not simply the beneficiaries of education systems but their primary stakeholders who must be recognized as partners in their transformation.

I am pleased that UNESCO can draw on its collective strengths to turn the aspirations of the Youth Declaration into concrete action. Through this report and its proposed indicator, we provide an accountability mechanism to monitor progress towards youth participation in education decision making globally. Equally important is our unique convening power, which ensures that young people have a seat at the table in discussions shaping future education policies. These dual capacities of monitoring and convening position UNESCO to transform aspirations into meaningful change. Yet as this report reveals, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains wide. While consultation processes have proliferated, many remain tokenistic instead of truly transformative. Young people report being asked for input but rarely see that input reflected in final policies. We also need to do better in ensuring that elected, rather than hand-picked representatives of youth and student organizations come to these tables.

As we prepare to shape the post-2030 education agenda, young people must be at the center of that conversation. They bring fresh perspectives on pressing challenges and will inherit the decisions we make today. UNESCO stands ready to support this transformation, working alongside all partners committed to ensuring that the next global education agenda is co-created with youth. The future of education depends on it.

Stefania Giannini
Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

About the United Nations Youth Office

As the first dedicated entity for youth affairs within the United Nations Secretariat, the United Nations Youth Office champions the rights, perspectives, contributions and potential of young people everywhere. It leads efforts to enhance collaboration, coordination and accountability on youth affairs, ensuring that the United Nations works effectively and inclusively with young people in all their diversity. By fostering meaningful, inclusive and impactful participation of youth in decision-making processes, its work focuses on empowering young people as agents of transformative change in addressing global challenges in the areas of sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian action. The UN Youth Office builds upon more than a decade of work led by the former Secretary-General's Envoys on Youth, integrating their work to advance the global youth agenda and address the needs of young people all over the world – bringing the UN closer to young people, and young people closer to the UN.

Acknowledgements

This report is a collaboration between the *Global Education Monitoring Report* and the *United Nations Youth Office.* The report would not have been possible without the contributions of numerous young people, youth and student organizations and institutions. The *Global Education Monitoring Report* (GEM Report) team would like to acknowledge their support and thank them for their support throughout the process, from the consultations on the development of the surveys to the discussions around the advocacy and dissemination. Over two years, the GEM Report worked to ensure that this publication was co-designed with youth and students, incorporating their voices and perspectives at every stage.

We extend our sincere thanks to the members of the GEM Report Advisory Board and its Chair, Jutta Urpilainen, as well as to our dedicated funders whose commitment and financial support made the preparation, publication, and dissemination of the GEM Report's work possible.

We would like to acknowledge the role of the United Nations Youth Office and its leadership as co-publishers of this report. Their advice and careful review allowed us to delve into the complex issue of meaningful youth and student engagement in education from a global perspective.

We also acknowledge the role of UNESCO and all those in headquarters, in the field and at the UNESCO Institute for Statistics who supported the data collection for the government survey. Special thanks go to the Youth team at the Social and Human Sciences sector of UNESCO and to the SDG 4 Youth & Student Network for their support and guidance, as well as to the past and present members of their network who supported with this report (Olga Devic, Ellen Dixon, Ilan Enverga, Rachael Kamana, Najib Mattar and Blessing Tunde Dada).

We thank Professor Manja Klemenčič for sharing her expertise for the development of the survey data collection instruments and for reviewing the report.

This report would not have been possible without the support of the numerous global and regional youth and student organizations who provided valuable support from the mapping of youth and student organizations at the national level, to the rollout of the survey and advocacy. Special thanks go to the Global Student Forum (Jacob Blasius), the All-Africa Students Union (Divine Edem Kwadzodeh and Peter Kwasi Kodjie), the Organising Bureau of European School Students (Rui Teixeira), the European Students' Union (Arno Schrooyen) and the Commonwealth Youth Council (Joshua Opey). We would also like to warmly thank the Commonwealth Secretariat (Terri-Ann Gilbert-Roberts), the Global Campaign for Education (Asandiswa Dazana), the Asia South Pacific For Basic Education (Lae Santiago) and ASF Intercultural Programs (Anna Carolina Cassiani and Daniel Obst) for their advice and commitment to advance meaningful youth engagement.

Special thanks go to the Permanent Delegations of UNESCO, the National Commissions and the government officials from 93 countries who responded to the government survey as well as to the 101 youth and student organizations who responded to the youth survey. Their support has enabled us to propose the first measurement of a youth indicator on youth and student participation in education decision-making.

We also thank the members of our group of friends who provided thoughtful advice on the tone of the report and its recommendations as well as the young people who participated in our campaigns and consultations.

The report was led by Manos Antoninis, Anja Flottmeier, Priyadarshani Joshi and Laura Stipanovic (GEM Report) and by Sudha Balakrishnan and Bianca Liu Herzog (United Nations Youth Office). Special thanks go to the interns and consultants who supported this project (Meagan Brooks, Akashdeep Kaur and Katherine Moore). This work would not have been possible without them.

The report was edited by Andy Quan. The illustrations were developed by Aaron Lopez-Barrantes in consultation with young people.

Table of contents

Short summary 5
Foreword 9
Acknowledgements 12
Key messages 15

Youth and student leadership in education is exercised in several ways 19

... in schools 19
... in universities 20
... in youth-led civil society organizations 21
... in youth and student movements 21
... in political and policy spaces 24

It is difficult to monitor meaningful youth engagement in decision making 27

Definitions of meaningful engagement have been proposed 27
An enabling environment for meaningful youth engagement has prerequisites 29
Partnership and dialogue are key to meaningful engagement 31
A global survey tackled dimensions of youth engagement 32

Governments are developing engagement mechanisms with youth 37

One in three countries have formal bodies to engage youth or students 37
Three in four countries have education consultation processes involving youth or students 41
... on general education and youth law, strategy and policy 42
... on curriculum, education content and assessment 45
... on inclusion and well-being 46
... on higher education 48

Youth and student organizations struggle to be heard 53

Most organizations perceive their level of involvement to be inadequate 56
Youth and student organizations face a range of challenges 59

Conclusion 63

Recommendations 64



This illustration was co-designed with youth

KEY MESSAGES

- **The first measurement of a new proposed indicator on youth participation in education decision-making in this report finds that only** one in three countries have formal bodies to engage youth or students in education discussions. Additional analysis finds that three in four have education consultation processes for youth or students. Youth parliaments, advisory councils and consultation forums are proliferating.

- **The effectiveness of engagement mechanisms depends on whether they enable genuine influence or if decisions are already predetermined.** Over 40% of youth organizations surveyed said that they were dissatisfied with engagements through formal government bodies.

- **Meaningful youth and student participation requires both political will and enabling conditions.** Countries operate along a spectrum from tokenistic gestures to genuine partnership where young people take part in policy development as equals. Yet even well-designed mechanisms fail without political freedoms, the right to organize and media independence.

- **Political will to enable youth participation generates legitimacy in return.** Countries that create these opportunities, driving intergenerational dialogue, see young people report higher trust in political institutions and greater confidence in their own capacity to drive change in education and beyond.

- **Youth and students exercise leadership in different forms and countries choose different ways to engage with it.** Schools, universities, political institutions, street protests, digital platforms and civil society organizations all serve as arenas where young people shape education discourse and policy formally and informally, as individuals and as part of movements, when they have space to do so. Their potential influence has been amplified through technology.

- **Participation does not always translate into influence.** Few countries reported back on whether consultations actually changed final decisions or involved youth in accountability mechanisms. Of the youth organizations surveyed, 57% reported they had been consulted during policy design, but only 35% said that their feedback had been taken into account. Only one in four organizations had been asked to lead consultations and less than one in six to monitor the implementation of an education policy.

- **Most youth and student organizations report inadequate engagement.** Satisfaction is lowest among school student groups. When asked to characterize the depth of their engagement, from exclusion to being valued as partners, only 20% felt they were genuinely collaborating with government or that their contributions mattered. Satisfaction increases significantly when they are given formal responsibilities in policy reform.

- **More participation does not always equal more inclusive participation.** Even well-intentioned mechanisms risk excluding marginalized voices, allowing select individuals to speak for diverse populations they do not reflect. However, 44% of the youth organizations surveyed set themselves representation requirements.

Leadership is commonly viewed as key to improving education systems in all their dimensions. But it is not always clear how such leadership is exercised. The 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* cycle broadly defined leadership in education as a process of social influence aimed at maximizing joint efforts towards a common goal. This definition served as a reminder that leadership roles are not limited to people in institutional roles of authority at the school and system level. The potential to shape a goal opens up opportunities to many others who can influence the direction of the education system at a political level.



"OUR MAIN OBJECTIVES ARE TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE, QUALITY EDUCATION, ENSURE YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLICYMAKING, AND ADVOCATE FOR LEGAL FRAMEWORKS THAT REFLECT THE NEEDS AND RIGHTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE."

Albanian National Youth Council

Youth and student organizations are among those actors with considerable potential to wield leadership in education. Historically, youth and students around the world have led demands for accountability, social justice and political reform. This role has become more prominent in recent years. Technology affords young people more opportunities to exchange views and organize actions. Moreover, a growing recognition of the role of young people as critical agents of positive change and their important contributions to peace and security, sustainable development and human rights has prompted many countries to actively solicit, listen to and act upon young people's views.

Global institutions, especially at the United Nations level, have also advocated for youth visibility in decision making. In 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognized children's rights to participation: being active in decision making within societies, community programmes and services (United Nations, 1990). In 1995, the World Programme of Action for Youth included education and full participation in society and decision making among its 15 priority areas, emphasizing youth organizations as forums for developing necessary skills, promoting cooperation and exchange (UNDESA, 1995). A global overview in the early 2000s found that young people still lacked a voice in the design and implementation of policies that affected them (World Bank, 2006). In 2015, the launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development helped foreground the role of youth. The Major Group for Children and Youth, a coordination mechanism for civil society to meaningfully engage in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, has been submitting formal inputs, with a growing engagement of national youth delegates and youth-led shadow reports (UNDESA, 2018). A first ever system-wide Youth2030 UN Youth Strategy acknowledged the importance of strengthening meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes (United Nations, 2018). In 2022, UN General Assembly resolution 76/306 created the UN Youth Office to lead efforts to enhance collaboration, coordination and accountability on youth affairs (United Nations, 2022).

The UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda in 2021 urged states to establish youth consultative bodies and an effective monitoring framework to monitor progress toward meaningful engagement (United Nations, 2021). At the Transforming Education Summit in September 2022, the Youth Declaration on Transforming Education was a further sign that the voices of youth can no longer be ignored. The declaration called upon countries and other

key decision makers to create an enabling environment for young people to lead; ensure engagement with youth; support youth and student leadership; advocate for inclusive access, curricula, pedagogical approaches and learning environments; and ensure youth are key to holding decision makers accountable in these efforts (United Nations, 2022b) (**Box 1**).

In 2024, the Summit of the Future's outcome document, the Pact for the Future, called on countries to empower youth as key agents in localizing the SDGs, including by strengthening meaningful participation in education (Action 36) through national mechanisms, intergenerational dialogue, addressing challenges and barriers to full youth participation, and supporting youth-led and youth-focused organizations (United Nations, 2024). The first Global Youth Participation Index noted that only 10 of 141 countries lack a comprehensive national youth policy (Anlar et al., 2025).

The objective of this report is to understand whether and how governments have institutionalized youth participation mechanisms and how they have tried to practically include youth in their decision-making processes; to understand youth and student organizations' approaches to and opportunities for engagement in decision making; and, combining the two perspectives, to reflect on the strength and meaningfulness of youth and student engagement in education legislation and policymaking.

This report begins with an overview of the various ways in which youth build and exercise leadership in and through education systems, followed by an outline of the methodology applied to assess meaningful youth and student engagement. It then reports the results of a global survey of youth and student engagement in education legislation and policymaking, which was designed to respond to one of the central demands of the Youth Declaration and help fill an important gap in information on channels of youth and student influence.

The survey consists of two parts. First, governments were asked whether any laws, regulations or other formal documents require them to engage youth and students when they develop a new education law or policy, to provide examples of such engagement, and to describe whether and how they took youth and student inputs into account. Responses from 93 countries were received. Second, youth and student organizations were asked to describe their organizational characteristics, membership and representation; their voice in education law or policy design; their responsibilities for education law or policy development or implementation; their satisfaction with that engagement; and the objectives, actions and challenges they faced relating to youth and student engagement. Responses from 101 national youth and student organizations were received.

By documenting the diverse mechanisms which nations use to frame youth and student participation, this report aims to advocate for the essential inclusion of youth and student voices as we enter the final years of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and begin thinking about a new global education agenda: one that must be shaped not for youth, but with them.



In this report, a distinction is recognised between youth and students, as well as between youth organizations and student organizations. The term youth is used generally to refer to young people as a demographic group, encompassing individuals in a range of life situations, while the term students is used to refer to those engaged in formal education, particularly within schools, colleges or universities. Similarly, youth organizations often work with young people across diverse backgrounds and settings, whereas student organisations are typically linked to educational institutions and represent the interests of enrolled learners. In practice, these categories frequently overlap, as many young people are also students and many organisations serve both constituencies simultaneously. This report refers to these groups separately as youth and students when reporting youth and student organization perspectives, and the distinction is clear on youth or student leadership. In other instances, the report refers to these groups collectively as youth or young people.

BOX 1.

The Youth Declaration of the 2022 Transforming Education Summit

In September 2022, the Transforming Education Summit resulted in a global movement for transforming education grounded in the leadership of young people. In his vision statement, the UN Secretary-General said that '[a] new approach from government requires a new approach from all of society, demanding transformative education. Young people will be the heartbeat of this effort, leveraging their voices, experiences, knowledge, and agency'.

The Summit placed youth as a central actor and agent of transformation. In the Youth Declaration, almost 500,000 young people in over 170 countries made the following demands, among others:

1. We demand decision-makers engage with youth in all our diversity, including elected student representatives, in a meaningful, effective, diverse, and safe manner in the design, implementation, execution, monitoring, and evaluation of the process to transform education – including the follow-up to the Transforming Education Summit;

2. We demand that decision-makers promote and invest in youth and student leadership and support systems for representation, especially for those from vulnerable and marginalized communities, and include youth and students in policy and decision-making bodies and national delegations

In its December 2022 meeting, the SDG 4 High-level Steering Committee decided that an indicator of youth and student engagement should be developed (§23) and tasked the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the *Global Education Monitoring Report* with the development of a proposal for one.

YOUTH AND STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION IS EXERCISED IN SEVERAL WAYS

Youth leadership in education is the process by which young people[1] are empowered to take initiative, make decisions and influence education in their institutions, communities and societies. The channels through which young people influence education and the actions they undertake range from formal roles in school governance (e.g. student councils) and non-formal organization membership to collective action and digital activism. They exercise such leadership to grow personally, be active citizens and prompt policy change to improve education quality. Enabling youth and student leadership requires a focus on their agency, spaces for meaningful participation and decision making, and shared leadership with adults (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023; Hopma and Sergeant, 2015).

... in schools

Students exercise leadership through participation in school management committees and student councils. They can change classroom practice; improve peer relationships; promote positive relationships with teachers; enhance their self-confidence; and strengthen their skills such as communication, active listening, responsible citizenship and leadership itself (Mayes et al., 2019).

Globally, 57% of countries mandate student representation on school boards and councils. In the 48 education systems that participated in the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), 81% of lower secondary school students were in schools whose principals reported that the school gave students opportunities to actively participate in school decisions, from a low of 31% in Italy and 33% in Japan to a high of 95% and above in Colombia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Korea and England (United Kingdom) (OECD, 2020b). In the Netherlands, participation councils were mandated by the 2024 Participation in Schools Act. Councils meet with school authorities to discuss educational goals and staff appointments. They aim to propose initiatives, ensure transparency, prevent discrimination, submit activity reports, and exercise consent and advisory powers in school governance, with student representatives among their elected members (Netherlands Government, 2024).

"OUR MAIN OBJECTIVES WHEN ENGAGING IN EDUCATION LAW AND POLICY MAKING ARE TO ENSURE THAT THE VOICES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE HEARD IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES, TO ADVOCATE FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE AND HIGHER-QUALITY EDUCATION SYSTEM, AND TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES THAT ARE BASED ON STUDENTS' RIGHTS, EQUALITY, AND MODERN EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS."

Network of councils of students of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Participation in school management teams, committees or boards empowers students to cultivate their leadership, responsibilities and confidence. It fosters diversity of ideas and encourages teamwork, ultimately enriching the school environment (Reaching Higher NH, 2022). Student councils enhance the school climate, boost academic performance and foster crucial leadership and citizenship skills in students (Griebler and Nowak, 2012; Łukasiewicz-Wieleba and Romaniuk, 2020).

But student councils may have limited practical involvement in decision making, which can undermine students'

1 Definitions of youth vary by location and organization and have shifted over time. In most contexts, biological age will be the basic determinant of youth classification in legal and policy documents. Youth overlap with the category of childhood, typically defined as anyone under 18 years. The United Nations define youth as the age group 15 to 24. The International Parliamentary Union uses different cutoff points (under 30, 35 and 45) when reporting on 'young' parliamentarians. Youth policies also vary, with some extending the limit of who is considered youth to 35 years old. In this report, definitions of youth are taken as given by the government authorities and the authors of research and policy documents.

authority. In Poland, a study of secondary school councils found that many council supervisors imposed direction on students, stifling their enthusiasm for active participation and decision making (Łukasiewicz-Wieleba and Romaniuk, 2020). Roles in councils may also be restricted to a few representatives and lack representation (Mager and Nowak, 2012). In education systems that participated in the 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), 40% of students reported 'taking part in decision making about how the school is run' but the share ranged from 22% in Croatia to 62% in Norway and 63% in Sweden (Schulz et al., 2025). However, even in Nordic countries, an analysis found that less than one third of students had participated in councils, with students from marginalized groups feeling disconnected from decision-making spaces and processes (Guðjohnsen and Harðardóttir, 2025). Students with disabilities face significant hurdles in accessing leadership opportunities such as complex membership processes, social isolation, negative perceptions, and a lack of guidance in planning and participation (Klisz, 2014).

"POLICYMAKERS STILL TALK TOO MUCH ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE, RATHER THAN WITH YOUNG PEOPLE. IN ADDITION, WE SEE THAT POLICYMAKERS WANT TO REACH POLICY DECISIONS QUICKLY, WHILE INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN A PROCESS TAKES TIME."

Flemish School Student Union

... in universities

A global mapping of student representation in higher education governance in 24 countries found that student unions often advocate for youth interests, including education quality, access and social welfare provisions (Klemenčič, 2024). Student unions are also active in higher education accountability. For instance, the European Students' Union and its members have collaborated to develop higher education quality assurance policy and instruments. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance has made student involvement mandatory in external and internal higher education quality assurance (Darmanin et al., 2024). In Czechia, students have a strong presence in governance at the university level, backed by national legislation which grants them at least one third of all seats in all academic senates at the faculty and university level (Hammerbauer et al., 2024).

"WE ARE A VERY SMALL ORGANIZATION AND IT'S HARD TO ENGAGE VET STUDENTS IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES WITH OUR LIMITED RESOURCES. WE ARE ALSO IN AN ARENA WITH SOME VERY BIG PLAYERS, THE TRADE UNIONS AND EMPLOYERS' ASSOCIATIONS WHICH MEANS THAT OUR VOICE IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED."

Vocational school student organization of Denmark

Student networks lead on issues such as ensuring that universities are free of sexual violence. In Guatemala, student-led research helped document the extent of sexual harassment on a university campus and highlighted the lack of institutional mechanisms to respond to it. The findings were used to create a protocol on the prevention and sanction of sexual harassment, and motivated similar efforts at other universities (UN Women, 2019). In Delhi, India, the Pinjra Tod (Break the cage) student collective campaigned for women's rights in hostels, and advocated for the establishment of internal complaint committees for sexual harassment in universities (Gawali, 2019). In the United Kingdom, the National Union of Students and professional bodies have surveyed staff–student sexual misconduct in higher education, conducted campaigns aimed at students and campus culture, and contributed to guidance on changing university culture (Universities UK, 2022).

Political roles during student life serves as a common pathway for political office and are used as an opportunity to hone leadership skills and gain visibility, such as in India (EdexLive Desk, 2023) and the United States (Goodman, 2024). Political interference can have an impact on student unions' effectiveness. In Kenya, the 2016 Universities (Amendment) Act moved the responsibility of selecting

student council members for student associations from an electoral process to a few delegates. The process enabled university administration to influence student council membership and reduced space for student activism, such as on issues like student fees (Ojwang, 2024). Student branches of national political parties, such as in Nepal, often focus on the national political agenda instead of student issues (Khatiwada, 2023; Poudel, 2025).

... in youth-led civil society organizations

Youth-led education civil society organizations[2] pursue a range of education objectives, from improving access, equity and inclusion; analysing content; advocating for education rights; strengthening representation; and drawing attention to low financing levels (Millora, 2022). Your Life Indonesia focuses on young people in rural areas, enabling them to access higher education through a dedicated mentorship programme. The One Africa Child Foundation for Creative Learning, a youth-led member of the Global Campaign for Education that is active in Kenya and Nigeria, focuses on global citizenship and peace education, and supports disadvantaged children with leadership skills and resources to help them to become proactive agents of change (OneAfricanChild Foundation, 2023). Uplifting Syrian Youth supports youth's access to global higher education opportunities. The OMOM Maasai Community Foundation helps Tanzanian children facing economic, cultural and geographical barriers to continue schooling.

Youth-led organizations often use approaches embedded with technology to fulfil their objectives. Thrive League Africa empowers girls aged 11 and above through education programmes on rights, robotics and artificial intelligence, financial literacy, public speaking, sports, leadership and creative expression. GlobeDock PLC provides AI-powered curriculum-aligned education to underserved students in Ethiopia. Code.X, an international education technology non-profit organization, equips underserved and conflict-affected youth with technology, design and entrepreneurship skills. O'Kanata, a federally incorporated, indigenous youth-led non-profit organization in Canada, provide programmes on ecological literacy, employment and entrepreneurship, cultural and digital storytelling and leadership developments.

... in youth and student movements

Youth and student movements lead on education demands, whether through student unions (Klemenčič, 2024) or through broad youth and student coalitions (UNESCO, 2017). The student movements in Chile represent a remarkable case of the institutionalization of efforts of student leadership efforts (**Box 2**). Education objectives range from curriculum reform in Poland to academic freedom in Türkiye (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Student unions often advocate for the right to affordable education. In Argentina, student unions protested against funding cuts in public higher education institutions (Reuters, 2024).

"AMONG OUR MEMBERS, THERE ARE STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS WORKING IN THIS FIELD, AND TOGETHER WITH THEM, THROUGH OUR INITIATIVES, WE CARRY OUT ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS — FOR EXAMPLE, THOSE AIMED AT THE RENOVATION OF STUDENT DORMITORIES."

National Youth Council of Moldova



2 Most of the examples of youth-led, education-focused civil society organizations in this section were founded by SDG4 Youth & Student Network members (2024–2025 and 2025–2026).

BOX 2.

Students led political efforts to transform education in Chile

In the 30 years following the restoration of democracy in Chile in 1990 and until a major social upheaval in 2019, 908 student protest events were estimated to have taken place. Student protests first took on a wider significance in 2000 but gained momentum in 2006 with the so-called Penguin Revolution by secondary school students. In response, a law increased allocations by 50% to municipal schools, which served mostly more disadvantaged students. Measures such as maintenance on rundown school buildings, free school meals and bus passes were also proposed. The Presidential Commission on Education gathered 81 experts and civil society actors, including student leaders (Donoso and Somma, 2019). Despite this response, the student movement continued and led to the 2011–12 protests, mobilized by the Confederation of Chilean Students (CONFECH), which focused on higher education financing (González, 2020; Wiley, 2013).

The overall movement aimed to shift education from the market-driven model inherited by the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet to being a social human right within a welfare state framework. The key components of the demands were to improve the quality of public education, remove private for-profit institutions, expand and improve equality of access to higher education, and increase the capacity of the state to regulate and guide higher education.

Significantly, the main student leaders and spokespeople of the 2011–12 protests from CONFECH were elected to the National Congress. They led public discussion to include student demands in the political and legislative agenda. Student leaders from the movement joined the government as advisors, assumed key roles in the public administration and started new political parties. In 2022, Gabriel Boric was elected President of Chile and appointed four former Confederation leaders to his cabinet and several others to key national central and local government positions. The student organizations were thus able to question the public's perception of the role of education in society, which led to widespread and intense national discussion on the purposes of schooling and higher education (Argomedo et al., 2024; Bellei and Villalobos, 2024). However, one of the movement's long-standing demands, which is to write off student debt now worth USD 12 billion, has been contested because it would benefit people who are well-off on average: almost half of students with debt in 2023 came from the richest quintile (Sanchez, 2024).

The All-Africa Students Union worked with students in South Africa in the #FeesMustFall campaign for equitable access to higher education (Kodjie et al., 2024). The National Union of Ghana Students, as a member of a coalition against the commercialization of education has petitioned for higher education affordability (**Box 3**). In Sri Lanka, student politics have focused on preserving the free education policy in place since the 1940s, opposing the privatization of higher education and promoting student welfare issues, such as the quality of facilities, meals and monthly stipends (Dulanjana, 2024).

When student activists lead wider demands for political reform, their relationships with government authorities can be tense. In many cases, these movements are suppressed, violently, and their leaders persecuted for political disturbance and portrayed as seditious. However, when their actions lead to regime change, student leaders are recognized as heroes. In Bangladesh, student activists were instrumental in the language, education and independence movements of the 1950s and 60s. Subsequently, however, the two main political parties used their student wings as proxies in fierce political antagonism. These wings carried out criminal activities in campuses, such as extortion, which were tolerated if not encouraged (Patwary, 2011) to the extent that prominent figures urged for an end to these practices (Ahmed, 2019). Nevertheless, a student movement with a clear political agenda continued to operate (Jackman, 2022). One of the recurring campaigns was opposition to quotas for government jobs, which was initially meant to recognize veterans of the 1971 independence war but was subsequently used as a tool of political patronage. In 2024, this movement succeeded in toppling the government and was even recognized for its contribution with positions in the interim cabinet (Alamgir, 2024).

In the last few years, numerous youth movements have also sparked major protests in Indonesia, Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Peru and the Philippines. In September 2025, Nepal's youth organized digitally, protested against systemic inequities and governance failures, and ultimately toppled the political establishment under what were called the Gen Z protests (Koirala, 2025; Kshetri, 2025). Key reforms under debate include youth representation, stronger civic education, publicly financed quality education, the depoliticization of student unions, and minimum education and experience requirements for politicians (NepalReforms, 2025). The youth

BOX 3.

Ghana shows that student advocacy is more effective when it is independent of politics

The National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) was formed in 1962 with the key aim of promoting the interests of students (National Union of Ghana Students, 2026). It is a critical umbrella body in the country, with a complex internal structure consisting of five blocks of member unions that ensure adequate representation of different types of students including graduate students, nursing and midwifery students, teacher trainees, professional students and university students (National Union of Ghana Students, 2019). Its independence from government has shifted in different periods.

In its early years, the NUGS had a constructive and open relationship with the government and operated objectively in advancing the interests of its members and in holding the government to account. A notable success of its advocacy, in particular the Mmobrowa struggle that protested against the introduction of academic and residential facility user fees (Kawaya, 2006), was the establishment in the 1990s of the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund). To this day, the fund supports government investment in public education infrastructure and offers scholarships to disadvantaged but gifted students to study in Ghana and abroad. The NUGS nominates one representative from its membership to sit on the GETFund board (Adonteng et al., 2024).

However, after 2004 the government began influencing the election processes of the union. Politicization created divisions along political party lines, limiting the union's ability to advocate effectively (Paalo and Van Gyampo, 2019). The NUGS is considered to have shifted from an independent organization to a vehicle for advancing the interests of political parties (Van Gyampo, 2013).

In recent years, efforts have been made to restore the influence and power of the NUGS and to return it to its mission of advancing students' interest and pursuing independent advocacy 'without fear or favour' (Dzivenu, 2024). The union now holds seats on various government bodies, has lobbied for policy change, and has been involved in the formulation of new policies. For example, the NUGS joined the coalition against privatization and commercialization in education and presented a petition to the parliament demanding budget increases for quality public education. The NUGS was also invited to participate in the decision-making process of the National Scholarship Secretariat, an extra-ministerial body mandated to administer all government scholarships since 2022. A NUGS student representative now sits on all 261 District Selection Committees across Ghana. As a registered member, it attends events organized by the National Youth Authority (Adonteng et al., 2024).

movement used Discord, a popular gaming strategy media platform, to select an interim Prime Minister through the Youth Against Corruption Server (Singharia, 2025).

"IN JAPAN, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE STILL SEEN AS OBJECTS TO BE EDUCATED, AND ARE NOT RECOGNIZED AS PEOPLE WHOSE VOICES ARE LISTENED TO. THEREFORE, IT IS IMPORTANT TO SPREAD THE IDEA OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, AS WELL AS TO ENABLE PUPILS TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING IN MORE FAMILIAR PLACES, SUCH AS SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES."

Japan Youth Council

Digital activism has expanded globally as youth movements use social media to mobilize, educate and deliberate on reform agendas. Beginning with the Arab Spring, digital platforms have enabled young citizens to organize, share information and reimagine their political participation (Al-Qteishat, 2024). The growth in connection, and space for mobilization and large-scale organization, contrasted with their limited space in the mainstream (Smidi and Shahin, 2017). However, digital platforms can also narrow information sources, and amplify polarization and misinformation. Enhancing media and data literacy through curricula and other interventions, and building strong foundational reading skills, is thus essential to mitigate issues of misinformation (UNESCO, 2023) to ensure digital spaces can serve as educational tools which foster informed and democratic participation.

"IN SWITZERLAND THERE IS A DECENTRALIZED EDUCATION SYSTEM WHICH MAKES IT HARDER TO INFLUENCE EDUCATION, SINCE IT'S NOT JUST A SINGLE FRAMEWORK."

Union of Student Organizations (USO), Switzerland

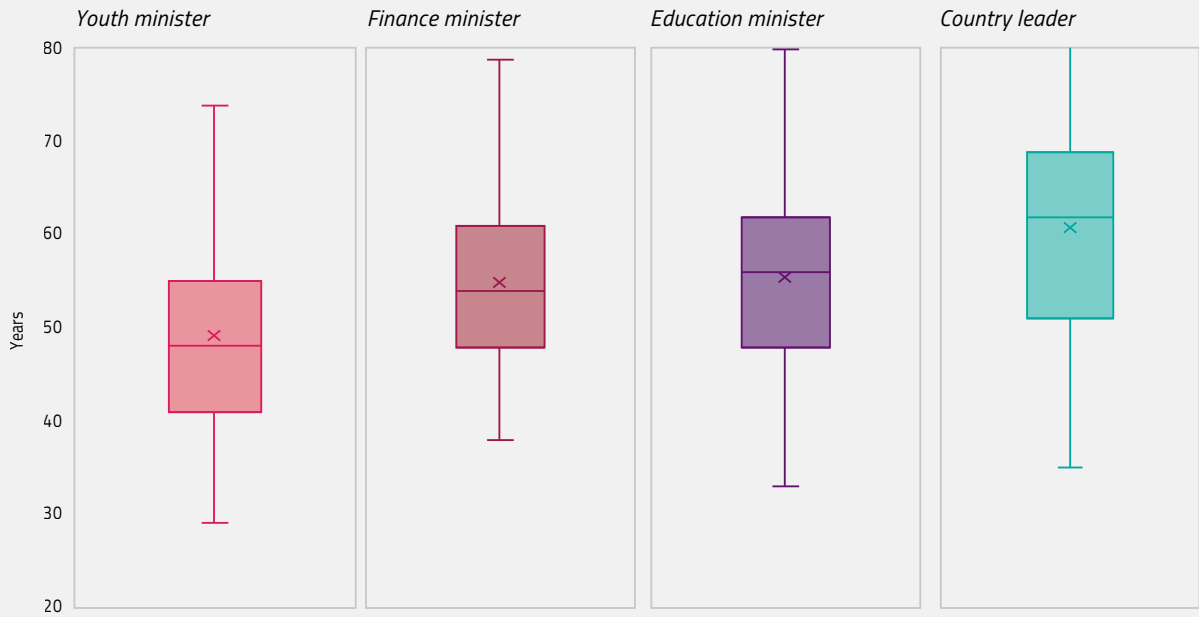
... in political and policy spaces

Youth may be valued as voters but are prevented from holding influential positions (Stockemer and Sundstrom, 2022). Despite the recognized role for youth leadership, there are few young political decision makers around the world. At the highest level, a ministerial database shows that education and finance ministers are typically in their mid-50s, while the average national leader (such as a prime ministers or president) is 61 years old while the average minister with a youth portfolio is 49 years old (**Figure 1**) (Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020).

At the parliamentary level, the member parliaments of the Inter-Parliamentary Union passed a resolution in 2010 calling for efforts to increase the election of young people in parliament and other representative bodies. In total, 13 countries have youth quotas in their legal frameworks to support this participation. However, despite these efforts, only 2.8% of parliamentarians are under 30 years of age today, far below the suggested target of 15%. (IPU, 2023).

Such under-representation is not without consequence. Age shapes experiences, priorities and choices of public policies. There are intergenerational differences in priorities not only between younger and older voters but also between younger and older representatives. An analysis of the effect of politicians' age in closely contested races in Brazilian municipalities shows that having a young mayor in office helps increases the share of spending of the budget on education, influences the hiring of more young bureaucrats, and reduces deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions (Dahis et al., 2024). In Bavaria, Germany, municipalities with a higher proportion of young councillors allocated more resources to social spending between 1996 and 2020 (Baskaran et al., 2024). The absence of age diversity in political representation, such as parliaments, limits the kinds of social experiences represented in parliament, such as in the United Kingdom where only young politicians have paid tuition fees for higher education (Tremmel et al., 2015).

FIGURE 1.
The average education minister is 56 years old
Distribution of senior political figures' ages, 2023 or latest



Notes: The box limits show the range within which the central 50% of the data is found. The central line indicates the median value, and the x sign indicates the unweighted mean. Lines extending from each box illustrate the range of the remaining data, except for outliers. A country leader can be a president, prime minister or other national figure.
Source: WhoGov dataset version 3.0 (August 2025).

Countries are trying to make up for this under-representation of young people through various means. Youth parliaments create direct channels for engagement with decision makers (IPU, 2023). In Uzbekistan, an amendment to Article 79 of the Constitution explicitly targets young people. Youth parliaments have been established in the chambers of the Oliy Majlis (Legislative Chamber and Senate) to help young people actively participate in the activities of the state and protect their rights and interests (Uzbekistan Government, 2023). In collaboration with the Youth Parliament, the Commission on Science, Education, Culture and Sport made recommendations relevant to young people for over 30 legal documents in one term (INTER PARES, 2024). In Bulgaria, the National Student Parliament keeps close ties with the education and youth ministries and with child protection bodies (Bulgaria Government, 2025).

National youth councils and forums advocate for youth rights and provide feedback to decision makers. Before its dissolution in 2024, the British Youth Council regularly submitted written evidence to the parliament, for instance, on the curriculum for personal, social, health and economic education in schools, arguing that it should be statutory (British Youth Council, 2014), an issue that has also been part of a recent inquiry of the Youth Select Committee (House of Commons, 2025). The European Youth Forum has advocated for the recognition and validation of learning acquired outside formal schooling through its national youth council members (Lopez-Bech, 2016).

Other national consultation spaces are also available for youth to make education demands and help set priorities. In Belize, education was a core priority identified in the National Children and Youth Conference. Youth emphasized that curriculum reform should include climate issues and further integrate practical skills development, life skills and trade education for improved workforce preparation, and reduce education inequalities (Belize Government, 2024a). In Thailand, more than 63,000 young people contributed to the development of the Youth Chapter of the Voluntary National Review (to review progress on the Sustainable Development Goals) through surveys conducted by the Children and Youth Council of Thailand. They recommended education reforms aligned with evolving labour market demands, investing in mental health education in schools and communities, expanding scholarships for access to higher education and skills, and integrating climate education across all education levels (Thailand Government, 2025).

"WE RUN MULTIPLE CONSULTATIONS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. EXAMPLES INCLUDE CONSULTATIONS WITH T1 AND T2 SCHOOLS ON HOW IRISH IS TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS. ALL OF THE STUDENT OFFICERS HAVE PUBLIC EMAILS TO ALLOW STUDENTS TO CONTACT US. THESE MEASURES ALLOW US TO ACCURATELY FEED BACK TO THE BOARDS WE SIT ON. EACH YEAR LEADING UP TO THE BUDGET WE MAKE A SUBMISSION TO THE GOVERNMENT. THE SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER RUNS AN EVENT CALLED DEBATE YOUR DECISION MAKERS, DURING THE EVENT A LIST OF DEMANDS IS DRAFTED TO TACKLE THE SDGS AND PRESENTED TO THE POLICY MAKERS IN ATTENDANCE AND SENT TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT."

Irish Second-level students Union

Local youth councils are another channel of youth engagement (Augsberger et al., 2024), used to educate youth, parents, schools, local governments and other community entities on issues ranging from mental health awareness to internet safety and bullying (Collins et al., 2016). Analysis of three local youth councils in Denmark showed that a dialogue-based democracy enhanced peer learning, encouraged effective participation, improved the fairness of decision-making processes, and developed young people's citizenship skills and agency. Adults served as mediators, allowing youth to influence decision making, on the basis that young people have a right to participate as members of their communities (Harada, 2023). In Honduras, the Child and Adolescent Participation Route, part of the President's Government Plan (2022–2026), has participation objectives at the municipal and departmental levels.

These examples show how countries have created space for youth to influence education systems. It is this aspect of youth leadership that this report explores through a dedicated survey that was administered to governments and to youth and student organizations to map the frequency, extent and consequences of different approaches at the global level.



Student participation is still seen as optional

Peter Kwasi Kodjie, All-Africa Students Union

I am Peter Kwasi Kodjie, Secretary General of the All-Africa Students Union. I have held this position since 2021, and my mandate will end later this year. During this time, I have seen both how far student representation has come in Africa and how fragile it still is. The All-Africa Students Union brings together student organisations from all 54 African countries. Our role is to ensure that students' voices are present where decisions about education are made. In practice, this is still not guaranteed.

My own journey into student leadership began early. In senior secondary school, I represented my institution. At university, I was elected Secretary of the Ghana Union of Professional Students, and later President of the National Union of Ghana Students, which represents learners from primary, secondary and tertiary levels. These experiences taught me that when student participation depends on goodwill alone, it is often withdrawn. When it is protected by policy, it becomes effective.

One of the main obstacles we face is cultural. In many contexts, young people and particularly female students are still seen as lacking legitimacy or capacity. I have sat in committees where university leaders openly questioned why students were present at all. These attitudes persist even when no formal rules prevent participation.

Another challenge is the absence of legislation. Where laws require student representation, participation is stronger and more consistent. Where it is left to institutional discretion, student involvement becomes symbolic or disappears altogether. Funding also limits participation. Students are often invited to meetings without financial support, making sustained engagement impossible. Finally, some issues mobilise students more easily than others. Increases in fees generate broad attention, while concerns affecting smaller or marginalised groups struggle to gain the same support.

Despite these constraints, student action has led to tangible change. The Fees Must Fall movement prevented increases in academic and facility user fees that would have excluded many students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, through the Global Education Coalition, we helped secure zero-rated internet access for educational purposes in several countries. We also worked with UNESCO's Gender Division on the Girls Back to School campaign, which led many schools to relax admission rules for pregnant girls after the pandemic.

We have also developed tools such as the Africa Students' Charter, which sets out expectations for both governments and student unions on responsible and meaningful engagement. What remains clear is that student participation cannot rely on goodwill alone. It must be anchored in policy and legislation. Wherever decisions affect students, their voices must be part of the process not as an exception, but as a standard.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO MONITOR MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION MAKING



Understanding, mapping and monitoring the frequency, extent and consequences of engaging youth and students in decision making in education is multifaceted and can be approached in different ways: the preconditions that facilitate such engagement and the level of formality, the modalities of interaction, and the impact it has on actual decisions. This section outlines definitions of and preconditions for meaningful engagement and then presents the methodology used to assess youth and student engagement in national education decision making.

Definitions of meaningful engagement have been proposed

Various frameworks outline desirable forms of youth participation and the conditions that enable it. The classic ladder model of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), later adapted for children and youth (Hart, 1992), classifies participation into eight rungs. Three represent non-participation – manipulation, decoration and tokenism – followed by five degrees of participation – assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated and shared, child-initiated and directed, and child-initiated with shared decisions.

A simplified version groups these into four levels: informing, consulting, collaborating and co-designing with youth so that they are empowered. At the basic level, youth are informed but passive. Consultations may be adult-led or involve young people as partners. Collaboration requires active partnership, typically adult-initiated. Co-design processes engage youth in shaping decisions, while youth-led initiatives reflect the highest degree of autonomy. Opening policy processes to youth means moving from awareness to deliberate opportunities and, ultimately, to norms and obligations to work with youth (OECD, 2017).

"WE GENERALLY PROCEED THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS, FIRST IDENTIFYING ALL IRREGULARITIES AND PROPOSING AMENDMENTS. THINGS ARE EVEN MORE DIFFICULT BECAUSE WE ALWAYS REACT AFTER LAWS AND POLICIES HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED, AS WE ARE NEVER INVOLVED IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT."

Collège des délégués des universités de Côte d'Ivoire

The ladder's linear and hierarchical assumptions have been criticised. For example, symbolic or representative participation, such as addressing a major forum, can still be meaningful. Mid-level forms of participation can also be valid, and youth-led processes may not be feasible or appropriate in all contexts. A reinterpretation of the ladder involves rungs being seen as different forms rather than levels of participation, appreciating that there are many different routes to improve meaningful engagement with youth and children (Hart, 2008).

Other frameworks emphasize enabling environments, degrees of influence and power sharing. One definition of youth participation talks of 'involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives' across domains such as education reform and community development, and requires recognizing youth as active citizens with real influence (Checkoway, 2011; p.341). Another definition identifies four essential elements: space (safe,

inclusive opportunities), voice (support to express views), audience (views must be heard) and influence (views must shape decisions as appropriate) (Lundy, 2007). The 'three lens' approach proposes assessing the participatory environment (structures and processes that enable participation), the impact of participation, and ensuring participation is meaningful and consistent throughout (Lansdown, 2011). The guiding principles of the European Youth Forum on quality youth participation and representation highlight the need for engagement in all aspects of the process; having a voice and say; adequately resourcing and supporting; clearly defining roles; and measuring impact (European Youth Forum, 2020).

"WE MUST COLLABORATE WITH PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS IN THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, MANAGEMENT, MONITORING, AND EVALUATION OF POLICIES AND ACTIONS RELATED TO YOUTH"

Spanish Youth Council

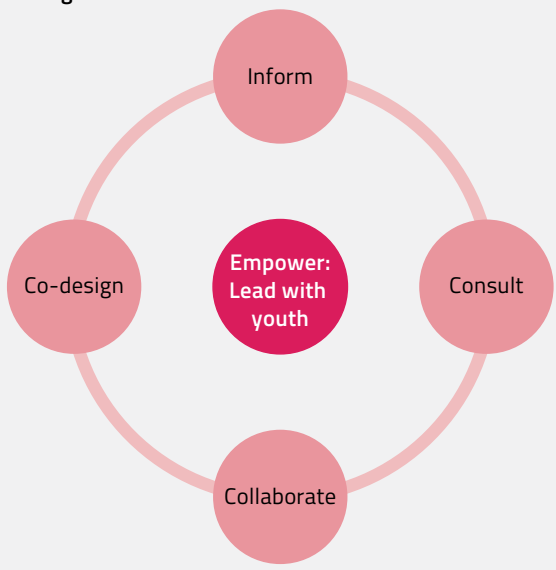
Meaningful youth participation, as defined in the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda report, is an intentional process of recognizing, nurturing and valuing young people's vital contributions as agents of positive change (United Nations, 2023). For example, the core principles for meaningful, representative, inclusive and safe youth engagement in intergovernmental processes and across the work of the United Nations are in the process of being developed under the mandate of Action 37(d) of the Pact for the Future. Engagement at the national level involves inclusive partnerships (i.e. engaging youth as equal partners in policymaking and decision making, spanning every stage of collaboration, from design and planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation); intergenerational collaboration (i.e. bringing together diverse stakeholder groups, including youth, in collaborative environments which consider and address power dynamics and other barriers which might otherwise hinder the meaningful participation of youth); sustained engagement (i.e. committing to long-term partnerships with young people, ensuring that their involvement extends beyond one-off consultations and is integrated into continuous decision-making and implementation processes); and accountability and feedback (i.e. establishing mechanisms for youth to hold stakeholders accountable and to receive meaningful feedback on how their contributions are utilized, fostering trust and transparency for long-term partnerships).

"THROUGH OUR MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS WE ENGAGE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE DIRECTLY AND SHARE THEIR OPINIONS; IF THERE IS ENOUGH TIME IN THE PROCESS WE CONDUCT RESEARCH OR CONSULTATIONS TO GATHER OPINIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE"

Croatian Youth Network

To summarize, calls for meaningful participation in the context of education decision making, which is the focus of this report, requires empowering youth, built on foundations such as a strong enabling environment and partnerships (**Figure 2**).

FIGURE 2.
A framework of meaningful youth engagement in decision making



Foundations
An enabling financing and governance environment.
Intergenerational and intersectoral partnerships and dialogue.

Source: GEM Report team.

An enabling environment for meaningful youth engagement has prerequisites

Meaningful participation requires institutional conditions, such as political freedoms, the right to organize and media freedom, to be in place. The role of education systems in building civic and leadership skills among students is also important. Political efficacy, in other words, people's belief that they can influence what government does, drives participation and trust in government (UNDP, 2022). Globally, according to the World Values Survey (2017–2022), about 30% of 74,000 people surveyed in 52 countries believed the political system allowed people like them 'a great deal' or 'a lot of' say in what the government does. Views vary by age and country. For example, younger people are more likely to agree with this statement in Malaysia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan, while older people perceived they had more influence in Egypt, Japan and Zimbabwe (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Countries that actively support youth's economic and social participation provide a more enabling environment, where youth report higher trust in the political system and a stronger belief in their capacity to effect change. A survey of youth in Finland and the United Kingdom showed that their trust in organizations and willingness to engage in social change were higher when they perceived that institutions were listening to them, especially on social media (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

But this is not the case elsewhere in the world. A youth voice can be expressed, for instance, through voting and consultation. A study of OECD countries found that nearly 60% of 30 government entities in charge of youth affairs and over 80% of 52 youth organizations reported that young people lacked confidence that their vote would lead to positive change (OECD, 2020a).

Public consultation processes are unevenly implemented and policy debates that concern young people often take place without their perspectives. Most high income countries have adopted stakeholder engagement practices for regulatory policy and infrastructure planning, in which youth groups are included among other civil society groups. However, consultation often occurs late in the process or reaches only a small share of the population (OECD, 2023). In 2023, more than 4 in 10 respondents in OECD countries believed it was unlikely that governments would adopt opinions expressed in public consultations (OECD, 2023). Among government entities responsible for youth affairs, 92% had consulted youth but only 43% (in particular, 50% for OECD but less than 15% for non-OECD member states) had engaged them throughout the policy cycle. Satisfaction is low: only 26% of 52 surveyed youth organizations rated government performance on youth participation positively (OECD, 2020a). Among education ministries not overseeing youth affairs, only 14% reported informing, consulting and engaging youth in the past 12 months. Expanding youth participation opportunities is viewed as a priority by 77% of entities in charge of youth affairs, 72% of education ministries and 53% of other line ministries (OECD, 2020a).

A review of 54 countries found youth participation in education decision making concentrated at the institutional level (e.g. school and university governance, curriculum processes) rather than at the national decision-making level. Young people are treated mainly as beneficiaries, not partners. Barriers include negative stereotypes, hierarchical norms and lack of diverse and gender-balanced representation (Hopma and Sergeant, 2015). Cultural hierarchies and traditional governance structures can be particularly challenging for youth participation, as demonstrated in the Pacific region (**Box 4**).



BOX 4.

Young people lead through informal channels in the Pacific

Pacific countries have generally prescribed the roles that community members are entitled to perform in governance and decision making, with a hierarchical arrangement minimizing the role played by youth (Jayaweera and Morioka, 2008). However, the increasingly politicized civil society sector has largely been driven by youth, as they seek ways to be active despite cultural expectations. Participation by youth and youth advocates in the Pacific is considered to be overlooked and dismissed by decision makers, rather than explicitly opposed. Youth advocates frequently face views that 'they are the leaders of tomorrow' and that 'their time will come' but when they create a space for themselves their views can be criticized for disrespecting local culture (Farran, 2016; Craney, 2019). This attitude is reflected in the limited representation of youth in formal governance systems (Noble et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, the number of spaces for young people to develop leadership skills and influence policy agendas has been growing. Most countries in the Pacific have a National Youth Council focused on advocacy and bridging the gap between young people and governments. Facebook contributed initially to the expansion in youth engagement and civic discourse (Vakaoiti, 2014). Online platforms are popular and comfortable spaces for youth to express opinions and engage in politics, in contrast to community and church meetings (Vakaoiti, 2014; Craney, 2019).

The development of regional collaboration and study opportunities in the Pacific has allowed youth to compare their priority issues (Jayaweera and Morioka, 2008). The National Youth Councils of the Pacific Island countries have formed a regional body, the Pacific Youth Council, which aims to represent youth across the region and is dedicated to promoting youth empowerment, leadership and advocacy for sustainable development (Pacific Community, 2024). At its most recent regional convening in May of 2024, the Pacific Youth Council identified collaboration, inclusivity and governance as the most pressing priorities. However, the current governance structures in the Pacific do not sufficiently position young people as equal partners to allow them to influence policy and decision making.

"THE MAIN CHALLENGES WE FACE ARE SHORT INQUIRY TIMEFRAMES, LIMITED STAFFING, AND LIMITED CHANNELS FOR DETAILED DATA COLLECTION. IT IS CHALLENGING TO REACH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH OUR CURRENT RESOURCES AND FUNDING, AND SHORT INQUIRY TIMEFRAMES USUALLY LIMIT THE SCOPE AND DETAIL OF OUR CONTRIBUTIONS."

Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC)

An analysis of 10 countries' youth development visions (Australia, Costa Rica, Georgia, Kenya, Liberia, Malta, Morocco, Nepal, the Philippines and Solomon Islands) showed structural challenges that limit the active participation of young people, who perceive institutions to be centred around adults. Improving the integration of young people in public affairs requires establishing a collaborative and interconnected youth ecosystem, leveraging technology, entrusting youth with responsibilities, and building their capacities through civic and leadership education (Lelwic-Ojeda and Akintola, 2024).

Lack of resources and sustained institutional support remains a major constraint. Among the 52 youth organizations in OECD countries mentioned above, 67% pointed to lack of political will as a barrier. Entities in charge of youth affairs highlighted insufficient resources, insufficient capacities among organizations and public officials, and lacking institutional mechanisms for participation (OECD, 2020a). More than 40% of Thai youth reported feeling they have no real influence in shaping their communities or contributing to national policy, constrained by a seniority-based culture, underfunded youth-led platforms and inadequate civic rights education (Thailand Government, 2025).

In the Arab States, youth participation is primarily hampered by a lack of human and financial resources in Jordan, Lebanon and Mauritania and by weak stakeholder capacities and a lack of institutional requirements to involve youth in Qatar and Tunisia (OECD, 2022). In Qatar, young people highlighted enhanced civic engagement platforms, relevant education and training, and innovation ecosystems as critical enablers to fulfil their potential to act as agents of change. Youth highlighted the need to go beyond being informed beneficiaries to having a seat at the table, making active contributions in decision-making roles (Qatar Government, 2025).

"WHEN THE FEDERATION OF LIBERIAN YOUTH ENGAGES IN EDUCATION LAW AND POLICY-MAKING, ITS OVERARCHING AIM IS TO ENSURE YOUTH-CENTRED, EQUITABLE REFORMS. WE ADVOCATE FOR INCLUSIVE ACCESS AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE SCHOOLING, CHAMPION TVET, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP WITHIN CURRICULA, AND INSIST THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE REPRESENTED IN EVERY LEGISLATIVE DIALOGUE. WE ALSO MONITOR IMPLEMENTATION FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY, PUSH ALIGNMENT WITH REGIONAL AND GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS SUCH AS THE AFRICAN YOUTH CHARTER AND SDG 4, AND ULTIMATELY STRIVE TO EMPOWER LIBERIAN YOUTH WITH THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS NEEDED FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT."

Federation of Liberian Youth

Partnership and dialogue are key to meaningful engagement

As shown by these examples, even if the institutional and material infrastructure is in place, an enabling environment requires genuine political will to see youth and students as partners. Youth need opportunities to work with adults in planning and policymaking. Effective partnerships between youth and adults share control: adults act as collaborators and connectors, offering guidance and support, without fully shifting problem solving onto youth (Augsberger et al., 2018). Partnerships between youth and adults can be built on various bases: consent, i.e. youth advise on parts of a plan (beyond consultation) but do not steer its overall direction; incorporation, i.e. youth are present across all stages, while adults still lead; and advocacy, i.e. youth independently push policy or systems change, bringing demands directly to decision makers (Botchwey et al., 2019). Young people recognize and value intergenerational partnerships. A youth-led voter education initiative in Guyana, which was branded the 'Vote Like a Boss' campaign, and initiated and implemented by the national youth council, appreciated the support of mentors, advisors and other adults in the process (Gilbert-Roberts, 2022). Intergenerational partnerships are highlighted as critical in the UN youth, peace and security agenda (Berents, 2024), for example in Cameroon (Ngomna and Leke, 2023).

Intergenerational justice requires recognizing that today's choices can disproportionately burden future generations, for example, the challenges of ecological footprints, child poverty, public debt and welfare (Vanhuysse, 2013). Spending is often skewed toward older people: in Greece, Italy and Poland, welfare outlays for the elderly are seven to eight times higher than those for the non-elderly (Vanhuysse and Tremmel, 2018). In the United Kingdom, per person public spending rose by 55% for pensioners versus 20% for children between 2005 and 2024 (Nakkan, 2025). Achieving intergenerational justice requires strong political leadership, age diversity in the public sphere and robust accountability (OECD, 2020a).

Intersectoral partnerships are also important in strengthening education ministries' commitment to engaging youth. The Commonwealth youth mainstreaming guidebook encourages member states to establish intersectoral mechanisms (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017). In Estonia, the National Youth Council organized the first multi-ministry youth council meeting in 2025. Representatives of the youth councils of the Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture discussed the accessibility of hobby education and activities for young people, and put forward councils' suggestions (Estonia National Youth Council, 2025).

Joint education and youth responsibilities could facilitate such partnerships. A global mapping on the interlinkages between education and youth ministries conducted for this report found that youth and education were combined in a ministry in 18% of countries; a distinct youth ministry (with the word 'youth' or similar mentioned in their title) was present in 65% of countries; 20% of countries had an official department on youth within other ministries; and 15% of countries had neither a youth ministry nor a youth department.

A global survey tackled dimensions of youth engagement

Previous efforts to understand and, where possible, monitor youth participation, representation and the enabling environment have focused on youth organizations and decision-making spaces (**Table 1**).

TABLE 1.

Cross-national efforts to monitor youth engagement and enabling environments

Initiative	Proposed measures and areas of evaluation and monitoring
World Programme of Action for Youth 15 priorities, including education and the full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and decision making (United Nations, 1995)	• Youth organizations as forums for developing necessary skills, promoting cooperation and exchanges • Actions at national level: improve access to information; strengthen opportunities to learn; promote and fund youth associations; involve youth in design, implementation and evaluation of national policies and plans
UNDESA toolkit Help young people evaluate national youth policies on proposals for action (UNDESA, 2004)	• In what ways does the government support or promote young people's participation in decision making? What are the successes and constraints to youth participation? • Are there NGO programmes or activities which promote youth participation in decision making? • How do young people learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens? Through in-school or out-of-school activities? • In what ways does the government promote youth associations? What support is provided? Is support provided by NGOs and the private sector? • How are young people or youth organizations involved in designing, implementing and evaluating national policies and plans affecting youth? • Does a national youth platform – such as a national youth council – exist in your country? If so, is it recognized by the government? Does it receive financial support from the government?
SDG development process Discussions on monitoring the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes (UNDP and Plan International, 2015)	• Participation: existence of public consultation policies, and whether youth and youth-led organizations are included; number of campaigns led by young people; number of youth groups and organizations contributing to local and national policy decision-making processes • Representation: existence of national youth policies and frameworks; budget for and level of investments; youth ministries or departments; youth focal points within ministries or departments; structured advisory bodies; number of formal youth-led organizations • Responsiveness: public availability of consultation results and outcomes, youth reporting on success in influencing decision making, youth reporting decision-making bodies take feedback into account • Inclusiveness: marginalized and vulnerable youth populations, engaged and supported to participate
YouthWiki A broad range of information on national efforts for youth engagement (European Commission, 2023)	• Young people's participation in policymaking: formal mechanisms of consultation; actors involved; information on extent of youth participation; outcomes achieved; large-scale initiatives for dialogue or debate between public institutions and young people • Policies to support youth organizations: legal/policy framework for the functioning and development of youth organizations; public financial support; initiatives to increase the diversity of participants
Global Youth Development Index Youth policy score, based on four criteria of political and civic participation (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016, 2021, 2024).	• Policy and legislation: Is there a national youth policy? • Public institutions: Is there a government authority that is primarily responsible for youth? • Youth and representation: Does the country have a national youth organization? • Budget and spending: Is there a budget allocated to government authority that is primarily responsible for youth and/or youth programming?
SDG global indicator 16.7.2 (UNDP et al., 2024)	• Proportion of population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group
Student participation and representation in higher education Four degrees of participation (Klemenčič, 2024)	• No consultation (no involvement of students in decision-making processes) • Consultation (invited to voice student concerns, initiated by either party) • Structured dialogue (formalized procedures for student representation) • Students as full partners (shared governance arrangements, seats, voting rights)

Source: GEM Report team.

Based on the existing conceptual frameworks, measurement approaches, a review of evidence, and youth and student organizations' perspectives and demands, two surveys were developed to capture a number of dimensions of youth and student engagement in education decision making.

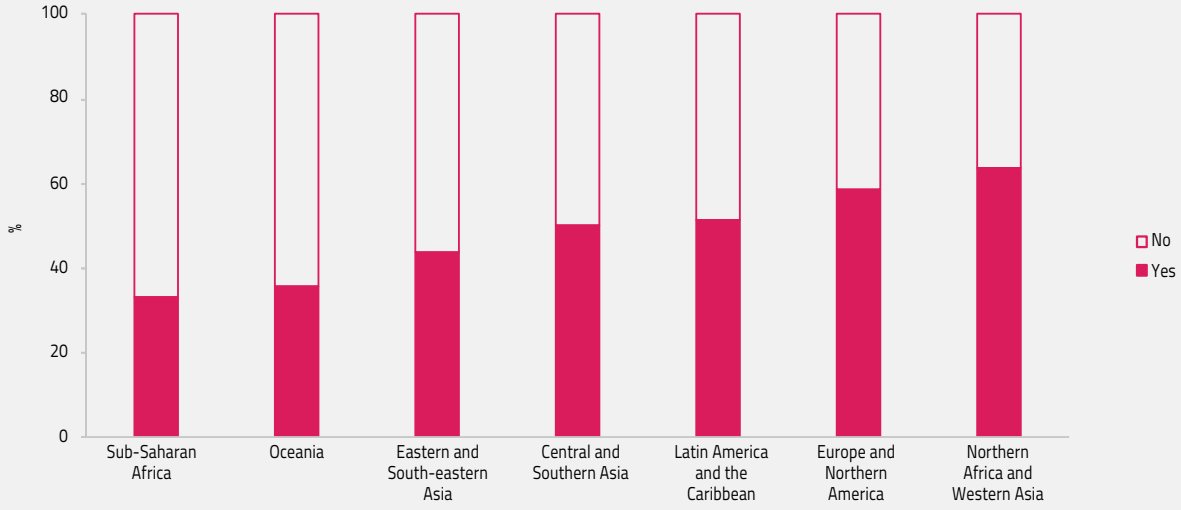
The first survey focused on formal mechanisms governments use to engage youth and/or students in developing education laws and policies. It asked three core questions. First, whether the education ministry was required by law, regulation or some other formal government document to engage with youth and/or student organizations or networks, when it designs a new education law or policy. Second, regardless of whether such a requirement existed, education ministries were asked whether they had engaged with youth and/or student organizations or networks in the design of an education law or policy in the past three years – and, if so, to give up to three examples and information on the form of engagement (public open consultations – through meetings, written comments or informal comments through digital channels; direct consultations – through individual or umbrella organizations; and other forms). Third, education ministries were asked whether they had taken into account inputs from youth and/or student organizations or networks, when they engaged them in the design of a new education law or policy in the past three years – and, if so, to give an example.

Government responses were received from 93 countries (48% of 193 countries). At least half of countries submitted responses in Northern Africa and Western Asia (14 countries, 64%), Europe and North America (27 countries, 59%), Latin America and the Caribbean (17 countries, 52%) and Central and Southern Asia (7 countries, 50%). Response rates were lower in sub-Saharan Africa (16 countries, 33%) and Eastern and South-eastern Asia (7 countries, 44%) (**Figure 3**).

FIGURE 3.

Half of all governments responded to the survey on youth and student engagement

Percentage of governments that responded to the survey on youth and student engagement in education legislation and policy making, by region, 2025

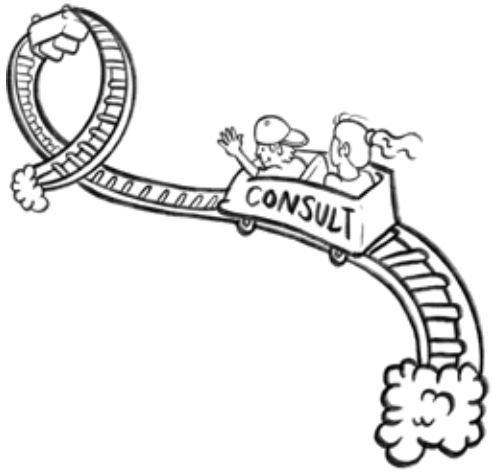


Source: GEM Report analysis based on government survey responses

The second survey focused on youth and student organizations. A global mapping of such organizations was first carried out in order to define the target population and obtain contact information. The intention was to identify up to five nationally representative youth and student organizations for each country. These included national youth councils, youth advisory bodies, school student organizations, university student organizations and any other national or umbrella organizations that could be potentially involved in education policy making at the national level. Youth organizations operating only at the local level organization and youth-led organizations that advocate for specific issues were excluded from the mapping.

Umbrella bodies provided an important entry point for identifying organizations in some regions. In Europe, the European Student Union represents 42 unions in 40 countries, the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions brings together unions active in both general and vocational secondary education, and the European Youth Parliament has 40 national member organizations. The All-Africa Student Union, the Asian Youth Council, the Continental Organization of Students from Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Pacific Youth Council are other such bodies. Some umbrella organizations operate across regions, including the Commonwealth Youth Council and the Commonwealth Student Organization, which represent members in 56 countries, and the Global Student Forum, which represents student organizations from 135 countries and territories through five regional unions and more than 200 national and international organizations. As the government survey had been administered first, ministry responses also helped identify a few organizations. Other organizations were identified through their online presence.

A total of 497 organizations were mapped and 396 were contacted. The most common types were national youth councils and university student organizations, with about two in three countries having at least one such organization. School student organizations were almost exclusively found in Europe and Latin America. There were 842 exchanges with them, excluding those by partners and umbrella organizations. In total, 101 youth and student organizations, or about one in five of those mapped, responded to the survey. Two thirds of responding organizations are based in Europe and Northern America, which means that this is a much less geographically balanced set of responses (**Figure 4**).



"WE ENGAGE IN POLICY ADVOCACY AT THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS, REPRESENTING STUDENT INTERESTS IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE, THE PARLIAMENT, AND OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL BODIES, INVOLVING STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES FROM ALL ACCREDITED HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LATVIA. WE MAINTAIN STRUCTURED DIALOGUE MECHANISMS THROUGH WORKING GROUPS, CONSULTATIONS, AND NATIONAL FORUMS WHERE STUDENTS CAN EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS AND SHAPE OUR POLICY. OUR REPRESENTATIVES PARTICIPATE IN LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY WORKING GROUPS, ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE BODIES, AND REFORM PROCESSES RELATED TO HIGHER EDUCATION, FUNDING, ACADEMIC FREEDOM, AND STUDENT WELFARE. ADDITIONALLY, WE COLLABORATE WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ORGANISATIONS LIKE THE EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION TO AMPLIFY THE VOICE OF LATVIAN STUDENTS IN BROADER EUROPEAN POLICY DEBATES."

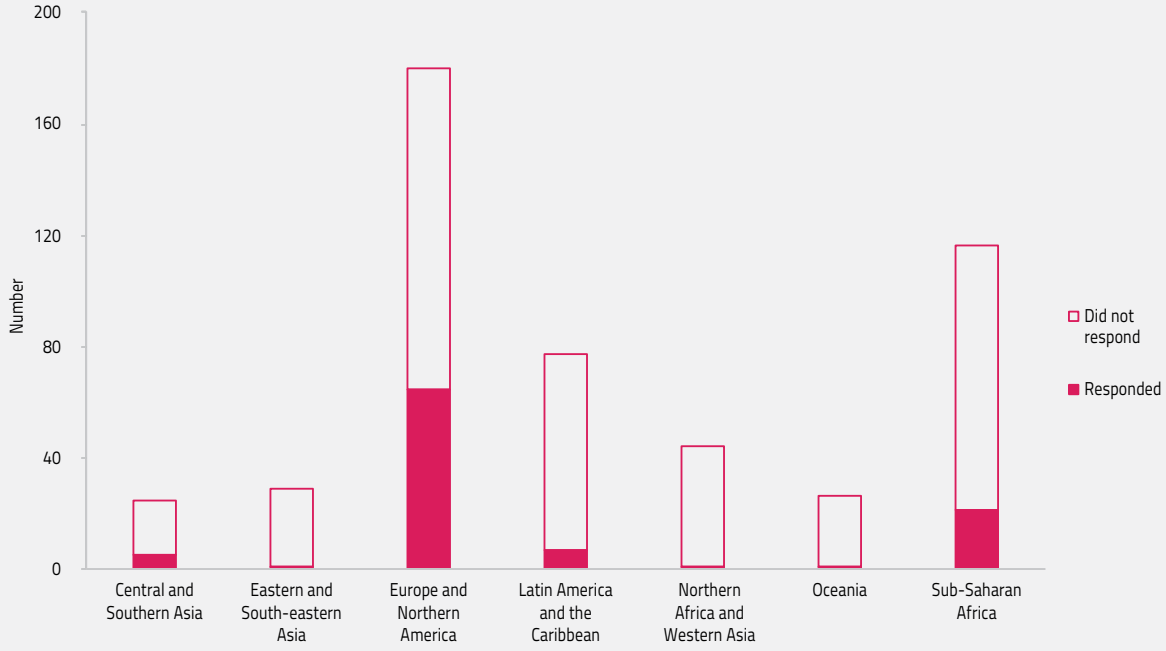
Students' Union of Latvia (LSA)

FIGURE 4.

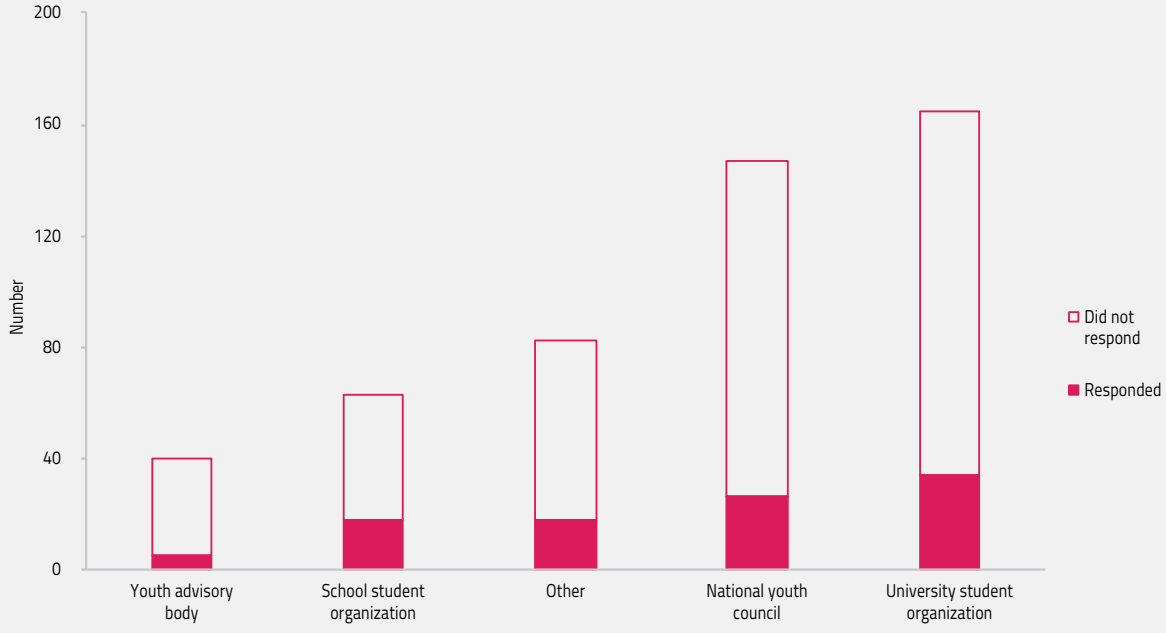
One in five youth and student organizations responded to the survey on their engagement in education decision making

Number of youth and student organizations that were mapped and responded to the survey on their engagement in education legislation and policy making, 2025

a. By region



b. By organization type



Source: GEM Report analysis based on youth and student organization survey responses.



Nothing about students should be decided without them

Rui Teixeira, Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions

My name is Rui Teixeira, and I am the Secretary General of the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU). The organisation was founded in 1975 and brings together national school student unions from across Europe, representing both general secondary education and vocational education and training (VET). What makes OBESSU distinct is that we represent very young students. Today, our network includes 35 member organisations from 27 countries, both inside and outside the European Union. Through them, we work to ensure that school students are represented in decisions that shape their education.

My involvement in student organisation began in Portugal, when I was in high school. I was frustrated by the absence of a national structure for school students. Seats that were legally reserved for high school students, including in the National Council of Education, remained empty simply because no national union existed. At 17, I decided to help found a Portuguese National Federation of School Students. It was during this process that I first learned about OBESSU, at the European level. After finishing high school, I stepped away from student organising. Two years ago, while looking for work in Brussels, I came across an open position at OBESSU related to membership work. It connected directly to my earlier experience, and I returned to student representation from a different position.

For us, meaningful student engagement is simple in principle but difficult in practice. Nothing should be discussed about students and youth without them being at the table. For high school and VET students, this remains a challenge. While it is widely accepted that university students should participate in decision making, school students are still often treated paternalistically, largely because they are minors. We also insist that participation must be real. Being present is not enough. When student involvement becomes symbolic: when we are invited only for visibility or legitimacy we withdraw. If participation is not meaningful, it has no value for us. In recent years, progress has slowed. Across Europe, civic space has been shrinking, affecting youth organisations and civil society more broadly. For school students, this has meant fewer opportunities to engage and increasing limits on the issues they are allowed or encouraged to raise. As a result, meaningful participation has become more difficult at both national and European levels.

OBESSU works to support its members in two directions. We collect the positions of national student unions and bring them to European institutions and the Council of Europe. At the same time, we bring information, outcomes, and opportunities from European advocacy back to our members. Capacity building is central to our work, as our membership is highly diverse and operates in very different national contexts.

One of our most significant achievements is the Declaration of School Student Rights. Nearly twenty years ago, OBESSU collectively drafted this declaration to define a shared baseline for student rights across Europe. It has since been reviewed twice, most recently in 2019. In several countries, students used the declaration to engage directly with governments and ministries of education, influencing national legislation. This showed how European-level advocacy can lead to concrete legal change.

Looking ahead, two priorities remain clear. Policymakers must genuinely involve young people, and this cannot be assumed. In some countries, participation is stagnating or even declining. At the same time, involvement must not be tokenistic. Pretending to listen to students while ignoring their concerns creates frustration and undermines trust. What we continue to advocate for is full, meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels, from the local to the European.

GOVERNMENTS ARE DEVELOPING ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS WITH YOUTH

"WE MONITOR FEEDBACK ON LAWS, WE DO PUBLIC ADVOCACY, WE SPEAK WITH THE MINISTRY AND MINISTER"

Estonian Youth Council



In an ideal scenario, a strong legal or institutional mechanism would ensure that youth perspectives and expertise are represented in the design of education laws and policies. Consultations with their organizations, or with representative groups of individuals, would become part of a collaborative approach throughout the policy cycle. Through such engagement, governments would ensure youth and students have an impact on laws and policies in ways that are relevant and important to their lives. This section synthesizes the responses of the government surveys on youth engagement in decision making.

One in three countries have formal bodies to engage youth or students

The first question of the government questionnaire asked whether the education ministry was required by law, regulation or some other formal government document to engage with youth and/or student organizations or networks when it designed a new education law or policy; and whether that document specified youth and/or student organizations or networks to be engaged.

Of the 93 countries that responded (**Table 2**):

- 32% reported that they were required by a law, regulation or some other formal document to engage with youth and/or student organizations or networks when designing a new education law or policy, and that the document specified the organizations to be engaged.
- 33% did not self-report the formal bodies, but have supportive laws, mechanisms and processes in place that mention rights to participation with varying degrees of specificity.
- 34% did not specify any engagement requirement at the national level.

Some countries reported the right to participation in their constitution, including for youth. In Ecuador, Chapter 5 of the 2008 Constitution establishes the right to participation, including the right to be consulted, while Article 45 highlights that children and adolescents have the right to be consulted in matters affecting them (Ecuador Government, 2008). The Finnish constitution stipulates that children and youth must be heard on matters that concern them (Finland Ministry of Justice, 1999). In Kenya, Article 55 in the 2010 Constitution establishes the right of youth and adults to participation in lawmaking, while Article 232 establishes the right of people to be involved in policymaking. In Yemen, the Constitution (Article 5) requires taking the opinion of youth into account regarding any draft law that concerns them. Other policies aimed at empowering youth highlight that draft laws need to incorporate their input, without prejudice to legislative authority. In Luxembourg, the Constitution requires that children have the right to express their opinion freely, and their opinion has to be taken into account.

Among the countries whose laws include the principle of participation, Article 6 of the 2011 Organic Law on Intercultural Education in Ecuador highlights citizen participation in organization, governance, operation,

decision making, planning, management and accountability as one of the principles governing the national education system (Ecuador Ministry of Education, 2017). In Estonia, the Statute of the Ministry of Education and Research highlights that one of its main tasks is to involve and inform target groups of issues within the Ministry's area of governance, including ensuring interest groups are consulted, feedback is documented in an explanatory memorandum, and stakeholders are engaged in the ex post impact assessment of an Act. In Mexico, Article 57 of the General Law on the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents states a requirement to establish mechanism for the expression and participation of children in education matters.

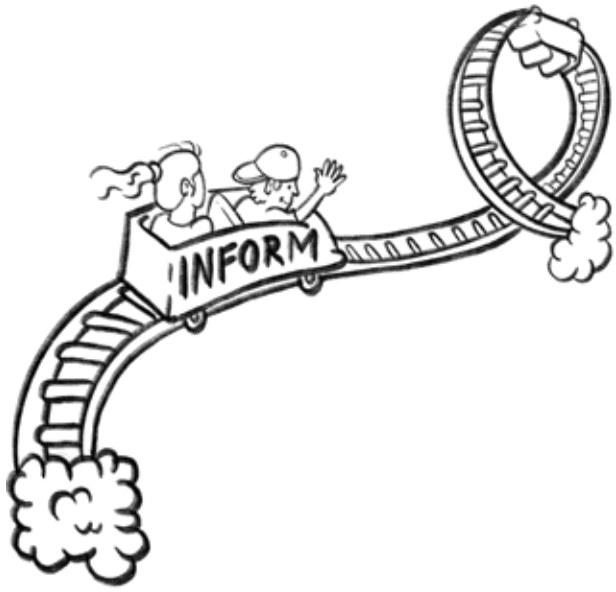


TABLE 2.

Percentage of countries with legal or policy requirements to engage with youth or student organizations through formal or other mechanisms

	Number of countries	Requirement?		
		Yes (%)	No, but other mechanisms exist (%)	No (%)
Total	*93*	32	33	34
Income level				
High	*35*	37	37	26
Upper middle	*22*	41	36	23
Low and lower middle	*36*	22	28	50
Share of population 0–24				
Less than 30%	*29*	41	31	28
30%–45%	*29*	38	34	28
More than 45%	*35*	20	34	46
SDG region				
Central and Southern Asia	*7*	14	14	71
Eastern and South-eastern Asia	*7*	29	29	43
Europe and Northern America	*27*	48	37	15
Latin America and the Caribbean	*17*	29	47	24
Northern Africa and Western Asia	*14*	36	29	36
Oceania	*5*	0	20	80
Sub-Saharan Africa	*16*	25	31	44
Liberal democracy index				
Low	*40*	33	35	33
Medium	*18*	28	33	39
High	*31*	35	35	29

Source: GEM Report synthesis based on government survey responses.

Many countries have approaches that build on citizen participation, youth and student engagement for education policies. In Ireland, the Minister of Education signed a statutory instrument in 2022 extending membership of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (Ireland Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2023), an indicative example of concerted attempts to engage children and youth. In the Republic of Moldova, the 2008 Law on Transparency in the Decision-Making Process established the basis for public consultation. The Education 2030 Strategy requires organizations, such as the National Council of Students and the National Youth Organizations Alliance of Moldova, to be included in working groups and dialogue platforms on education policy. The National Council of Students had been established through an order in 2013 as a nationwide consultative body to be constituted from representatives elected from local and district student councils.

Some countries reported that student representative bodies can formally participate in education policy development by law or regulation. In Austria, the 2014 Students' Union Act establishes that the union must be consulted before any law or decree affecting students is presented to the federal government, and that they be given reasonable time to comment. In Cyprus, the Operation of Public Secondary Schools Regulations (2017–2024) highlights that the Pancyprian Student Coordinating Committee coordinates and addresses student problems and is required to be consulted on matters of educational importance.

Consultation requirements embedded in public administration rules are mainly found in European countries. In Finland, the Ministry of Justice guidelines on consultation for legislative reforms include general provisions on children's opportunities to influence matters that concern them and their development. Public officials are trained for this purpose and there are handbooks for law drafters on hearing the views of children (Stenvall et al., 2021) and on child impact assessment (Livonen and Pollari, 2021). In Norway, Ministry of Finance instructions on how to support decision making in government outline that official studies, proposed laws and regulations shall be put to consultation and be open for input from everyone. The Public Administration Act similarly highlights that affected parties shall be consulted before administrative decisions are made.

Legal mechanisms for student engagement in higher education were reported in Balkan countries. In North Macedonia, the 2018 higher education law stipulates that students are represented in the National Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research, as well as in the accreditation board, evaluation board and interuniversity conference. Serbia's laws on higher education and student organizing formally empower student conferences to monitor legislation and propose amendments related to higher education. In Romania, the 2023 higher education law specifies that the Ministry of Education shall consult legally constituted national student federations (Romania Government, 2023b).

Youth and student advisory groups and councils have been set up to improve students' participation in policymaking processes. An order passed in 2020 regulates the formation of the Armenia Student Council, comprising students from grades 8 to 11 from public and licensed private schools, ensuring that student perspectives are integrated into the Ministry's policymaking processes. This development is part of a broader effort to institutionalize youth participation in the country (**Box 5**). In Bahrain, a Student Advisory Committee was established by the Ministry of Education as a consultative body in early 2025, with the objective of involving student representatives from all secondary schools, selected through student elections. In Jamaica, the National Secondary School Student Council and the Jamaica Prefects' Association take part in education decision-making dialogue, while youth engagement is facilitated by the National Youth Advisory Council of Jamaica and the National Youth Council. New Zealand's Ministerial Youth Advisory Group, established in 2017, enables direct youth input into education policy. The 2020 Education and Training Act obliges the Minister to consult children and young people on national learning priorities.

BOX 5.

Armenia has been formalizing cooperation with youth organizations

Government representatives in Armenia reported that public consultation is embedded in education and science legislation. For example, draft laws related to education are routinely sent to higher education institutions for review and discussion by governing and scientific councils. When the proposed legislation directly affects students, such as the draft Law on Higher Education and Science, it is also reviewed by student councils, including those at Yerevan State University and Yerevan State Medical University. The government reports that their recommendations were incorporated into the final draft.

In recent years, the government has taken steps to institutionalize youth participation and clarify the roles of state bodies, local governments and youth organizations. A milestone was the adoption of the Law on Youth Policy in March 2025, which aims to formalize cooperation with youth organizations and promote participatory policymaking (Armenia Government, 2025).

The Federation of Youth Clubs of Armenia (FYCA) is the main youth network of the country. Established in 1999 and formally registered as a non-governmental organization in 2000, it unites over 100 youth clubs, centres and organizations, both professional and regional. Its mission is to strengthen the role of young people in building civil society, consolidate youth clubs and promote active citizenship through non-formal education and local youth work. The organization operates on the principles of voluntarism, equality, self-management and openness. It provides inclusive spaces where young people can debate and engage in civic learning, leadership training and community projects. Its membership in international networks, such as the European Confederation of Youth Clubs, helps bring good practices into its youth work (Federation of Youth Clubs of Armenia, 2026).

FYCA has expressed dissatisfaction regarding the level of collaboration with government on education laws and policies, an indication of the challenge that the new youth policy law is trying to address, as youth organizations seek deeper, more sustained involvement in shaping education reforms.

Students and youth groups are typically part of broader stakeholder councils in various countries. In Belgium, the Flemish Education Council includes pupil and student organizations, along with education providers, trade unions and civil society organizations (Douterlungne and Herpelinck, 2021). In Chile, the Civil Society Council for the Ministry of Education includes 11 student representatives (2 from basic, 6 from secondary and 3 from higher education) (Chile Ministry of Education, 2024). In Saint Lucia, according to the 2005 Education Act, the Education Advisory Board consists of at least 10 members, including a representative nominated by the National Students Council or another representative student body. In Türkiye, the 2024 National Education Council Regulation specifies student representatives in the scientific advisory board of the Ministry of Education.

Among countries where engagement was not formally required, some mentioned that regular engagement with key youth and student groups is part of education decision-making processes. Denmark follows a participatory model through the Together for the School initiative, a semi-formal body of seven civil society organizations, including the national pupils body (Danske Skoleelever), that regularly meets with the Minister of Children and Education to discuss legislative proposals. In Mexico, students from different education levels, the School Committee for Participatory Administration, and the Citizen Council, which includes youth and students, are expected to be consulted during education decision-making. In Paraguay, the Working Group with Students, a permanent dialogue mechanism between the Ministry of Education and student representatives, was established in 2023. In Senegal, the National Group of Education and Training Partners, the national platform for coordinated sector monitoring, includes youth and student organizations, such as the Student Association of Senegal and National Youth Council of Senegal.

Among countries that did not specify a formal body, but whose support to consultation and engagement processes involving youth and students can be inferred from national strategic or policy goals around stakeholder consultation are Cambodia (Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2011) and Tunisia (Tunisia Government, 2024).

Three in four countries have education consultation processes involving youth or students

The second and third questions of the government questionnaire asked whether the education ministry had consulted with organizations in the design of a new education law or policy in the last three years and how often. Of the 93 countries that responded, 75% said they did have some consultation with youth or students. When asked to specify the nature of consultations:

- 53% of countries reported having some public open consultation meetings
- 44% received consultation inputs in writing
- 37% received consultation inputs online
- 52% had direct consultation with groups
- 42% specified that direct consultations took place through a formal body.

The characteristics of these consultation processes vary around the world (**Table 3**). In terms of frequency, consulting with youth or students as part of a regular consultation process was less common in Central and Southern Asia. In terms of formality, high income countries with an older population and a high liberal democracy score were more likely to have formal direct consultation processes in place. In general, youth engagement is formalized more often as public consultation; it is far less often direct consultation that could then lead to a direct attribution of impact to student or youth organizations. Governments did not typically place youth organizations' perspectives at the centre of these discussions, with some exceptions.

TABLE 3.
Percentage of countries where a youth and/or student consultation type was reported

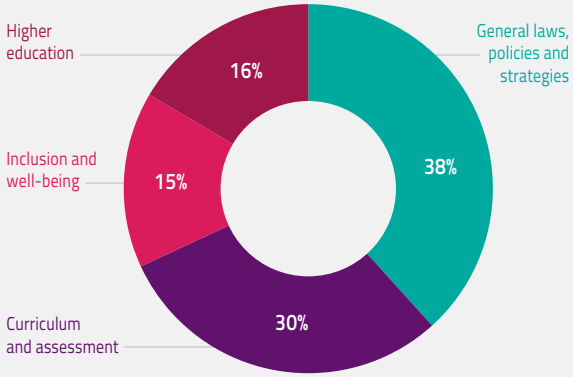
Consultation	*Number of countries*	Any (%)	Public open (%)			Direct (%)	
			Meeting	Formal written	Online	With groups	Through a formal body
Total	*93*	75	53	44	37	52	42
Income level							
High	*35*	74	49	54	34	66	49
Upper middle	*22*	95	64	41	41	45	45
Low and lower middle	*36*	64	50	36	36	42	33
Share of population 0–24							
Less than 30%	*29*	72	52	52	34	55	41
30%–45%	*29*	83	55	45	41	55	45
More than 45%	*35*	71	51	37	34	46	40
SDG region							
Central and Southern Asia	*7*	43	29	29	14	29	43
Eastern and South-eastern Asia	*7*	86	57	14	29	43	14
Europe and Northern America	*27*	74	52	52	37	63	52
Latin America and the Caribbean	*17*	94	59	41	35	71	59
Northern Africa and Western Asia	*14*	79	57	50	43	43	43
Oceania	*5*	60	40	60	40	40	0
Sub-Saharan Africa	*16*	69	56	44	44	38	31
Liberal democracy index							
Low	*40*	75	50	30	33	45	35
Medium	*18*	83	67	56	44	61	67
High	*31*	71	48	55	35	58	39

Source: GEM Report synthesis based on government survey responses.

In terms of thematic focus, youth and students were usually consulted on broad documents, such as national education laws or strategies (**Figure 5**). At the primary and secondary education level, the consultations tended to focus on inclusion, curriculum reform, well-being and safety. Several countries also reported examples of engagement with youth policy, with implicit rather than explicit ties to education.

Countries choose different ways to engage youth and students. The Icelandic Upper Secondary Student Union, the National Youth Council and Youth Work Iceland were consulted for the Education Policy/Action Plan in a Ministry of Education stakeholder meeting (Iceland Ministry of Education and Children's Affairs, 2024). In Mauritius, student councils of schools were part of a consultative meeting in April 2025 in charting out the 2025–2029 education strategy, as part of a plan to ensure regular feedback for steering and updating policies and programmes. In the Philippines, the Department of Education, through its Youth Formation divisions, regularly engages with student groups such as the Supreme Pupil Government and the Supreme Student Government to gather policy inputs. In the Republic of Korea, the Ministry of Education 2030 Advisory Group, comprised of 20 members aged 19 to 39, participated in education policy round tables and on-site policy activities. In Saint Lucia, the National Youth Council was consulted for the Education Act 2023 and the National Students Council was consulted for the Education Sector Plan 2023–2028 and the curriculum and assessment framework.

FIGURE 5.
Youth and students are consulted on policy, content and inclusion
Distribution of thematic focus areas in quoted examples of youth and student consultations, 2025



Source: GEM Report analysis based on government survey responses

In some cases, consultations are collaborative, ensuring youth or student organizations a seat at the table, involving them in the design of policies and programmes, and paying specific attention to their feedback. In Denmark, Danske Skoleever provided inputs to a 2024 education law. The feedback was viewed as valuable across all phases of policy development, from drafting proposals to final adjustments. But there were few reports of targeted youth involvement in accountability or a clear explanation of how youth specific consultations impacted policies.

In the Republic of Moldova, the National Council of Students, the National Youth Agency, the National Youth Council and the National Council of Student Organizations were formally consulted for the Education 2030 strategy adopted in 2023 and for the Education Code adopted in 2024. District council delegations, regional workshops, online feedback channels and a Youth Agency advisory platform helped ensure that youth and students influenced the final texts.

... on general education and youth law, strategy and policy

Examples of overall **strategy** consultations include Mexico, where 55,000 people (of which 20,000 were 15 to 17 years old) participated in broad national consultations for the General Law on Upper Secondary Education (Mexico Ministry of Public Education and ANUIES, 2025). In Oman, youth made up almost 40% of 41,000 participants during the planning and development of Oman Vision 2040, the government development programme, at all stages from analysis to drafting (Al Jahdhami, 2024). In education, the recommended strategic directions were inclusive education, lifelong learning and scientific research (Oman Government, 2023). In Senegal, the national youth council and national association of students were consulted for the development of the Sectoral Development Policy Letter 2025–2029. In the United Republic of Tanzania, students at all levels were consulted for the 2023 edition of the Education and Training Policy.

Governance arrangements in education have also been revised with student input. In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, the Regulation on Student Governments of the Regular Education System was discussed with the

Confederation of Secondary School Students of Bolivia and two regional federations (El Alto and La Paz). The students emphasized forming student governments in grades 1 to 6 with gender parity. This proposal was then reflected in Article 10 of the regulation on the right to participation. In Ireland, the establishment of a student participation unit at the Department of Education in 2023 supported consultations with children and young people and helped embed a culture of participation in policy development (**Box 6**).

"OUR MAIN OBJECTIVE IS TO REPRESENT, UPLIFT AND DEFEND THE STUDENT VOICE. WE STRIVE TO ENSURE THAT NO STUDENT IS LEFT BEHIND IN EDUCATION AND TO DRIVE REAL MEANINGFUL PROGRESS IN EDUCATION POLICY MAKING THAT TRULY BENEFITS ALL STUDENTS. WE ARE FIGHTING FOR A LEGAL RIGHT FOR STUDENTS TO HAVE A STUDENT COUNCIL AND FOR THE STUDENT COUNCIL CHARTER TO BE UPDATED. WE WANT TO SEE A FAIR AND EQUAL EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR THE DIVERSITY OF OUR STUDENTS. WE WANT A PARTICIPATORY EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT CENTRES AROUND STUDENTS."

Irish Second-Level Students' Union

BOX 6.

Ireland has taken bold steps to ensure child, youth and student participation in decision making

In June 2015, Ireland became the first European country to develop a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (Ireland Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). This strategy was developed by the Citizen Participation Unit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and was intended to increase children's and youth's voices in decision-making in their local communities, education systems, health and social services, and the courts and legal system.

The Department of Education extended this work on youth and student participation in education policymaking through the creation of a student participation unit in April 2023 and an expert group on student participation in May 2023. The group, which included organizations such as the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, was formed to advise the government on how to improve its work on involving children and young people in policy development and was chaired by Laura Lundy, Professor of Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast.

A final report of the group on student participation was published in October 2024. The well-established Lundy Model of Child Participation, which was used for the report, focuses on space (children and young people's preferred ways of offering their viewpoints), voice (how they could be supported to give those views), audience (how they would know that their views have been listened to) and influence (how they would know that their views have been acted upon).

Child advisory groups were formed of 10 primary school children attending the same school and youth advisory groups formed of 10 post-primary school students attending the same school. The schools were asked to select a diverse and representative sample of students. The engagement with these advisory groups was ongoing. Using focus group methodology, consultations were then held with 174 children and young people from different backgrounds and educational settings, including mainstream classes, special classes, a special school, an Irish language–medium school, a school providing a support programme for Traveller and Roma young people, and from alternative education provisions.

The expert group produced 10 key themes and 5 high-level recommendations in the final report, which was written in a way understandable to and readable by children. Actions in the plan aim to promote good practice across the education system, by raising awareness about the importance and benefits of children's and young peoples' participation in decision making among students, parents, teachers, school leaders, school staff and boards of management. There are also actions to ensure that children and young people can better engage with the work of the department, by publishing student-friendly information and summary pages in inspection reports; and a commitment to work with representatives of children and young people, including the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, to develop communications (Ireland Department of Education, 2024a).

The Department of Education accepted all changes recommended and published the Student Participation in the Department of Education: Implementation Plan 2024–2026 with 50 actions over the following two years. These actions focus not only on the consultation process but also on the follow-up: the Department of Education commits to ensuring that children and young people who share their views will know why their views have not been taken up or what changes have happened as a result of them (Ireland Department of Education, 2024b).

In the Republic of Moldova, the education ministry held working workshops attended by members of the National Council of Students and representatives of local student councils in the lead-up to drafting an order on student participation mechanisms in 2023. Students reviewed the draft text and proposed revisions on selection criteria for student councils (e.g. representation quotas), term length and reporting obligations. Following these discussions, the final version incorporated clarifications on the selection process for delegates (through district workshops coordinated by School Inspectorates), the internal structure of student councils, and the requirement for an official digital channel to collect and publish student feedback.

In Romania, the national councils of pupils and students were consulted on the design of the pre-university (general) education law (Romania Government, 2023). The final draft addressed proposals related to the participation of representative organizations of pupils, teachers and parents in education policy elaboration and implementation processes; the participation of representatives and representative associations in selection committees for key public administration positions; and the participation of these representatives, with observer status, in the work of the school inspectorates Board of Directors and in the periodic external quality assessments of the Education Unit. There was also support for two proposals: schools should offer a curriculum of pupils' choice, and this curriculum should be approved by the school's Board of Directors after consultation with the school's pupil and parent councils.

BOX 7.

Consultations with youth help youth policies to be more ambitious

Youth and students are also consulted for youth policies. In Cambodia, the National Youth Development Council consulted various youth organizations for the 2022–2026 National Action Plan on Cambodia Youth Development, developed under the guidance and coordination of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (National Youth Development Council, 2022). In Honduras, the National Youth Institute, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, implemented a territorial youth consultation to identify priorities for the national youth policy through Student Governments in 10 departments across the country and digitally for all students in the national education system between the ages of 12 and 30. In Peru, at least one representative from each of the regional youth councils and other bodies participated in updating the national youth policy (Peru Ministry of Education, 2024).

Youth policies in Europe are tackling challenging issues of citizenship. The University of Luxembourg collaborated with the National Youth Service to conduct surveys, which led to a national report on the situation of youth in 2020 for the National Action Plan for Youth Policy 2022–2025. European citizenship and political participation were major cross-cutting themes, which are supported at several levels through direct actions and teaching materials in formal and non-formal education with contributions from the Centre for Political Education (Luxembourg Ministry of National Education, Children and Youth, 2022).

Another area of interest in youth policies is youth work. In Latvia, youth organizations that were part of the National Youth Advisory Board made suggestions for the 2025–2027 Youth Policy Action Plan and Youth Law. The suggestions taken on board referred to the recognition of competences acquired in non-formal education, such as youth work (Latvia Government, 2025). In Slovakia, the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth aims to give young people the opportunity to participate in the development of legislation that directly affects them. The involvement of young people, through the Youth Council, the Association of Regional Youth Councils, the Association of Youth Information and Counselling Centres, and the Student Advisory Committee, has influenced legislation to support youth work. The amendment of the relevant act also strengthened youth participation in decision-making processes at the national level.

The Slovenian Student Union and the National Youth Council collaborated with the government in the development and eventual implementation of the National Programme for Youth 2023–2032. The National Youth Council coordinates between the youth representatives and the Office for Youth. Thirteen regional consultation workshops were held with young people, youth workers and representatives of youth and youth organizations, with an emphasis on seven fundamental areas, including education (Slovenia Ministry of Education, 2024). However, the representatives of organizations in the youth sector rejected an interministerial coordinated proposal, which is the reason it has not been submitted yet for adoption (Eurydice, 2024a).

... on curriculum, education content and assessment

A key preoccupation of youth and students is **curriculum and assessment** reforms. In the Federated States of Micronesia, the Youth for Change organization and schoolchildren were consulted for an initiative to mainstream indigenous and traditional knowledge into the curriculum. Between 2021 and 2023, the development of a new curriculum for basic education in Luxembourg was based on an extensive consultation process involving more than 1,200 education sector stakeholders, including student unions, which resulted in a white paper presented at a forum in October 2023. The Century of Türkiye Education model was developed in 2024 to realign the curriculum with contemporary needs. Curriculum evaluation committees were established in all 81 provinces during the needs analysis. Students' opinions were gathered from all provinces and surveys filled in by 17,000 students on their curriculum reform preferences. Students' responses were incorporated into the new curricula (Eurydice, 2024b).

Students have expressed preferences for more practical, competency-based learning and against curriculum overload. In Chile, students participated in different stages of updating the national curriculum. First, at the Pedagogical Congress (August–September 2023), students proposed the inclusion of subjects such as financial education, sports and health (Chile Ministry of Education, 2023b). Second, as part of the public consultation to evaluate and refine proposals (June–September 2024), a meeting was held with the Civil Society Council of the Ministry of Education, which made recommendations regarding the subject of Orientation and Coexistence, which were accepted and made part of the proposal (Chile Ministry of Education, 2023a), and submitted to the National Education Council for approval. In Cyprus, the Pancyprian Student Coordinating Committee was consulted on the update of the secondary education curriculum and the formation of a new education evaluation system. The governing board representatives of the Committee requested less content in some subject syllabi, an observation that was included in the main guidelines to the teams working on the curriculum update.

In Mexico, 660,000 students responded to the survey on the needs, challenges and strengths of the Common Curriculum Framework for Upper Secondary Education, raising issues such as formative assessment, meaningful learning, social participation and school management. Adjustments were made to the curriculum framework, based on the consultation results, to match students' preferences for more flexible academic programmes. In Slovakia, a Student Advisory Committee was actively involved in the development of the new National Curriculum for Primary Schools in 2023 (Eurydice, 2023). Established in 2021 on the initiative of young people, this advisory body operates at the National Institute of Education and Youth and aims to involve students in education reform processes. In its two-year term (2021–2023), the first group, consisting of 16 pupils from primary and secondary schools from all over the country, actively commented on the new curriculum proposals. Committee members also took part in meetings aimed at improving school conditions and were consulted on forthcoming legislation on school and youth parliaments.

For most young people, the transition from school to work puts pressure on them. Concerns arise then, often, in consultations over the role of schools in equipping them with skills to make them **employable**. In Estonia, the Youth Council of the Ministry of Education and Research, which includes several youth and student organizations, has been consulted on the new vocational education curricula and career development competencies. The Ministry took into account proposals to consider individual perspectives in career development, to integrate skills development in curricula from a young age, and to encourage more practical skills. In Sierra Leone, the technical and vocational education and training policy consultation did not initially prioritize youth inputs, but eventually youth and student engagement played a role in shaping the policy. Youth organizations and student bodies demanded practical, market-driven programmes, which led to policy adjustments to emphasize relevance for employability and to address barriers faced by marginalized youth.

Students have been strong advocates of education for sustainable development. In Cameroon, young people in UNESCO clubs provided feedback that was incorporated into the national strategy of education for sustainable development. In Germany, the Coordination Office for Youth Participation in Climate Issues, which is coordinated

and organized by the Federal Youth Council, has created a framework for youth association engagement to help them select the issues they want to be involved with and on which they express opinions to decision makers. Moreover, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research consults with the Youth Panel (youpaN), which brings together 30 people aged 16 to 27 as experts on youth perspectives in the implementation of the National Action Plan on Education for Sustainable Development (Germany Government, 2025). In the United Arab Emirates, the Ministry of Education launched the Big Green Legacy Pulse, a national youth consultation campaign focused on improving climate education. The campaign engaged over 72,000 students aged 12 to 22 through workshops, surveys and digital platforms. Student input helped introduce project-based environmental learning and embed sustainability in science, geography and civic education (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, 2025a). These insights directly influenced the education ministry's Climate Education Enhancement Policy.

The **digital transformation** agenda has also benefited from student input. The Libyan National Student Union and the Libyan Youth Council were consulted for the Digital Learning Strategy in 2023. Their inputs led to the integration of coding in the curriculum. Youth groups highlighted barriers to access for rural and marginalized students, which led the ministry to expand digital learning platforms and develop support programmes. Student consultation forums and evaluation mechanisms have also been established. In Poland, the Council for Dialogue with the Young Generation was consulted for the general education policy and curriculum updates. Lower secondary school students provided comments to an educational research institute study on the role of artificial intelligence, which became the basis for new educational materials that take into account the use of modern technologies.



On **assessment**, Bahrain established a Students Advisory Committee in 2025 to review final examination schedules and policies, offering feedback to the Minister of Education on students' academic and career needs. This engagement led to adjusted procedures, extending the number of review days between core subject examinations, and aligning the focus of examinations with contemporary skill frameworks. In Belgium, the Flemish Education Council, invited to advise on standardized national tests for students in the last grade of upper secondary education, proposed limiting the learning outcomes assessed to avoid overburdening students. At the Flemish Parliament in May 2025, the Minister indicated that the Act had taken on board the Council's advisory opinion (Belgium Flemish Parliament, 2025). The Lithuanian School Students' Union, represented in the working groups preparing the recommendations on the evaluation of the education system, argued for better regulation of learning workload and homework (Lithuania Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2025).

... on inclusion and well-being

Many countries rely on youth inputs to address issues of **exclusion** in education. In Australia, the Department of Education consulted with the First Nations Youth Advisory Group, an appointed group of 8 to 10 young people, who provided input on four priority areas: the role of teachers, the National School Reform Agreement, cultural capability and curriculum content, and targeted support for school engagement. Over multiple workshops in 2024 and 2025, its members drew on their experiences on student engagement, teacher workforce attraction and retention, and cultural safety to inform the First Nations Education Policy and the First Nations Teacher Strategy. This initiative was in the context of an ambitious government plan to develop meaningful youth engagement (**Box 8**). In Serbia, the Secondary School Students Union was consulted for the development of education and upbringing strategy, and the amendments to the secondary education law. The main proposals adopted related to monitoring the effective transition of primary school students who received support in the framework of inclusive education into regular secondary schools, the inclusion of indicators related to equity and vulnerable social groups, and measures to achieve gender equality.

BOX 8.

Australia has developed a three-year plan to move to meaningful youth participation

In Australia, a study of youth engagement from 2014 to 2021 argued that it had been superficial, serving more as a means to legitimize existing policies than to drive real change. While consultation had been emphasized, young people had limited influence over policy outcomes, as many engagement processes stopped short of empowering them to shape decisions (Waite et al., 2024). In 2024, the government's **Office for Youth** (OFY) launched **Engage!** as a strategy and three-year action plan to ensure that young people (aged 12 to 25) contribute to government decisions. The work, grounded in inclusive engagement, capacity building and collaboration with youth from diverse backgrounds, sets out three priority areas: recognize and listen to young people; empower them to advocate and engage with government; and support government to work with them (Australia Department of Education, 2024a).

There are several youth engagement mechanisms. The **Youth Steering Committee** comprises 14 young people, appointed for two-year terms with staggered renewal. It provides strategic advice on the design and implementation of Engage! initiatives. Members have contributed to projects such as the Youth Engagement Toolkit, the National Youth Forum and the National Youth Survey, and represent young people at national and international events. Members also met with the Minister of Education to discuss the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

The OFY provides secretariat support for several **Youth Advisory Groups** consisting of up to 10 young people (aged 16 to 25) with a term of up to two years that help young people advise government on specific policy areas. Since 2023, there have been several groups working on topics including employment, climate change, civic engagement and gender-based violence. Their input has directly influenced policy and programme design, such as the Net Zero Plan, digital mental health services, youth employment initiatives and First Nations education, where discussions centred on models of support for first Nations students in influencing, advocating and advancing educational change, discussing the role of teachers, and approaches to tackling racism in schools, community and family engagements (Australia Department of Education, 2025).

The **National Youth Forum** was launched in 2024. It is an annual event that brings together young people from across the country to share ideas, build skills and influence government decisions. The 2025 Forum theme was regional, rural and remote youth. Outputs from a policy hackathon with government agencies are used to inform policy development, with updates provided to participants.

In 2023, over 4,600 young people participated through surveys, workshops and focus groups on how they would like to be involved in government decision-making. The survey and consultations inform the themes of the National Youth Forum and the focus of Youth Advisory Groups. Key requests will be considered related to varied engagement channels with government, information in familiar and easily accessible spaces, and transparency on how their ideas will be considered (Australia Department of Education, 2024a).

An annual report developed as part of Engage! closes the loop on the progress and impact of the strategy. Launched in August 2025, *Engage! Impacts and insights 2024–25* was the first annual report of the youth engagement strategy. A highlighted outcome was that 59% of young people involved in OFY activities felt they influenced a government policy or programme. In turn, 82% of government agency representatives who worked with the OFY felt supported to engage with young people. In total, 124 young people were directly engaged in OFY activities in the previous year, with strong emphasis on diversity in representation. The Digital Youth Hub, launched in December 2024 to provide access to information on engagement opportunities, had over 22,000 users and 71,000 page views (Australia Department of Education, 2025).

In Côte d'Ivoire, the National Federation of Youth Associations and Movements, the Network of Youth Organizations and the National Youth Council were consulted on the gender policy action plan (2020–2024). Young people advocated for better consideration of girls' needs, which led to the integration of specific measures within the partnership pact, such as teacher training in gender equality and curricula revision to reduce stereotypes. In Eswatini, the Ministry of Education and Training received feedback from several youth organizations, coordinated by the Eswatini National Youth Council, on the guidelines for prevention and management of learner pregnancy in 2022. A Youth Parliament, where each of the 59 constituencies were represented, was organized to deliberate on teenage pregnancy and school dropout to facilitate reintegration into education. Pregnant girls used to be forced to leave school, but the enactment of the policy and guidelines allow them to continue their education. Students are also expected to be involved in the budgeting, implementation and reporting of the policy.

Mental health is a growing area of concern. In Ecuador, Student Participation Council representatives and 540 students from student councils were consulted for the development of the To Educate is to Prevent plan, aimed at reducing psychosocial risks in education (Ecuador Ministry of Education, 2023). Students prioritized psychological risks and proposed strategies to strengthen mental health, such as family co-responsibility, student counselling departments' staff capacity, and communication (Ecuador Ministry of Education, 2025). In Poland, as part of the state education policy on healthy and safe learning and teaching environments, consultations on mental health were conducted by the Children and Youth Council in 2023, followed by round tables in 2024 with students, teachers and government representatives. In Uruguay, the Neither Silence Nor Taboo strategy emerged from consultations with young people on mental health and support needs. It has become a comprehensive state policy that seeks to break down stigma, encourage active youth participation, and provide concrete spaces for psychosocial support and care.

In New Zealand, the Student Wellbeing Measures project is a Ministry of Education initiative designed to directly support the well-being of Years 7 to 13+ learners in their education settings. A co-design approach was taken in the development of well-being measures and will also be used in developing the proposed mechanism for their use, building on diverse student voices in terms of indigeneity, migration or displacement, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and disability. Three key outcomes were established: culturally appropriate measures that support Māori concepts of well-being; a mechanism for collecting, storing and using measures; and a plan for the safe and respectful protection and use of data.

In Ireland, the Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying, published in December 2022, was developed through an extensive consultation process. The Department of Education collaborated with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to develop a child-centred methodology to collect data on the views of a broad range of children and young people on the pre-existing 2013 action plan and procedures on bullying. The Irish Second-Level Students' Union was a member of the Cineáltas Steering Committee, contributing to the plan's development, which includes 61 actions. The 2024–2027 implementation plan includes an annual report on child, youth and parental views on how schools prevent and address bullying, using survey and focus group data.

School **safety** is a preoccupation in countries with high levels of youth violence. In Jamaica, the National Secondary Student Council and the Jamaica Prefects Association were consulted on the school governance framework and National Safe Schools Policy. Students voiced concerns about bullying, violence, mental health and the need for stronger support systems in schools, which influenced key policy provisions, such as increased mental health resources and improved safety protocols. Youth advocacy groups and student leaders have also highlighted gaps in school security, the effectiveness of disciplinary measures, and the importance of restorative justice approaches, leading in turn to a policy on school discipline and psychosocial support. In Paraguay, the National Federation of Secondary Students, the National Union of Students of Paraguay and the National Front of Catholic Students were all consulted on school safety. They expressed their disagreement with Ministerial Resolution 854/2023, which would authorize school risk management committees to inspect backpacks and bags to safeguard safety. The Ministry of Education and Science issued a new resolution focused on working with classrooms and communities to prevent risks.

... on higher education

Student bodies commonly make suggestions on higher education issues, for instance on **governance**. In Armenia, the Student Council of Yerevan State University and Yerevan State Medical University took part in public hearings for the draft higher education law that focused on the main principles of forming student governing bodies, the number of representatives and election methods. In Lesotho, students from Representative Councils demanded and were granted gender-balanced representation within the council of their respective higher education institutions.

In North Macedonia, the Youth Education Forum, the Universities Student Assembly and the Forum for Educational Change were consulted for the amendment of the higher education law. The working group included two student

representatives, alongside academics and representatives of the government and the Chamber of Commerce. Students are also represented in the National Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research, the Accreditation Board, the Evaluation Board and the interuniversity conference.

Higher education student bodies have influenced government approaches on **access, equity and finance**. The Australian Universities Accord was built on consultations with various stakeholders, including Youth Steering Committees. In response to the Accord's recommendations, the Australian Government is implementing structural reforms, including an Australian Tertiary Education Commission, a Managed Growth Funding System and demand-driven Needs-based Funding (Australia Department of Education, 2024b; 2024c, 2024d). The 2025 National Youth Forum hosted a hackathon to support the development of a higher education outreach funding policy. About AUD 44 million per year will be provided from 2026 to support initiatives that engage people from under-represented backgrounds in tertiary education.

The Colombian Association of Higher Education Student Representatives was consulted for the higher education financing law and the Federation of University Students for the national agreement for public higher education. The national agreement was drafted over five months in 2024 with the participation of 12 student platforms, the National Youth Council and other young people. In 2025, the Senate approved the government bill to increase resources for public universities, a decision credited to student movements that have fought for decades on this issue (Colombia Ministry of Education, 2025). In Malaysia, the National Student Consultative Council, the Malaysian Youth Council and other institutions were involved in the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2025–2035 and the National Higher Education Policy Review Committee. The Committee focused, among other issues, on international student problems, such as restrictions on changing their courses and institutions (Idris, 2023); an action was taken to lift some of these restrictions.

Student bodies have also advocated on **quality and research**. In Azerbaijan, recent reforms, such as the introduction of a national qualifications framework in 2018, have focused on competency-based and student-oriented education programmes. A commission, including graduate students and undergraduate students in their final year, helps prepare these programmes. Moreover, the internship framework for higher and vocational education institution students was informed by students' suggestions on paying students a salary and mandatory contributions and covering transportation and accommodation costs for students whose internship was distant. In Belize, the National Students Union and the Children's Parliament were engaged in an 11-member advisory committee with the purpose of guiding the Ministry of Education to develop the first national science, technology and innovation strategy (2024–34) (Belize Government, 2024b).

The Lithuanian National Union of Students and the Vilnius University Students' Representation participated in the development of the priorities of the Social Dimension of Higher Education for 2023–2030, and provided written and oral feedback on study-related matters (Lithuania Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2023). In late 2024, the Swedish government presented the Research and Innovation Bill as a basis for its four-year research and innovation policy (Sweden Government, 2024). Stakeholder engagement usually takes the form of appointing representatives as experts to meet regularly with the committee to give input and advice. The Swedish National Union of Students, which organizes 47 unions, was among the stakeholders asked to provide formal comments on the Bill. The union emphasized financing needs, resource optimization and the potential to strengthen quality in research and higher education (Swedish National Union of Students, 2024).

Concerns over well-being have increased in recent years. In Bulgaria, the National Assembly of the Student Councils was consulted on the amendment of the Higher Education Act and the Council of Ministers Decree on scholarships for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as the renovation of student dormitories. It is involved through representatives on the committees of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, the Commission for the Allocation of Vacancies in Student Dormitories and the Public Council of the Minister of Education.

BOX 9.

Youth and students are consulted and engaged on diverse issues in Canadian provinces

In Canada, education is an area of exclusive jurisdiction of provinces and territories. It is at that level that consultations are held for policy development, often including youth and students. Several provinces consult youth on **equity and inclusion**. In Prince Edward Island, youth engagement shaped the Inclusive Education Action Plan (Prince Edward Island Government, 2024). The government consulted the Child and Youth Advisory Committee and the Youth Council, whose feedback stressed more personalized support (Prince Edward Island Child and Youth Advisory Committee, 2024). The plan accordingly added measures such as individualized education plans, greater access to specialized staff, and initiatives to foster belonging in schools. In Nova Scotia, School Advisory Councils and the Minister's Student Advisory Council provided feedback on the school food and nutrition policy (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2024). In Ontario, the Ministry of Education consulted the Ontario Student Trustees' Association for the 2022 Education Equity Action Plan. In response, the plan emphasized practices such as bias-free hiring, enhanced support for marginalized students and culturally responsive teaching. Students were also involved in monitoring and providing ongoing feedback on the implementation. In Saskatchewan, the Provincial Youth Council contributed to the Provincial Education Plan 2023–2030, which focuses on mental health and well-being, Indigenous education and student transitions (Balaski, 2023).

Provinces also engage students on discrimination. In British Columbia, the Minister of Education held a youth dialogue series with grade 7 to 12 students to develop an Anti-Racism Action Plan, a multiyear framework designed to address racism and discrimination in schools. In New Brunswick, the Child Youth Advocate consulted youth and youth organizations on the sexual orientation and gender identity policy, including the Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick. School Mental Health Ontario acted as the education ministry's partner in the implementation of the Policy and Program Memorandum on Student Mental Health (Ontario Ministry of Educatoin, 2024). It administered the #HearNow survey on school mental health and conducted virtual focus groups, gathering ideas from grade 7 to 12 students on how to develop mental health promotion, how school communities can adopt a reconciliation and equity-based approach to school mental health support, and how to support student leadership in mental health. In Yukon, advocacy organizations engaged with schools for the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Policy, facilitating surveys, interviews and focus groups. Input from youth, students and adults led to changes on pronoun use and terminology, sports inclusion and the clarification of departmental and school responsibilities.

Several provinces held consultations on policies related to device use. In Newfoundland and Labrador, a new policy on the personal use of electronic devices came into effect in 2025, aiming to reduce the impact of device use on learning. Of the over 13,000 participants who provided feedback to an online survey, over 40% were students, along with teacher associations and other education partners (Newfoundland and Labrador Government, 2024). Student and stakeholder feedback helped amend the policy to allow students access to personal electronic devices during recess and lunch. In Nova Scotia, School Advisory Councils and the Minister's Student Advisory Council, including student representatives, were consulted on the Provincial Directive on Cell Phone Use in Schools (Nova Scotia Education and Early Childhood Development, 2024). The responses overwhelmingly supported clear, consistent restrictions on cell phone use. In Prince Edward Island, the youth council, home and school federation, and the office of the Child and Youth Advocate engaged on screen-time guidelines in school.

Student associations have a more central role in decision-making processes in **higher education**. In Saskatchewan, the Scholarship, Bursary and Loan Committee includes three student members representing their institutions to involve them in all major changes to student aid programmes. Annual meetings and ad hoc communications allow members to provide feedback. The Ministry also held an in-person student engagement session to gather input on developing a new student aid application, with student feedback highlighting their priorities for accessing online government services. In Quebec, student association mobilization led the government to adopt uniform legislation on sexual violence. The Quebec College Student Federation and the Quebec Student Union were consulted throughout the development of the Act to Prevent and Counter Sexual Violence in Higher Education 2022–2027 (Quebec Government, 2024). The Ministry of Higher Education coordinates an Advisory Committee on combating sexual violence, composed of 15 members appointed by the college and university networks, student federations, ministerial representatives and the research community. Its mandate is to share issues, needs and recommendations that can inform the development and monitoring of the Action Plan (Quebec Ministry of Higher Education, 2022).

In Belgium (Flemish), a 2022 act on student intake and improving study efficiency in higher education that came into effect in 2023/24 introduced major changes affecting student progress, such as a strict threshold for enrolling in a bachelor programme. The act aims to push students towards quicker adjustment through remedial courses or reorientation to prevent long-term dropout. It was argued that students from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out when the trial-and-error period is too long, increasing inefficiency. In 2023, the Flemish Education Council issued an advisory opinion proposing the indicators that should be used to monitor whether the act was achieving its objectives, e.g. changes in study habits, success of reorientation and timely completion. This led the Flemish Parliament to question the education minister, who responded that monitoring would begin earlier than originally planned (2028) using existing indicators and databases.

In New Zealand, representatives of the Union of Student Associations, the National Māori Student Association (Te Mana Ākonga) and International Student Associations sat on an advisory panel regarding domestic and international student contract dispute resolution schemes. The final recommendations were outlined in advice to the Minister. The National Union of Students in Norway was consulted for the new act on universities and university colleges, adopted in 2024. The union proposed a chapter on learning environment and student rights, which was adopted as Chapter 10 of the Act which also covers issues such as student representation, duties to prevent harassment and sexual harassment, and accommodations for students and pregnant students (Norway Ministry of Education and Research, 2024).





Young people must be part of implementation, not just consultation

Joshua Opey, Commonwealth Youth Council

My name is Joshua Opey, and I chair the Commonwealth Youth Council, the official youth organisation of the Commonwealth. I am from Ghana. The Youth Council was established in 2013 and is endorsed by the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth. Since then, it has represented young people across the 56 member states, working with national youth councils and youth representative mechanisms to ensure that young people's views are reflected in decision-making.

Our work takes place at different levels. We represent young people in ministerial and pan-Commonwealth processes, but we are also closely involved at the grassroots level. In countries where national youth councils exist, we support them to strengthen their work. Where they do not exist, we support young people and governments to establish them. This combination of high-level advocacy and practical engagement is central to our role.

My own experience in youth and student representation began early. In high school, I was part of a regional student representative council in Ghana, representing more than 50,000 students in the Greater Accra Region. At that time, we were consulted on education policy reforms that later led to free senior high school education. At university, I served as General Secretary of the University of Ghana Students' Union and later of the National Union of Ghana Students. During this period, we supported the development of Ghana's National Youth Policy and worked on reforms to the student loan system.

One of the most important lessons I have learned is that meaningful youth engagement goes beyond consultation. For us, it means integrating young people throughout decision-making processes and into implementation. Young people are often excluded through assumptions about experience or expertise. Yet, time and again, young people with limited formal experience bring new ideas that challenge long-standing practices that have failed to deliver results, including on education outcomes and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Resistance often comes from discomfort with the energy young people bring. Youth engagement can feel disruptive. In the past, this disruption took the form of activism. Today, many young people are seeking something different: a seat at the table as equal partners, where they can co-design solutions rather than push from the outside. Recognising young people as equal partners remains one of the biggest barriers.

A clear example of successful youth engagement is the reform of the student loan scheme in Ghana. Although access to basic and secondary education had expanded significantly, tertiary enrolment remained low, largely due to financing barriers. The loan system required guarantors from the formal economy, automatically excluding the majority of young people. Student unions analysed the data, proposed alternatives, and advocated for change. The guarantor requirement was removed and replaced with a system based on national identification, making access to loans significantly easier. Students were also involved in implementation, outreach, and monitoring.

Looking ahead, the question is not whether to involve young people, but how. Engagement must be adapted to young people, not the other way around. Traditional consultation tools are often insufficient. Youth-friendly and innovative approaches—including creative, digital, and participatory methods—can unlock insights that formal processes miss. At the same time, young people must be part of implementation. In countries where young people make up the majority of the population, treating them only as beneficiaries rather than drivers of solutions limits progress.

In education, young people are the central stakeholders. Without them, education has no purpose. Integrating young people into decision-making and implementation is not optional; it is essential for improving access, quality, and relevance. When young people are given real mandates and real responsibility, education systems are stronger and more responsive.

YOUTH AND STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS STRUGGLE TO BE HEARD

Talking about youth and their needs is not the same as hearing from them directly. For this reason, this report administered a questionnaire to youth and student organizations about their engagement on education decision making. This section presents information on the organizations' perspectives and experiences from engaging with government, as well as the challenges they face in fulfilling their aspirations.

The analysis is based on 101 youth and student organizations, of which two thirds are from Europe and Northern America. Most are registered as non-governmental or not-for-profit organizations. As explained earlier, this survey focused on nationally representative organizations with a broad mandate to represent young people or students rather than single-issue organizations. Those that responded are diverse in terms of their membership. Most have elected representatives. They typically rely on multiple funding sources, such as membership fees, government grants, project funding, in-kind support and private sources. Some 40% of the organizations have representation requirements, mainly in terms of gender balance but also in terms of age, disability, language and the diversity of the institutions represented (**Table 4**).

All organizations aim to empower youth and protect their rights. In Ecuador, the National Youth Advisory Council advocates for public policies that allow young people access to fundamental rights. In Mali, the Association des Jeunes pour la Défense des Droits Humains et la Protection de l'Environnement aims to promote equity and inclusion, advocates for rights-based education of good quality and works to ensure youth participation in shaping education policies. The Norwegian Children and Youth Council focuses on freedom of speech and democracy, and the right for students to engage in political activities during school hours. In Spain, the Youth Council aims to encourage the creation of youth organizations and councils, promote the effective participation of youth in society, and channel and defend the demands and interests of youth.

Surveyed organizations aim for the perspectives of youth or students to be represented and valued by the government in education policy. In Belize, the National Student Union works to amplify students' voices, advocates for meaningful representation on policy forums, tackles inclusion needs and acknowledges the diverse heritage of its members. In Côte d'Ivoire, the National Youth Council aims to mobilize young people and convey their views to decision makers. In France, the Fédération des associations générales étudiantes (National Federation of Students' Associations) has the objective to give students a voice and help improve their conditions. In Hungary, the aim of the National Union of Students is to make their views more influential in university decision-making forums and in everyday university life. The Japan Youth Council works to ensure children's and youth rights by ensuring their voices are heard and they have access to education of good quality. In Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), the Secondary Students Union aims for its members' perspectives to be included in policy design.

"WE RELEASE ARTICLES ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES/ ORGANIZATIONS IN IMPORTANT DECISION MAKING THAT WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON STUDENTS WITH THE HOPE THAT WE AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS WILL START GETTING INVITED."

National Youth, Schoolchildren, and Student Interest Organization of Suriname

TABLE 4.

Characteristics of youth and student organizations that responded to the survey

	Europe and Northern America		Rest of the world		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	64	**100**	35	**100**	99	**100**
Organizational type						
National youth council	20	**31**	10	**29**	30	**30**
National school student union	15	**23**	4	**11**	19	**19**
National higher education student union	20	**31**	6	**17**	26	**26**
Youth advisory body	1	**2**	7	**20**	8	**8**
Other	8	**13**	8	**23**	16	**16**
Total		**100**		**100**		**100**
Organizational status						
NGO/charity/not-for-profit	45	**70**	26	**74**	71	**72**
Not registered, informal association	3	**5**	0	**0**	3	**3**
Branch/unit of a larger institution	4	**6**	2	**6**	6	**6**
Other	12	**19**	7	**20**	19	**19**
Total		**100**		**100**		**100**
Funding sources (multiple answers)						
Membership fees	37	**58**	17	**49**	54	**56**
Government grants	51	**80**	17	**49**	68	**65**
Project/service funding	48	**75**	23	**66**	71	**73**
Philanthropy/donations	11	**17**	16	**46**	27	**30**
In-kind support by host organization	7	**11**	7	**20**	14	**16**
Commercial sources	11	**17**	2	**6**	13	**15**
Member criteria						
Voluntary	24	**38**	22	**63**	46	**46**
Automatic/universal	9	**14**	6	**17**	15	**15**
Other	28	**44**	6	**17**	34	**34**
No answer	3	**5**	1	**3**	4	**4**
Total		**100**		**100**		**100**
Member types						
Organizations	41	**64**	6	**17**	47	**47**
Individuals	12	**19**	11	**31**	23	**23**
Both	8	**13**	18	**51**	26	**26**
No answer	3	**5**	0	**0**	3	**3**
Total		**100**		**100**		**100**
Representative selection and criteria						
Representatives elected	55	**86**	30	**86**	85	**86**
Representatives appointed	20	**31**	17	**49**	37	**37**
Some group representation requirements	16	**25**	24	**69**	40	**40**

Source: GEM Report analysis based on youth and student organization survey responses.

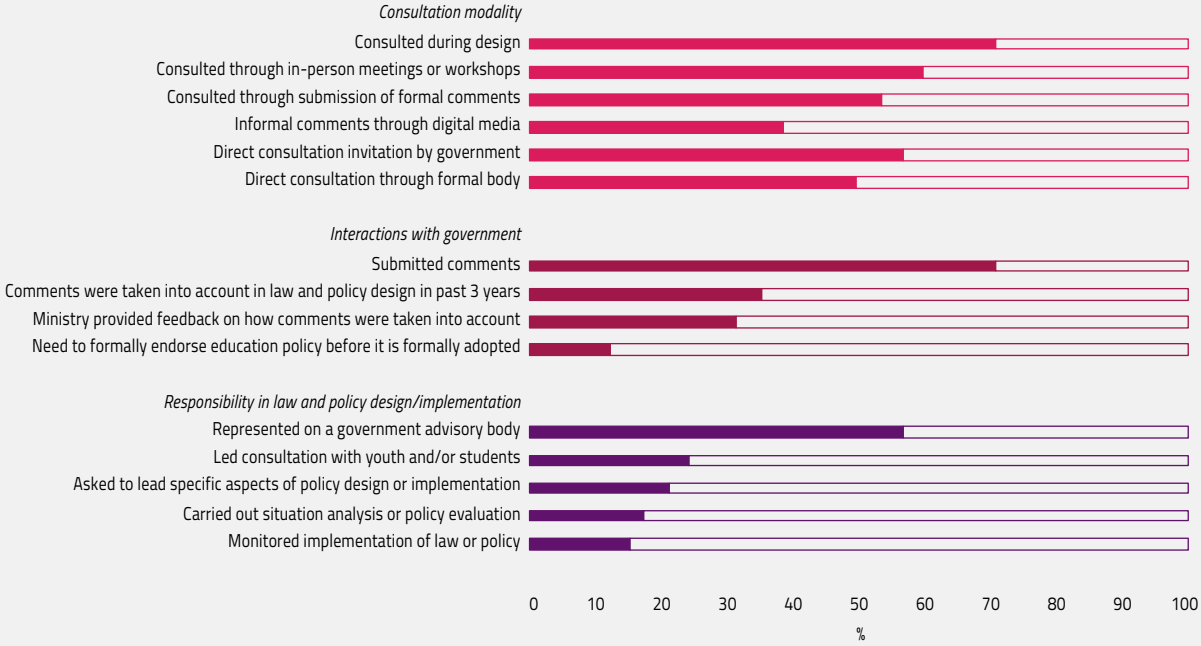
Youth and student organizations work towards engagement with education legislation and policymaking to advocate for equitable, accessible and transformative education systems. In Colombia, the National Association of Secondary School Students defends the right to education as a common good and demands public funding for education to promote democratic values and student participation at the grass-roots level in each school. In Ghana, the Youth Advisory Board works to ensure that the voice of young people, particularly upper secondary school students, is heard, considered and included in education policies and curriculum development. The Italian Youth Council promotes the integration of sustainability, cultural heritage and active citizenship into education policy and builds the capacity of young people. In Romania, the National Alliance of Student Organizations represents student interests and aims to make higher education more accessible and improve its quality through increased resource allocation. In the United Kingdom, the National Union of Students wants to harness the collective power of its members for a free, democratic and inclusive education for young people over the age of 16, with special emphasis on overhauling the funding system, abolishing tuition fees and making sure teachers are paid well. The Zambia National Students Union emphasizes the importance of academic freedom.

Most organizations reported they had been consulted during policy design, usually through in-person meetings and workshops, direct consultation through invitation by governments, and through representation in a formal body. Of all organizations, 57% stated that they had submitted comments to a consultation. However, of those, only 6 in 10 (or 33% of all organizations) said that their feedback had been taken into consideration in the design of a law or policy and only 5 in 10 (or just 28% of all organizations) had received responses on how that feedback had been taken into consideration. Only one in five organizations had been asked to lead consultations and only one in six to monitor the implementation of a policy (**Figure 6**).

FIGURE 6.

One in three youth and student organizations have seen their inputs taken into account in an education law or policy

Frequency and type of youth and student organizations' engagement in law and policy design, 2025



Source: GEM Report analysis based on youth and student organization survey responses.

"OUR CENTRAL BOARD AND LEADER CHANGES EVERY YEAR. WE TRY TO GET OUR INPUTS PROPERLY VALUED ON EQUAL GROUNDS, INCLUDING BY TEACHERS"

School Student Union of Norway

Organizations try to influence government policies in multiple ways. They may be **represented in structured mechanisms**. In Sweden, the National Union of Students appoints student representatives to boards and reference groups of government commissions, participating in public debate and taking official positions. In the United Kingdom, the National Union of Students lobbies government, functioning as the Secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on students, emailing and meeting with members of the two houses of parliament, ministers and senior civil servants to make their positions clear.

When they are not consulted, organizations may **lobby and protest**. In Côte d'Ivoire, the College of Delegates proposes amendments to policies, even though it is usually not a party to the policy development process. The National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania makes critical public statements when youth or student bodies are not adequately consulted by the government. Awareness raising, advocacy and lobbying also takes place through organizations. The Kenya National Youth Council calls for public participation on its communication channels, social media platforms and youth engagement forums on youth issues, including education. The National, Youth, Schoolchildren and Student Interest Organization Suriname publishes articles to stress the need for including student representatives in decision-making processes. Some organizations carry out policy research and analysis to support their positions. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Students' Union of the Republic of Srpska conducts surveys of students' opinions and priorities then shares them through their representative spaces. In Lithuania, the National Union of Students publishes and disseminates periodicals aimed at ensuring the broad participation of students.

Organizations also try to develop the **capacities** of youth to participate and mobilize. The Federation of French-speaking Students in Belgium supports local representative elections, trains student representatives for their assigned roles, and brings them together to discuss policies that affect young people. The Federation of Liberian Youth identifies and empowers youth representatives to participate in stakeholder meetings, policy forums and legislative hearings. In Nepal, the National Youth Council trains youth on consultation and orientation, organizes youth model parliaments and encourages volunteering. In Paraguay, the National Union of Student Centres created participatory spaces with students and young people to help them become activists to defend their rights. In the United Kingdom, the Welsh Youth Parliament provides elected young people with access to ministers, committee chairs and decision makers so that their ideas and reports are considered.

"OUR MAIN WORK IS TO DO ADVOCACY AND AWARENESS RAISING"

Tanzania Youth Coaliton

Most organizations perceive their level of involvement to be inadequate

When asked their perspectives on government engagement, 26% of the 99 youth and student organizations that responded to the survey reported they were engaged always or often by the Ministry of Education in law or policy design; and 19% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their engagement level. These shares were higher among the 26 organizations that represented higher education students, with 39% reporting frequent engagements with the Ministry of Education and 27% reporting satisfaction with their engagement. In contrast, the 19 organizations that represented school students reported the highest percentage of being rarely engaged (47%) and of feeling dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the level of engagement (58%) (**Table 5**).

TABLE 5.
Youth and student organizations' perceptions of the quality of engagement in education law and policy design processes, by organization type

	National Youth Council N=30	School Student Organization N=19	Higher Education Student Organization N=26	Youth Advisory Body N=8	Other N=16	Total
The Ministry of Education engages our organization in law/policy design						
Always	3	5	8	25	6	7
Often	20	21	31	0	6	19
Sometimes	17	11	35	13	56	26
Rarely	33	42	15	38	6	26
Never	10	5	4	25	13	9
Our organization is satisfied with its engagement in education law/policy design process						
Very satisfied	0	0	4	25	0	3
Satisfied	17	16	23	13	6	16
Neutral	27	5	27	13	25	21
Dissatisfied	30	47	31	25	50	36
Very dissatisfied	10	11	8	25	6	10
The following word best describes our organization's engagement in education law/policy design						
Valued	3	11	8	25	6	8
Collaborating	17	0	12	13	6	10
Consulted	20	26	35	25	44	29
Informed	33	37	31	38	19	31
Excluded	10	5	8	0	13	8
Our organization feels there are adequate time and resources invested in ensuring youth/student participation						
Agree	0	5	4	38	13	7
Partially agree	27	26	23	13	19	23
Neutral	13	5	8	13	0	8
Partially disagree	30	37	50	13	31	35
Disagree	13	5	8	25	25	13

Note: The percentages do not add up to 100 due to non-responses to these questions by some organizations.
Source: GEM Report analysis based on youth and student organization survey responses.

"WE WANT TO HARNESS THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF STUDENT UNIONS AND STUDENTS TO WORK TOWARDS A FREE, DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE POST- 16 EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS ACROSS THE UK. THAT MEANS AN UPHEAVAL OF THE FUNDING SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION"

National Union of Students of the United Kingdom

A five-level qualitative scale of the depth of the organizations' engagement with the government ranged from being excluded (the worst type of engagement) to being merely informed, to being consulted, before moving to collaborating and, ultimately, valued (the best type of engagement). Of all organizations, only 20% felt they were collaborating with the government or that their contributions were valued.

Youth and student organizations stress the importance of formal mechanisms. However, a direct consultation relationship with the government does not result in more satisfaction. More than half of the organizations were part of a government formal body (or even received government grants), but more than 40% of these organizations mentioned they were dissatisfied with their level of engagement (**Box 10**).



BOX 10.

In Luxembourg, even a formal role for youth does not guarantee real influence

In Luxembourg, youth participation in civic life, student life and development, and education decision making is determined by various legislation. The political participation of young people has been highlighted as a cross-cutting theme of education and youth policy. The government has also made it clear that youth policy can only be implemented in cooperation with young people themselves at different levels of governance.

Official mechanisms engaging in government decision-making processes include the National Youth Council (Jugendrot/CGJL) – which serves, for example, on the Higher Council for Youth, the Higher Council for Volunteering and the Higher Council for Child and Family Assistance – the National Conference of Students of Luxembourg (CNEL) – which serves on the Education Council and is required to formally endorse education policies – and the Youth Parliament.

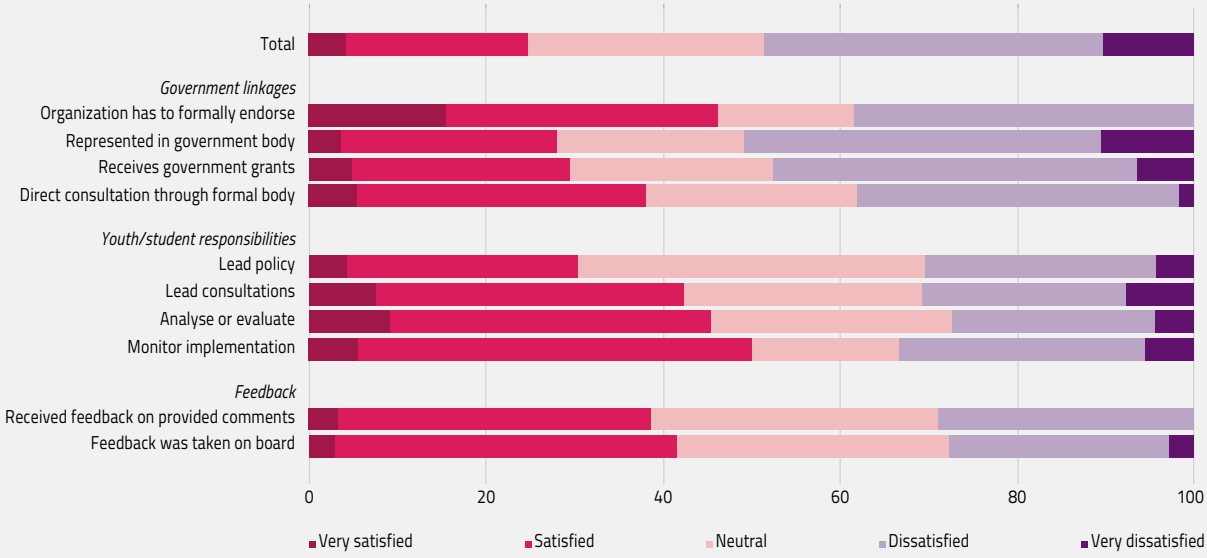
The organizations that responded to the survey highlighted their interactions but also their limited influence. The National Youth Council views its key role in education as supporting the National Conference of Students with resources, logistics and finance, but acknowledged that losing its membership on the Higher Council of National Education has limited its influence on the Ministry of National Education, Children and Youth and the Chamber of Deputies on education issues. They commented further, 'In our youth participation projects (such as the Youth Convention or the Youth Parliament), young participants express themselves on educational issues and share them with political decision makers. But in these instances, we rarely receive feedback from political decision makers on the follow-up of the proposals developed by young people'.

The National Conference of Students plays a central part through its roles in engaging students on education laws and policies. For example, they have provided feedback on policies related to compulsory schooling and mobile phone bans in schools They ensure student elections take place in all secondary schools so that student representatives join the Conference. But despite its representative and formalized function, the organization also finds their influence a challenge: 'Our organization's influence may be limited compared to other actors. Furthermore, a lack of transparency in legislative processes and insufficient monitoring of reforms makes it difficult to truly measure the impact of our actions'.

FIGURE 7.

Youth and student organizations are more likely to be satisfied with the engagement if they have specific responsibilities

Youth and student organizations' perceptions of the quality of engagement in education law and policy design processes, by type of engagement



Source: GEM Report analysis based on youth and student organization survey responses.

While less common, when youth and students have some responsibilities, such as a requirement to endorse a policy formally or lead consultations (which is the case for about one in four organizations) or when they have received feedback on their comments and their comments have been taken on board (which is the case for about one in three organizations), they are more likely to report being satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of engagement (**Figure 7**).

"THE RELUCTANCE OF CERTAIN STAKEHOLDERS TO EMBRACE NEW PROPOSALS, THE LIMITED RESOURCES OF THE ORGANISATION, THE ABSENCE OF A LEGAL REQUIREMENT TO CONSULT STUDENT ORGANISATIONS, AS WELL AS THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND OPENNESS TO DIALOGUE FROM GOVERNMENTAL BODIES, ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES WE FACE"

National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR)

Youth and student organizations face a range of challenges

The challenges described by youth and student organizations fall into four major categories, all of which increase the risk of leaving them behind: perceptions of government intent, time limitations, internal management difficulties and broader contextual constraints.

Organizations feel their decision-making space is limited. The Luxembourg National Youth Council claims to not be systematically involved in education law or policy design, and that feedback was not sought at all for policies around French literacy, the extension of compulsory schooling and secondary school infrastructure development. It also rarely receives feedback on education proposals developed at the Youth Convention or the Youth Parliament. The National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania highlighted the problem of an absence of a legal requirement to consult with student organizations, along with the reluctance of stakeholders to support proposals, and the lack of transparency and openness to dialogue from government bodies. The Union of Secondary School Students of Serbia

pointed out that the Ministry of Education mostly makes policies independently with little room for influencing them. Its advocacy work has been reduced to blocking negative policies instead of making positive ones. In Spain, the Youth Council described the challenge of a lack of structural and systematic mechanisms for youth participation in education and the limited feedback on input and contributions.

Organizations outside Europe particularly expressed such feelings. The Belize National Students Union highlighted systemic resistance from authorities that restrict students from being prioritized in decision-making processes. The National Council of Students of Côte d'Ivoire experiences opposition from the authorities in discussing law proposals with students (**Box 11**). The Japan Youth Council reports a lack of space for engagement because children and youth are viewed as people to be educated and not as people whose voices are listened to. In Kenya, the Women Students Mentorship Association mentioned that the most critical education policy decisions are made in closed and highly bureaucratic spaces, where students and youth organizations are under-represented or excluded altogether. The Federation of Liberian Youth referred to challenges of limited access to high-level policy spaces due to political gatekeeping or a lack of formal recognition of youth's contributions, with bureaucratic delays stalling progress even when youth inputs are submitted. In Mozambique, the Association of Finalist University Students notes that there is 'not much space for young people to express their opinions'. The National Union of Student Centres of Paraguay stated simply that 'the state seeks to weaken, eliminate and ignore us'.

BOX 11.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the two main youth organizations have had different experiences participating in education decision making

The principal documents in Côte d'Ivoire that address youth are the National Development Plan (2021–2025) and the Government Youth Programme (2023–2025). The Plan highlights the importance of youth inclusion in public policies, particularly in education. It promotes active youth participation through national consultations designed to capture their expectations and proposals. Building on this framework, the Programme seeks to further integrate young people into decision-making processes, especially in education, with the goal of enhancing their employability and socio-professional integration.

The Conseil national des jeunes de Côte d'Ivoire (CNJCI) and the Collège des délégués de Côte d'Ivoire (CDCI) (previously the National Council of Students) are the main youth organizations in the country. The CNJCI was established within the Ministry of Youth. It is a consultative body, providing a framework for consulting youth organizations. It helps youth give their opinion on public policies and programmes that concern them, make proposals related to education, and ensure youth representation domestically and internationally (CNJCI, 2023). Its main objective is to 'make the voice of young people heard and give young people aspirations'. Its members are chosen via an election. The council is represented in the Ministry of Youth, the interministerial committee for youth programmes of the Prime Minister's Office, the orientation council of the youth employment agency, and the steering committees of the employment programme coordination office and of the national civic service office. It was directly consulted in the Youth Orientation Law adopted in 2024, the Government Youth Programme and the 2021 General Assembly of National Education. The CNJCI described its engagement as collaborative with adequate time and resources to ensure youth participation.

The CDCI is a union of higher education students. Its main goal is to ensure that legislation is written in accordance with international standards in terms of education and takes into account the best interests of students. It is a registered non-governmental organization, with individual student membership upon registration. It is represented in the dialogue and peace committee of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. As it has not been formally consulted by the government, it usually provides feedback in response to new policies after they have been released. As a result, the union feels highly dissatisfied with its engagement and excluded: 'We usually proceed through negotiations, first identifying any irregularities and proposing amendments. This is particularly difficult because we always react after laws and policies have been implemented, as we are never involved in their development'.

The CNJCI has cited a 'need to establish a joint educational policy monitoring committee' involving them. They also mention training and project funding as other challenges. However, the CDCI reported bigger challenges: 'We generally face opposition from academic authorities, most of whom want laws to be implemented without discussion, even though this does not, in our view, reflect respect for the interests of students'.



Some organizations shared that their contributions are not valued at decision-making tables. In Belgium, the Federation of French-Speaking Students feels they are 'heard, but … not listened to. Especially when the positions we defend are not in agreement with the government'. The Swedish National Union of Students protested that since 'those in power don't take us seriously, we feel like we're checking a box when we're invited'. The Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) faces the challenge of being taken seriously as a youth-led organization: 'often politicians will agree with us but actually take no action on what we are campaigning for'.

A short time-frame for feedback is sometimes a challenge. The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition feels that the short time-frames of inquiries limit the scope and detail of their contributions, given their limited staff and resources to reach young people. In Belgium, the Flemish School Student Union also stressed that 'policymakers want to reach policy decisions quickly, while involving young people in a process takes time'. In Estonia, the National Youth Council highlighted the lack of time to engage and that 'the Ministry wants everything and nothing at the same time'. The Swedish National Union of Students described that they are challenged by short-term political decision making, which makes it challenging to advocate for sustainable higher education reforms in areas such as student finance, quality assurance and research funding.

Many organizations mention funding and capacity issues. In Colombia, the National Association of Secondary Students highlights a lack of funding as their main difficulty, which limits their research throughout the country and their role as a liaison body for all students. The Faroese National Union of Students reported that the annual government grant had not been increased in nearly nine years. In France, the Federation of General Student Associations described a decline in funding for associative organizations. The Malawi National Youth Council reported having limited technical capacity to provide evidence-based contributions in education law or policy discussions, exacerbated by limited financial resources for structured research and consultations. The Tanzania Youth Coalition mentioned a lack of resources to reach young people.

Some organizations also brought up the issue of student engagement and representation. In Denmark, the National Union of Students reported a lack of capacity to engage and mobilize students in large numbers. In Hungary, the National Union of Students faces the challenge of integrating feedback from universities that vary in terms of student populations, backgrounds and locations to come to a shared position. In Lithuania, the National Union of Students lamented the disengagement of its constituency, as they need to work full-time or volunteer and study. The School Student Union of Norway highlighted the problem of continuity, as its central board and leaders change every year. In Portugal, the Youth Council focused on the challenge of ensuring diverse youth representation. The problem of representation sometimes translates into an issue of low visibility. In Austria, the Federal Pupils' Representative Council is a national elected body, but most students do not know of its existence. The Swedish National Union of Students and the Union of Student Organizations in Switzerland reported the lack of interest from the media to promote their advocacy work, making it harder to build broad-based support for student issues.



Participation only works when students are involved from the beginning

Arno Schrooyen, European Students' Union

My name is Arno Schrooyen, and I am currently Vice President of the European Students' Union (ESU). The organization brings together 43 national student unions from 40 countries across the European Higher Education Area, representing around 20 million students. Our work goes beyond the European Union, and we engage with the EU, the Council of Europe, and higher education institutions to ensure that students' voices are heard in policy and governance.

My involvement in student representation began almost by chance. When I started my studies, I met the president of my local student union, who encouraged me to get involved. I later joined the French-speaking student union of Belgium, where I worked for three years, including on international affairs. Through this role, I represented my union within ESU for several years. At a certain point, I felt I had completed my work at the national level but was not finished with student representation. I therefore ran for election within ESU and continued my engagement at the European level.

For us, meaningful student engagement means the involvement of students in all parts of decision-making processes within higher education institutions, as well as in higher education policy at local, regional, and national levels. It means developing policies for students with students. Too often, students are consulted only once a policy is already drafted, when little can still be changed. Being involved from the beginning creates a different sense of responsibility and ownership and helps prevent participation from becoming symbolic.

We also see the effects of paternalism. Student representatives often serve for short periods and are constantly learning. In some cases, their ideas are dismissed immediately. There are also instances of backlash against students who speak up, including difficulties in completing internships or being excluded from academic communications. These experiences discourage participation.

Several barriers remain. Fear of retaliation is still present, and building a culture of participation requires institutions and staff to accept criticism. Time and financial constraints are another major challenge. In many countries, student representation is voluntary and must be balanced with studies and paid work. Students who would like to engage often cannot afford the time. Pressure to complete studies on time further limits participation. Greater flexibility such as allowing students to miss classes or extending study periods for student representatives would make engagement more accessible.

Despite these challenges, student participation has led to concrete outcomes. At the European level, ESU co-authored the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in 2005 alongside university associations and quality assurance agencies. Later, as the Bologna Process addressed social inclusion, ESU contributed to the development of the Principles and Guidelines for the Social Dimension in Higher Education. After years of advocacy, these were adopted in 2020 at the Ministerial Conference in Rome and now set minimum standards for social inclusion across Europe.

Looking ahead, policymakers need to better understand how student engagement functions. When students oppose a policy and organize, institutions sometimes react defensively and frame students as unwilling to engage. In reality, students remain open to dialogue, but meaningful participation requires reciprocity. Involving students throughout the process and building on their ideas is essential. Models such as the Council of Europe's co-management approach, where young people and member states participate on equal footing, offer useful lessons.

CONCLUSION

Young people lack representation in positions of power and are excluded from policy decisions that disproportionately affect them, such as on public debt, climate change and – the main focus of this report – education. In 2022, the **Youth Declaration** of the Transforming Education Summit clearly recognized young people as active agents of systemic and long-term change. The declaration demanded that youth be meaningfully engaged as full partners, moving beyond the traditional role of beneficiaries in education policy. This is not only because youth groups demand to be engaged but also because governments recognize that they need to leverage the vision of the education system's primary stakeholders. Their voices will be an essential input in improving progress in the SDG agenda; and shaping future national education agendas but also the global consensus on the document that will succeed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Responding to the call of the Youth Declaration and to a 2022 SDG 4 High-Level Steering Committee decision taken in response to the Transforming Education Summit, this report provides a baseline regarding the extent of youth engagement in decisions on education legislation and policymaking. The analysis is based on **two surveys** administered to governments, which explored the existence and use of consultation mechanisms, and to youth and student organizations, which explored their perceptions of the value of these mechanisms. In the latter case, the survey was preceded by a global **mapping** of up to five nationally representative youth and student organizations per country to determine the target sample. These included national youth councils, youth advisory bodies, school student organizations, university student organizations and any other national or umbrella organizations potentially involved in education decision making at the national level. Youth organizations operating at the local level and youth-led organizations that advocate for specific issues were outside the scope of the survey.

Government responses, which were obtained from half the countries in the world and with balanced coverage between regions, showed that consultation mechanisms have been established, propelled by advocacy from youth organizations at the global, regional and national levels. However, specific formal mechanisms were more common in high-income countries, liberal democracies and, counterintuitively, aging societies, where young people are a minority.

Youth and student **organizations'** responses, more than half of which came from Europe, suggested that even where formal mechanisms for youth engagement in education exist, these structures rarely translate participation into genuine influence on policy decisions. Most organizations confirm that they were consulted during policy design but find their feedback was not actually incorporated into final decisions. Moreover, very few were given meaningful roles in leading consultations or monitoring implementation. Overall satisfaction with government engagement remains low, with most organizations feeling they did not genuinely collaborate as valued partners. School student groups experience the lowest satisfaction levels.

Nevertheless, there are a number of cases where genuine government commitment to the principle of meaningful and inclusive participation has aligned with strong youth and student organizational capacity to generate good examples of consultation feedback influencing policy decisions. Many narratives of **impact** and systematic collaboration were found covering a range of issues from mental health to indigenous education and from phone bans to scholarships.

These findings are important in understanding the different layers of youth participation in education legislation and policy decisions. At the same time, it is important to recognize the methodological challenges. Monitoring youth and student engagement in education decision making through **government** self-reporting has flaws. Respondents perceive the scope of youth and student engagement differently, risk overstating government achievements, and may lack specificity in their responses. When detailing the formal mechanisms in place for youth and student engagement in decision making, government responses varied in ways that make cross-country comparisons more difficult. Many countries referenced the concept of youth participation in their formal documents but without clearly articulating education-specific processes.

Low response rates from nationally representative youth and student **organizations**, with only about one in five of those originally mapped submitting a questionnaire, stem from multiple factors. These are related not only to country political contexts but also to organizational capacity constraints (e.g. issues such as leadership turnover, funding gaps, and familiarity with responding to a survey of this kind). The challenge of contacting, explaining to and winning the trust of potential respondents cannot be underestimated. The mapping was limited to formal, nationally representative organizations, excluding non-formal groups despite their often-significant policy engagement.

And while it is essential to balance a government perspective on meaningful youth and student engagement with an organizational perspective to triangulate the information, this approach also carries risks, which make cross-country comparisons difficult.

One of the objectives of the report was to identify a cost-efficient and effective way to **monitor** the state of youth and student engagement in education decision making globally. However, the effort to collect information not only from governments but also from youth and student organizations is time consuming. Moving forward it is therefore proposed that the following information should be collected: *Is the Ministry of Education required by law, regulation or some other formal government document to engage with (i) youth organizations and/or (ii) student organizations or networks, when it designs a new education law or policy*? Governments can provide or can validate this information collected through other means. This question can support accountability and track youth engagement.

Beyond monitoring, efforts should continue to **evaluate** whether government efforts to engage youth and students in education decision making are meaningful. An important first step has been made with the mapping of national organizations. Efforts can now focus on stronger outreach efforts, including through the dissemination of this report, to increase response rates. Youth and student organizations should confirm whether consultations and seats at decision-making tables are meaningful, inclusive and effective.

Recommendations

Leading with youth requires government commitment to meeting youth expectations as an important foundation for better processes. That would mean creating **enabling environments** with adequate investment and institutional support, and improved communication between governments and young people. In line with this message, and to emphasize that youth are leaders in crafting a better future for education, the recommendations that follow have been written with young people, ensuring their voices directly shape the path forward. Enabling youth and student leadership in education will require the ownership of this objective by youth, students, governments and all organizations active in advocating for youth and student presence and visibility.

Youth and student **leadership** is needed in education, yet youth and students are typically not viewed as sharing leadership responsibilities with adults. Based on the responses discussed in this report, meaningful engagement in education decision making remains an aspirational goal. The tasks ahead include ensuring that such representation is truly embedded in national processes; relevant perspectives are used to improve laws and policies; building the political will to invest in enabling environments; offering adequate financial and institutional support; and convincing those in power to engage in intergenerational dialogue and take youth and student proposals into account.

"FIRST, WE NEED TO CREATE LAWS THAT ENSURE THAT THE GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE POLICY-MAKING PROCESS. THEN, WE NEED TO GATHER THE VOICES OF MANY YOUNG PEOPLE, STUDY EDUCATION POLICY PROPERLY, AND THEN MAKE MORE SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS. WE NEED TO SPREAD AWARENESS OF THE ISSUES WITH CURRENT EDUCATION POLICY THROUGH THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA."

Japan Youth Council



Governments that are genuinely interested in the contribution of youth and students in decision making in education need to work in the following directions:

1. Establish **formal** mechanisms, in legislation or regulations, that require youth and student participation in decisions on new education legislation or policy.

2. Ensure that processes inviting youth and students to participate in education decision making are **meaningful** and aligned with principles, such as those in the Pact for the Future, that guarantee accessible, inclusive, and representative participation; adequate time, capacity-building and resources; clear roles and objectives; safe and voluntary engagement; and transparent communication how inputs have informed decisions.

3. Engage youth and student organizations not only in the design but also in the **implementation** of education legislation and policy, including but not limited to monitoring, to build more trust and ownership of these decisions.

4. Support youth and student engagement by dedicating sufficient time to civic skills in the curriculum as well as by allocating resources to develop the **capacity** of youth and student organizations to become active citizens, to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes in education and to overcome barriers to take up formal roles within governments.

GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

LEAD WITH YOUTH

YOUTH REPORT

This report serves a dual purpose at a critical juncture for global education. It concludes the 2024/5 GEM Report cycle of reports on leadership with a focus on the importance of youth and student leaders in education, while simultaneously acting as the first in a new Countdown to 2030 series by the GEM Report that will examine the shape of education beyond the current SDG framework. By documenting the diverse mechanisms nations employ to frame youth and student participation, this report aims to empower young people in the dissemination of and debates around these findings. More fundamentally, it advocates for the essential inclusion of youth and student voices as we enter the final years of SDG 4 and begin conceptualizing a new global education agenda—one that must be shaped not for youth, but with them.

"Meaningful student participation is not an optional add-on; it is fundamental to democratic and accountable education systems. This report rightly exposes the gap between symbolic consultation and genuine student representation, offering clear evidence on how co-decision and shared governance can be realised in practice. We welcome its focus on structural participation, rights-based policymaking, and measurable accountability. The Global Student Forum is proud to endorse this report and support its advocacy."
Global Student Forum

"While youth and student leadership is acknowledged as being essential for localised action and social change, it is rarely examined as to how such leadership is meaningfully endorsed, executed and actualised. This Youth Report has championed consideration of a baseline measurement of youth and student engagement in education legislation and policymaking for state-level evaluation. It is a timely clarion call to action for authentic intergenerational inclusion, in relation to educational and societal success."
SDG 4 Youth & Student Network

"Meaningful youth and student engagement is not a courtesy; it is a governance imperative. Too often, youth and student engagement is treated as symbolic rather than substantive. This report provides timely evidence on what meaningful participation looks like in practice and how education systems can move from mere consultation to shared decision-making. We welcome this contribution and commend the GEM Report for making youth and student voices a pivotal issue. AASU is proud to endorse this report and support its advocacy."
All-Africa Students Union (AASU)

"Student participation is not only an important democratic practice, but a necessity for shaping better educational and youth policies. We welcome the insights, evidence and recommendations of this report, underlining and reinforcing the importance of empowering young people as full partners in decision-making."
Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU)

"Youth and student participation in education decision-making is a core expression of the Commonwealth's commitment to inclusive governance and the right of young people to be involved in all matters that affect their lives. The Commonwealth Youth Council (CYC) fully endorses the findings and recommendations of this report, which provide timely, evidence-based pathways to move beyond intent towards practical and sustained youth engagement in education policymaking. The CYC calls on all stakeholders to adopt and implement these recommendations, embedding youth participation as a standard practice within education systems across the Commonwealth and beyond."
Commonwealth Youth Council

"At AFS, we know that developing active global citizens starts with young people being trusted as partners in shaping the education systems that serve them. This GEM Report provides both the global perspective and the evidence needed to ensure that youth and students are meaningfully engaged in education decision-making. By linking participation to better, more responsive education systems, the Report offers a clear path forward for organizations like AFS to advance youth leadership and ensure that young people are not only heard, but have real influence over the decisions that shape their learning and their futures, recognizing that youth leadership is also a critical driver of impact for global development and positive change for communities globally."
AFS Intercultural Programs

"The Youth Report reaffirms the need to create enabling environments for active and inclusive youth engagement in decision-making processes that ultimately affect their lives. Youth have agency, and when they are empowered to lead spaces that genuinely center youth voices, including marginalized youth, they can inform and influence policies and programmes, uphold government accountability, and transform education systems"
Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE)

unesco
Global Education Monitoring Report

Sustainable Development Goals

9 789231 008443

www.unesco.org/en/publications ▪ www.unesco.org/gem-report/en