

EUniWell Policy Commission 2022-2023 Final Report

# Young people, well-being and the COVID-19 pandemic: Learning for the future

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**February 2023**

**Dr Paul Vallance** (University of Birmingham)

**Professor Robin Miller** (University of Birmingham)



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101035821.

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# 1. Executive Summary

## BACKGROUND AND AIMS

This report is the main output of a Policy Commission led by the University of Birmingham on behalf of the European University for Well-being (EUniWell) partnership. The EUniWell Policy Commission ran between June 2020 and February 2023. Its objective was to connect academic experts and regional actors from across this European University Alliance around key policy questions and challenges related to individual and societal well-being.

Given the context in which the Policy Commission was launched, a clear starting point was to focus on the then still-emerging implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the start of this health crisis, there was a clear concern that the greatest impact would fall on certain, more vulnerable groups within society. The topic for the EUniWell Policy Commission was therefore framed around the overarching question of how universities and civic society across Europe could work together to address a potential deepening of inequalities in well-being as a result of the pandemic.

Following consultation with a group of Policy Commissioners representing university and associate partners in EUniWell, this focus was narrowed down to the impacts of the pandemic specifically on young people. This demographic may have been at relatively low risk of serious illness from COVID-19 infection, but government measures in place to restrict the spread of the coronavirus during much of 2020 and 2021 – including the closure of educational institutions and workplaces across Europe – brought other pressures on their mental health, economic security, and future quality of life.

The 15-24-year-old age-range adopted by the Policy Commission to define young people covers those in the final years of secondary education, university students or recent graduates, and school leavers who move directly into the labour market for full-time employment. A key concern throughout this report is the progression

of adolescents and young adults between these formative life stages, and how these transitions may have been disrupted by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their well-being.

The first line of enquiry that guided the work of the Commission investigated the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people in terms of their educational performance and outcomes, labour market opportunities, housing and living conditions, mental well-being, and future life and career planning. A particular interest here was evidence of uneven effects on different groups along lines of socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. The second line of enquiry explored how universities can work with partners from the public, private, and civil society sectors to address the above lines of inequality as they bear on their own students, but also young people still at school and those who do not enter or complete higher education.

Evidence in relation to these lines of enquiry was collected through three main channels: i) a call for evidence and university best practices across the EUniWell network; ii) a search of the wider academic and grey literature; and iii) material gathered through other EUniWell activities that involved direct engagement with young people.

## EVIDENCE REVIEW

The review of this evidence outlines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in three overlapping areas. These are: i) young people in education (secondary and tertiary); ii) young people in (and out of) employment; and iii) the mental health of young people.

In relation to education, the review highlights the challenges experienced by students when school and universities across Europe were closed during lockdowns. For those in secondary education, the sudden shift to remote learning was associated with lower levels of concentration, motivation, and engagement with teachers, leading

to slower than normal educational progression during the height of the pandemic. This period was especially difficult for students from less affluent families due to issues around their access to the required technology for online learning, lower levels of support from their parents or other sources of external support, and greater anxiety about their future education and employment prospects. Evidence from the UK also identifies concerns that, with the suspension of formal exams in 2020 and 2021, new procedures introduced to award educational qualifications would be unfavourable for students from ethnic minority backgrounds and/or non-fee-paying schools. These experiences of disrupted learning and assessment during the pandemic may, in turn, limit the aspiration or opportunities for young people from these backgrounds to subsequently move into further or higher education.

In relation to (un)employment, the COVID-19 pandemic effectively led to large sectors of European economies (e.g., hospitality, tourism, non-food retail) being either fully or partially shutdown through parts of 2020 and 2021. Workers under the age of 25 are disproportionately concentrated in these sectors, and the evidence reviewed indicates that this unprecedented economic shock led to a sharp rise in youth unemployment across Europe (especially affecting young people who are female, Black or Asian, or have lower qualification levels). The job protection measures (e.g. wage subsidy or furlough schemes) introduced by almost all European governments helped to stimulate a strong labour market recovery when economies reopened after social distancing measures were lifted. These schemes did not, however, always offer equal protection to young workers in temporary or casual employment arrangements, leading to a deepening of the economic precarity experienced by this group. The opportunities for young people leaving education during the pandemic to secure employment, training or work experience were also restricted in comparison to cohorts from previous (and subsequent) years. This is especially

concerning as past evidence has shown that periods of joblessness or loss of income early-on in a person's working history can adversely impact employment and health outcomes throughout the rest of their lives.

In relation to mental health, the evidence now available from different European countries confirms that the psychological well-being of adolescents, university students, and young people in (and out of) employment in different European countries was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the factors behind this increase in poor mental health can be linked to a loss of social interaction with peers and/or reduced physical activity during periods of lockdown. Beyond these temporary restrictions, however, the wider consequences of the pandemic for young people's education, work, and living conditions have also contributed to this growing crisis. For secondary and tertiary education students, disruption to normal learning and assessment routines, as well as greater uncertainty about future plans, have been reported as sources of

#### **EUNIWELL POLICY COMMISSION – POLICY LESSONS**

1. Focus on the legacy of the pandemic for young people
2. Build on EU training and employment support programmes
3. Prioritise the well-being of young people in the post-pandemic recovery
4. Engage young people in shaping their future
5. Commission longitudinal research into the effects of the pandemic
6. Support the mental health of (higher education) students
7. Leverage the civic role of universities to support all young people

increased anxiety during the pandemic. The financial precarity experienced by young workers without secure employment as a result of the pandemic is also identified as a risk factor for the development of low self-esteem or depression. A high proportion of young people in employment also continued to work outside the home during times of peak coronavirus infection (including those in health and social care sectors), and were therefore potentially exposed to acute stress in these environments.

#### **POLICY CONTEXT AND LESSONS**

The second half of the report focuses on how young people most affected by the impacts on well-being identified above can be supported as part of the wider recovery from the pandemic in Europe. This leads to the identification of seven policy lessons that are listed in the box (left) and further referenced in the rest of this executive summary.

These lessons are situated in a changing policy context. The immediate risks to public health from COVID-19 seemingly





faded over the course of 2022, only to be replaced by a new set of political and economic challenges that are either directly or indirectly linked to the tragic events in Ukraine. Among these, rising energy and food prices have caused a cost-of-living crisis that, at the time of writing, threatens to compound some of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic, social, and psychological well-being of vulnerable groups. The disruption to education and employment experienced by many young people during the pandemic will also continue to be felt over the next decade or longer.

It is therefore important that, even with conflicting pressures on the focus and resources of the EU and national governments, policies that help to address this legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic must remain a priority (1). These should be accompanied by the funding of research into the ongoing effects of the pandemic on people's long-term well-being that can help inform balanced policy responses to comparable future health crises (5).

Existing EU initiatives, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Youth Guarantee, include commitments to providing training and employment support for young people in the post-pandemic context. These programmes should be built upon by incorporating targeted help for disadvantaged groups that face the greatest barriers in obtaining secure employment (2). A more explicit focus on the individual well-being of young people hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic, including support to improve their mental health, will further help them to effectively participate in these educational, training, and employment programmes (3). Young people, whose voices were often marginalised during the COVID-19 pandemic, can also be actively engaged by governments in the development of policies that concern them at a local, national, and European level (4). Now it has left the EU, the UK government should ensure that its young citizens are extended equivalent rights and opportunities that these different initiatives provide for their peers elsewhere in Europe.

For universities, a key concern highlighted throughout this report is the mental health of their students. Various steps taken by these institutions to provide extra support for their well-being during the pandemic should therefore be continued, and embedded as a core part of higher education practice across Europe moving forward (6). Beyond this, as key civic actors in their home cities and regions, universities can also play a larger role in supporting the education, job prospects, and well-being of all young people in their home cities and regions, including those who are not their students. This mission can be realised through close engagement with stakeholders such as local governments, healthcare providers, schools or colleges, employers, and youth organisations in civil society (7).





# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 BACKGROUND – THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY FOR WELL-BEING

This report summarises the first phase of a Policy Commission convened as part of the European University for Well-being (EUniWell) partnership. EUniWell is a European Universities alliance, funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes. The university members of this network during the period covered by this Policy Commission were:

- Nantes Université (France)
- The University of Cologne (Germany)
- Semmelweis University (Hungary)
- The University of Florence (Italy)
- Leiden University (Netherlands)
- Linnaeus University (Sweden)
- The University of Birmingham (UK)
- The University of Murcia (Spain) (joined in March 2022)
- Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine) (joined in August 2022)
- The University of Konstanz (Germany) (joined in November 2022)

These core partners are brought together with an overall vision to “understand, improve, measure, and rebalance the well-being of individuals, our own community, and society as a whole based on our joint values”<sup>1</sup>.

EUniWell is 1 of 44 European Universities alliances that are (as of early 2023) receiving support under this Erasmus+ programme. It was selected after successfully applying to a funding call in 2020, and is currently in its initial pilot stage. The strategic aim of the wider European Universities initiative is to encourage “long-term structural and strategic cooperation” between the transnational members of each alliance. This programme is set to be expanded further, with the European Commission setting a target of having 60 European Universities (involving more than 500 higher education institutions) in operation by mid-2024<sup>2</sup>.

This expansion will help advance the objective of creating a common European Education Area across the

EU (in a way that is consistent with the longer-standing Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area). Accordingly, the European Universities initiative emphasises the development of integrated teaching and degree programmes, student/staff mobility across national borders, and creation of inter-university campuses. It also, however, encourages collaboration between partners around their research and innovation functions, and recognises that “universities are key actors in Europe, able to address big societal challenges, become true engines of development for cities and regions, and promote civic engagement”<sup>3</sup>. This is reflected in the significant number of the current 44 alliances who highlight distinct societal themes (such as well-being) as the unifying foci around which their shared activities are organised.

1. EUniWell (2019) Mission Statement. [https://www.euniwell.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Downloads/EUniWell-Mission-Statement-for-Download\\_01.pdf](https://www.euniwell.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads/EUniWell-Mission-Statement-for-Download_01.pdf) [Accessed July 2022].  
 2. European Commission (2022) Commission Communication on a European Strategy, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-communication-on-a-european-strategy-for-universities> [Accessed January 2023].  
 3. European Commission (2020) Factsheet – European Universities: A Key Pillar of the European Education Area, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/factsheet-european-universities-a-key-pillar-of-the-european-education-area> [Accessed January 2023].  
 4. Stiglitz, J. E., Sen, A. and Fitoussi, J-P. (2009) Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf> [Accessed January 2023].





**WELL-BEING IS MULTIDIMENSIONAL. IT RANGES FROM INDIVIDUAL QUALITY OF LIFE TO SOCIAL COHESION AND ENVIRONMENTAL BALANCE AT A PLANETARY LEVEL. IT IMPLIES AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THESE DIMENSIONS AND THE CAPACITY TO BOOST THEIR SYNERGIES.**

## 1.2 WELL-BEING AS A GUIDING CONCEPT

The mission of EUniWell is informed by the concept of the Economy of Wellbeing, which was adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2019 under the presidency of Finland. This policy model is grounded in a critique of the received wisdom that an ever-increasing level of national GDP will translate into widespread and sustainable improvements in the quality of life enjoyed by a country's population<sup>4</sup>. It instead affirms that governments should prioritise the well-being of their citizens alongside long-term economic growth, and that these are “mutually self-reinforcing objectives” that can work together to form a “virtuous circle”<sup>5</sup>. This perspective builds on international work to identify new metrics of social and economic progress based on different indicators of individual and collective well-being. The proposal for an Economy of Wellbeing, however, seeks to move beyond technical questions of measurement, and translate this thinking into “a policy orientation and governance approach which aims to put people and their well-being at the centre of policy and decision-making”.<sup>6</sup>

Well-being in this context refers not just to the physical and mental health of individuals, but also to a wider set of factors that influence the aggregate quality of life at the level of a place-based community or population. This aligns with multidimensional definitions

of well-being, such as that developed by the OECD for its Better Life programme.<sup>7</sup> Typically, these encompass measures of both subjective well-being, assessed through surveys of individuals' self-reported mental health or life satisfaction; and objective well-being, drawn from a range of existing indicators of social, economic, and environmental conditions in a region or country. This is also reflected in the EUniWell Mission Statement.

“Well-being is multidimensional. It ranges from individual quality of life to social cohesion and environmental balance at a planetary level. It implies an understanding of the relations between these dimensions and the capacity to boost their synergies.”<sup>8</sup>

It is this encompassing sense of well-being that underpins this EUniWell Policy Commission report. In particular, the focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people across Europe (explained in the next chapter) corresponds with widely recognised dimensions of well-being related to education and training, employment and work, quality of housing and the local environment, inter-personal connections, and mental health. The Policy Commission will bring out the relationships between these different dimensions and explore how a multi-level policy focus on well-being can help young people recover from the impact of the pandemic on their lives.

## 1.3 CONTENTS OF THIS REPORT

This report has six further chapters.

- Chapter 2 outlines the background and aims of the Policy Commission, including the reasons why the topics of young people, inequalities in well-being, and the COVID-19 pandemic were brought together.
- Chapter 3 explains the main three channels through which material was collected to feed into the Commission – respectively a call for evidence across the EUniWell network, an academic and grey literature search, and direct engagement with young people through citizen forums.
- Chapter 4 is the review of this evidence, which is divided across sections covering the impacts of the pandemic on: i) young people in education (secondary and tertiary); ii) young people in (and out of) employment; and iii) the mental health of young people.
- Chapter 5 turns to the policy challenge of prioritising young people as part of a post-pandemic recovery, and situates this in a changing political and economic context across Europe.
- Chapter 6 focuses specifically on the role of universities in supporting the well-being of their students and other young people, illustrated through good practices implemented by members of the EUniWell alliance during the pandemic.
- Chapter 7 identifies forward-looking policy lessons and recommendations across seven areas that draw on insights developed across the preceding chapters of the report.

5. Nozal, A. L., Martin, N. and Murtin, F. (2019) The Economy of Well-being: Creating Opportunities for People's Well-being and Economic Growth. SDD Working Paper No.102. OECD Statistics and Data Directorate: Paris).

6. European Council (2019) Draft Council Conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing. (Council of the European Union: Brussels).

7. (OECD (2020) How's Life? 2020: Measuring Well-being. (OECD Publishing: Paris).

8. EUniWell (2019) Mission Statement. [https://www.euniwell.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Downloads/EUniWell-Mission-Statement-for-Download\\_01.pdf](https://www.euniwell.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads/EUniWell-Mission-Statement-for-Download_01.pdf) [Accessed December 2022].



## Simmelweis Well-Being Days

Budapest, October 2021

## 2. The EUniWell Policy Commission

The Policy Commission is part of an EUniWell work package that will ensure the joint activities of these universities with their associate (non-university) partners will have a real-world impact on individual and community well-being in their home city-regions and across Europe more widely. This concern with civic engagement is reflected in the central rationale of the Policy Commission to connect academic experts with regional actors around key policy questions and challenges related to well-being in contemporary societies.

### 2.1 POLICY COMMISSION LAUNCH AND CONSULTATION

An online launch event for the Policy Commission was held in June 2020. This was chaired by Stefano Manservigi, former Director-General of the European Commission's Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development. The theme of this meeting was "Well-being in a Covid World".

Despite taking place at a relatively early stage of the global health crisis brought by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the panel discussion highlighted a clear concern that the worst consequences of the pandemic would fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable within society. Specifically, exposure to possible infection, enforced social isolation, and loss of employment were identified as major threats to people's physical and mental well-being from the spread of the coronavirus and lockdown measures applied by governments in response. Even at the start of the pandemic, it was widely recognised that certain groups were more likely to be adversely affected than others – such as older people, ethnic minorities, and those from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds.

The key message from this launch event therefore was that, despite the pandemic touching all parts of society, it raised the prospect of exacerbating existing inequalities in well-being between different groups<sup>9</sup>.

Building on this, an overarching question for the EUniWell Policy Commission to investigate was defined:

**How can universities and civic society best collaborate to address the worsening of inequalities in individual and social well-being across Europe following COVID-19?**

The Policy Commission is led from the University of Birmingham (as the partner responsible for the relevant work package). However, the core team is advised by a larger group of commissioners with representatives from across the EUniWell network. Each of the then seven university partners in the alliance nominated an individual from its academic ranks and from one of its key regional associate partners to become members.

9. Mason, R. and Broome, M. (2020) Coronavirus: Can we 'reset' our world and boost well-being? A Review of EUniWell's inaugural policy commission on 17 June 2020. <https://www.euniwell.eu/newsroom/article/coronavirus-can-we-reset-our-world-and-boost-well-being-a-review-of-euniwells-inaugural-policy-commission-on-17-june-2020> [Accessed February 2023].

The first meeting of this group took place online in October 2021. It focused on narrowing the scope of the question above by surveying the main concerns the commissioners had about increasing inequalities in well-being related to COVID-19 in their regions. This elicited a wide range of responses, reflecting the diversity of academic and professional perspectives covered by the membership, and variations in the experience of the pandemic across different European countries.

The interests of the commissioners did, however, largely fall into one of two camps. First, many recognised the need to make sense - or as one participant described it 'help write the story' - of what had happened over the course of the pandemic to that point. They reported a growing awareness in their home countries that the social and economic restrictions necessitated by the virus were having uneven effects, but recognised that these impacts may be more complex than those that can be reduced to an all-embracing narrative of widening inequalities. Second, several commissioners were more interested in looking ahead to understand what the longer-term legacy of the pandemic would be for their cities and regions. In particular, they raised questions about the potential implications for local government, public service, and civil society organisations that had taken on added responsibilities during the crisis, but may not have the capacity to fulfil these on a sustainable basis in the future.

These concerns can both be seen as a reflection of the stage of the pandemic at which this meeting took place. In October 2021, the rollout of vaccine programmes across Europe meant that a possible route out of the health crisis was clear for the first time. A greater scope and depth of data was also starting to become available after 18 months of the pandemic, so that a more definite analysis of its effects on different groups was now possible.

The Policy Commission therefore set out to address both of these perspectives by: i) reviewing existing evidence about the impacts of the pandemic; and ii) using this to inform future facing policy recommendations of relevance to the various types of stakeholders in the EUniWell alliance. The first of these objectives will be addressed in chapters 3 and 4 of this report, and the second will be addressed in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

## 2.2 COVID-19 AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Another prominent theme throughout the discussion with the Policy Commissioners was the effect of the pandemic on university students and other young people. This demographic may have been at lower risk of serious illness from COVID-19 infection than older generations, but the discussion mirrored a wider concern that the lockdowns in place across Europe during much of 2020 and 2021 could be particularly detrimental to their overall well-being.

The measures introduced to restrict the spread of the virus included the widespread suspension of in-person teaching in schools, universities, and other educational institutions, meaning that students had to quickly adapt to remote learning practices and changes in the assessment procedures to gain formal qualifications. The commissioner group highlighted that this disruption, and the considerable uncertainty experienced by young people over this period, could have longer-term impacts on their ability to plan for their future after leaving education.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inequalities in well-being amongst young people was therefore selected as the specific topic for the EUniWell Policy Commission. The category of 'young people' is intentionally broad, but an age-range of 15-24-years-old - used by the United Nations for a statistical definition of youth - was adopted to help clarify the scope of enquiry. This is narrower than the 15-29 age-range typically used by EU agencies to define youth. It does, however, encompass most undergraduate (and many postgraduate) university students, as well as those in the final years of secondary education (15-18) and recent university graduates (21-24) entering full-time employment. In keeping with the interest of EUniWell in the engagement of universities with society more widely, the Policy Commission is also concerned with young people who do not enter higher education - including those who work





in non-graduate jobs, those who study vocational subjects in non-university institutions of further education, and those who are classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

This framing around 15–24-year-olds denotes a concern with the development of young people through key life-stages involved in progressing through the educational system and into early adulthood. A main point of emphasis through the subsequent report will be the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people during these vital points of transition and the longer-term implications of experiencing disruption at these times.

### **2.3 LINES OF ENQUIRY**

Drawing on the input of the Policy Commissioner Group, these concerns were translated into a more concrete set of lines of enquiry. These are divided into two areas:

- 1. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on different groups of young people in terms of their:**
  - a) Educational performance and outcomes**
  - b) Labour market opportunities**
  - c) Housing and living conditions**
  - d) Mental well-being**
  - e) Future life and career planning**
  
- 2. How universities can work with partners from the public, private, and civil society sectors to address the above lines of inequality as they affect different groups of young people who are:**
  - a) Their own (domestic and international) students and recent graduates**
  - b) Pre-university secondary education students**
  - c) School leavers who do not enter or complete higher education**

# 3. Evidence Collection

The evidence review phase of the Policy Commission is underpinned by material collected through three main channels: i) a call for evidence focused on members of the EUniWell alliance; ii) a systematic search of the wider academic and grey literature; and iii) input from related EUniWell engagement activities including Citizen Forums. This chapter will outline each of these channels.

## 3.1 CALL FOR EVIDENCE

A call for evidence linked to the Policy Commission was launched in January 2022 and kept open until the end of April. This call invited submissions related to the lines of enquiry outlined in the previous chapter. It also specified that the Policy Commission was “especially interested in evidence of uneven effects on different groups of young people along lines of socio-economic background, gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability”.

The dissemination of the call for evidence was focused on the universities and associate partners who are members of the EUniWell alliance. It was emphasised that submissions could take a number of forms, including “evidence from [academic] research studies (published or ongoing) on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people”, but also “examples of best practice in policy or institutional practice in response to the inequalities [identified in the lines

of enquiry], or other forms of expert knowledge and experience that are relevant to the theme of the Policy Commission”.

Submissions to this call were through an online portal that requested some background information about the person providing the evidence and their organisational affiliation, the themes to which the evidence related, and a short (up to 750 words) written summary (in English) of the evidence. There was then an option to provide a weblink to any relevant source(s) underlying the evidence (e.g. academic papers, published reports, other documentation). Alternatively, an email address was supplied so that responders to the call could send accompanying documents directly to the Policy Commission team.

A total of 25 submissions were received through this channel. Most of these were from members of the EUniWell universities, but a number also came from non-university associate partners. Following the broad interpretation of evidence defined in the call, these submissions included a mix of academic research studies with other forms of expert testimony on the impact of the pandemic on young people. Almost half of the total submissions were from members of the University of Birmingham (often in collaboration with academics from other universities in the UK).

The material submitted through this route is featured prominently in the evidence review that follows to highlight the contribution of expertise within EUniWell institutions to wider understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. Where these submissions correspond to published journal articles, working papers, or reports, these sources are cited in the text. In other instances, the written summary to the call for evidence may itself be referenced. A few submissions to the call for evidence opted for their contribution to remain anonymous in the Policy Commission report. These therefore inform the wider review that follows, but are not directly acknowledged to maintain confidentiality.

In addition to the main call for evidence, a supplementary call for best practices from the eight EUniWell university partners was issued in May 2022. This requested institutional level examples of how each university reacted to the unprecedented challenges they have faced over the past three years. These best practices could relate to, for example, changes in educational pedagogy, assessment or admission policies, extra mental health or pastoral support offered to students, or any form of engagement with external groups or organisations affected by the COVID-19 health crisis. The responses received through this channel will be discussed in chapter 6 where we focus on the role of universities both during and after the pandemic.







## ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN EVIDENCE OF UNEVEN EFFECTS ON DIFFERENT GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ALONG LINES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND, GENDER, RACE OR ETHNICITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, OR DISABILITY

### 3.2 ACADEMIC AND GREY LITERATURE SEARCH

To supplement the material received from members of EUniWell partner organisations through the call for evidence, the team leading the Policy Commission at the University of Birmingham commissioned a more extensive literature search on the topic of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. This was conducted by specialist library staff in the Health Services Management Centre (HSMC) at the University of Birmingham.

A search strategy was developed that used terms related to the five areas of potential impact from COVID-19 identified in the first part of the lines of enquiry (educational performance and outcomes, labour market opportunities, housing and living conditions, mental well-being, and future life and career planning). The seven European countries that were represented in the original EUniWell alliance (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK) were also included in the search terms to increase the compatibility of the results with the material received through the call for evidence. Reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of the topics covered, the search was applied across academic databases relating to fields including medicine, educational studies, social policy, and business studies. A separate search of non-academic “grey literature” – primarily policy reports, discussion papers, and press releases from governments, charities, and consultancies – was conducted using the same search term strategies.

The results for the academic literature search were provided separately for each of the five areas. This meant there was substantial duplication of articles across these lines of enquiry, but (even taking this into account) over 1,000 journal articles were identified through the search. The grey literature search identified over a hundred other policy-focused documents mainly from transnational organisations (e.g. OECD, UNICEF, International Labour Organisation), the European Commission or its related agencies, and national government departments, think tanks, and charities (predominately from the UK).

These searches were manually reviewed by the authors so that less relevant results could be excluded. Results that were highly relevant were saved and sorted by theme so that they could be included in the evidence review. This literature supplements the more focused material collected through the call for evidence and these are cited together below. Grey literature is also included in this review to help establish the wider context for policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years.

### 3.3 CITIZEN FORUMS

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Policy Commission is part of a work package in the wider EUniWell project that is concerned with societal engagement. Amongst the other activities in this work package are EUniWell Citizen Forums. These are intended as opportunities for the university partners to directly engage local groups in

dialogue around topics related to their individual and collective well-being.

In March 2022, the team leading the Policy Commission facilitated a Citizen Forum with a class of sixth form students (aged around 16-17) at a school in Birmingham that is an associate partner in the EUniWell alliance. The agenda for this discussion was drawn-up to be aligned with themes covered by the Policy Commission. Specifically, the session focused on the students’ experiences of education through the pandemic and how this had influenced their thinking about future post-school plans. These topics were also explored in a separate consultation with the parent of an autistic 18-year-old in Birmingham during April 2022. In June 2022, partners from the University of Cologne held an EUniWell Citizen Forum with students aged 16 at a local school. This was focused on the complementary topic of subjective well-being during the pandemic.

In relation to the academic studies and grey literature identified through the other two channels, the feedback received from these Citizen Forums have particular value in providing a more direct sense of the lived experience of young people (specifically teenagers) during the pandemic. The write-ups of these events have therefore been included as inputs to this Policy Commission evidence review process. They are referenced together in boxes separated from the main text in sections 4.1 and 4.3.





Semester Kick Off

Cologne, October 2021

## 4. Evidence Review

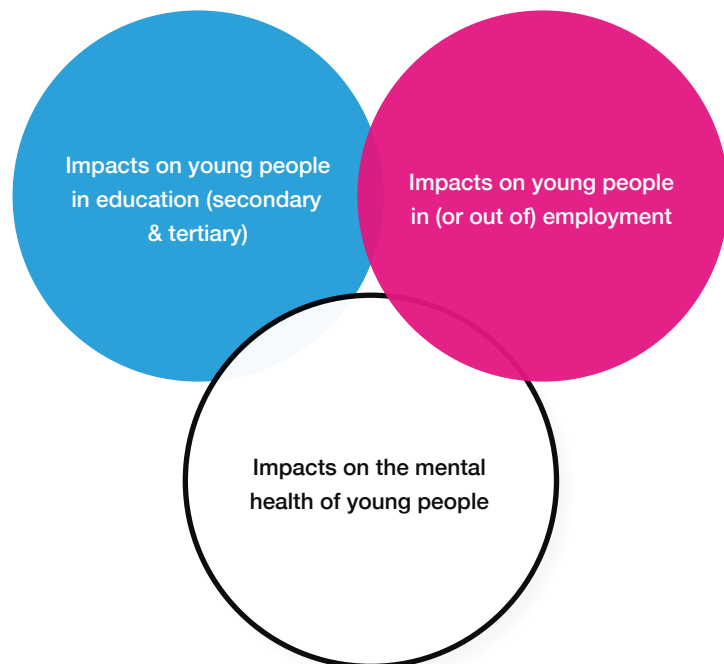
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The review of evidence gathered through the three channels outlined above will be divided into three overlapping themes. These are impacts on: i) young people in education (secondary and tertiary); ii) young people in (and out of) employment; and iii) the mental health of young people.

### 4.1 YOUNG PEOPLE IN EDUCATION

This section reviews the impact of the pandemic on the education of young people, covering issues around access, learning, and outcomes. As the age-range of 15-24 is under consideration, education at secondary and tertiary (higher/further) levels are examined together.

The emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2020 led to widespread lockdown measures that affected educational provision across Europe. Direct comparison between countries is not straight-forward because the form these restrictions took varied with different national rates of infection and government responses. However, data collected by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control indicates that, in the member states represented in the EUniWell alliance, secondary schools were closed for an initial period of two to



three months beginning in March 2020, and then again (either fully or partially) at different times throughout the rest of the year and first half of 2021. The equivalent data for higher education institutions is less clear across these countries, but does show that most followed a similar pattern of universities being closed for intermittent periods from the spring of 2020 into early- or mid-2021<sup>10</sup>. This holds even for Sweden, where the much-debated government decision to keep schools open throughout the pandemic did not apply for upper-secondary schools (with students typically aged-17-to-19) or for universities<sup>11</sup>.

The closure of schools and universities necessitated a change from in-person to online learning with very little advanced warning for educators or students<sup>12</sup>. This shift to remote learning may have had features that were perceived positively by some young people, but the evidence points to this on balance being experienced negatively by students at secondary school, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels<sup>13</sup>. For pre-university students in particular, lower concentration, motivation, and engagement with teachers were reported outside of the classroom setting, leading to a reduction in the ability to learn and the self-worth drawn from this experience<sup>14</sup>.

These impacts have led to some educational authorities, including the North Rhine-Westphalia state government and City Council of Cologne in Germany, funding and implementing additional targeted programmes to help children catch-up on the learning lost during the pandemic<sup>15</sup>.

## EUNIWELL CITIZEN FORUMS – EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS

EUniWell Citizen Forums held in Birmingham and Cologne as part of the wider Policy Commission process (see section 3.3) echoed academic research findings of lower engagement by secondary school students through periods of learning from home. The challenges recounted by participants in these UK and Germany based consultations pointed towards a common set of experiences. These included:

- Online learning sessions involving less structure and support from teachers than the students were used to in classroom settings.
- Difficulties in students being able to motivate themselves to concentrate on schoolwork when in their home environment, and therefore falling behind in their learning during lockdown.
- When they did return to in-person teaching at school, feeling they lacked a sound understanding of important topics and were under pressure to catch-up ahead of scheduled exams.

The Citizen Forum in Birmingham (March 2022) also explored how the exceptional challenges and uncertainty students had

encountered through the pandemic may have knock-on effects on their future education plans. This discussion focused on specific development opportunities that the students had missed out on, such as undertaking work experience or attending in-person open days for new colleges. The exams that students normally take around aged 16 in the UK (GCSEs) were also suspended in 2020 and 2021 (see below). This meant that their cohort moved on to post-16 study (for A-Levels) without gaining valuable experience of revising for and sitting these formal exams. Some participants in the Forum raised the possibility that this could undermine confidence in their academic abilities moving forward. The students also expressed a belief that the pandemic meant they would need additional support from their schools to, for instance, compensate for ground lost during remote learning, prepare for future exams, and make plans for their subsequent career paths.

Sources: i) Vallance, P. and Miller, R. (2022) Minutes of EUniWell Citizen Forum at University of Birmingham School – 18/03/22. ii) Berninger, I. and Springob, J. (2022) Minutes of EUniWell Citizen Forum in Cologne – 21/06/22.

10. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2022) Data on country response measures to COVID-19. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/download-data-response-measures-covid-19> [Accessed February 2023].

11. Vlachos, J., Hertegård, E. and Svaleryd, H.B. (2021) The effects of school closures on SARS-CoV-2 among parents and teachers. *PNAS* 118(9), 1-7.

12. Bartolic, S.K., Boud, D., Agapito, J et al. (2022) A multi-institutional assessment of changes in higher education teaching and learning in the face of COVID-19. *Educational Review* 74(3), 517-533. Fúzi, B., Géring, Z. and Szendrei-Pál, E. (2022) Changing expectations related to digitalisation and socialisation in higher education. *Horizon scanning of pre- and post-COVID-19 discourses*. *Educational Review* 74(3), 484-516.

13. Ferrao, F.V., Ambra, F.I., Aruta, L. and Iavaorne, M.L. (2020) Distance learning in the COVID-19 era: perceptions in Southern Italy. *Education Sciences* 10(355), 1-10. Goldstone, R. and Zhang, J. (2022) Postgraduate research students' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and student-led policy solutions. *Educational Review* 74(3), 422-443. Hoss, T., Ancina, A. and Kasper, K. (2021) Forced remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany: A mixed-methods study on students' positive and negative expectations. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12(1), 1-9.

14. Walters, T., Simkiss, N.J., Snowden, R. J. and Gray, N. S. (2022) Secondary school students' perception of the online teaching experience during COVID-19: The impact on mental wellbeing and specific learning difficulties. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 92(3), 843-860.

15. North Rhine-Westphalia Ministry of Schools and Education (no date), Action Programme 'Arrive and Catch-up'. <https://www.schulministerium.nrw/ankommen-aufholen> [Accessed February 2023].

16. Thorn, W. and Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2021) Schooling During a Pandemic: The Experience and Outcomes of Schoolchildren During the First Round of COVID-19 Lockdowns. (OECD Publishing: Paris).

Crucially for the topic of the Policy Commission, academic studies have also strongly indicated that the closure of schools will have reinforced existing educational inequalities along lines of socio-economic background. The reasons why secondary school students from less affluent families found learning from home more challenging include:

- issues with access to a strong internet connection or suitable device to participate in online learning<sup>16</sup>;
- lower levels of support from their parents or other sources of outside help (such as private tuition)<sup>17</sup>;
- and greater anxiety about their post-education future and how this may be affected by the pandemic<sup>18</sup>.

Submissions to the call for evidence also highlighted distinct challenges the pandemic caused for young people with special educational needs. For instance, the closure of schools meant that, in many contexts, young people with physical or learning disabilities experienced significant disruption to their daily routines and barriers to accessing the secondary functions that these institutions often provide (such as food programmes or specialist therapy). They also may not have had the same opportunities as non-disabled young people to switch to remote learning from home due to the higher level of support this would require from their schools and/or family<sup>19</sup>. These points were echoed in the EUniWell consultation with a parent of an autistic 18-year-old in Birmingham (see section 3.3). In this case, the school that their son attended was not able to offer specialist classes online when it was closed, so the parents had to meet his learning needs themselves within the home environment. Another submission to the call for evidence focused on children and young people

in the Alternative Provision sector in the UK (covering those who do not attend either mainstream or special schools). The impacts of the pandemic on these often already vulnerable young people include significant concerns about how this would inhibit their preparation for a successful transition from this sector into mainstream post-16 education or employment in the future<sup>20</sup>.

Another side of education impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic relates to changes in how young people were assessed for formal qualifications and the implications of this for their next steps into further study or work. A mix of evidence referring to these varying educational outcomes specifically in the UK was identified for this review.

The disruption brought by the pandemic led to the UK government cancelling the exams sat by students (typically at ages 16 and 18 respectively) for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced Level (A-Level) qualifications in 2020 and 2021. After an initial attempt to use an algorithm to determine A-Level results was withdrawn in August 2020, it was decided that these qualifications would instead be awarded based solely on grades recommended by teachers. The first approach failed because the algorithm applied was more likely to downgrade the predicted grades of students at larger, open-access state schools than those of students at smaller, selective fee-paying schools<sup>21</sup>.

One submission to the call for evidence was based on a survey and interviews with A-Level students conducted in the lead-up to results being announced in August 2020. This research particularly highlighted concerns amongst students from ethnic minorities that this new process of assessment would be unfair to them as individuals. Reflecting existing

inequalities in the UK educational system, respondents from all backgrounds anticipated that higher grades were more likely to be awarded to students from independent fee-paying schools<sup>22</sup>. Separate analysis of the university admission process in the UK (drawing on data from pre-Covid years) has also shown that students from disadvantaged backgrounds who go on to achieve good results in their exams are especially likely to have received projected grades from teachers that under-predict their actual performance<sup>23</sup>.

The data on university admissions in the UK during the pandemic reveals a nuanced picture. A submission to the call for evidence from a Professor of Practice in the University of Birmingham School of Education, who was the Director for Fair Access and Participation at England's Office for Students between 2018 and 2021, highlights that the period 2019 to 2021 continued a long-term increase in numbers of young people in the UK successfully applying to attend university each year. This overriding trend meant that more young people from neighbourhoods with low participation entered higher education during the pandemic than ever before. However, the increase in numbers from these areas was lower than those from neighbourhoods with already-higher levels of participation (reflecting grade inflation in A-Level results that favoured students from more prosperous areas<sup>24</sup>). This pattern particularly applied for entry into the more selective, elite universities in the UK that recruit fewer students from working class backgrounds. As the submission to this Policy Commission therefore concluded, "the pandemic ... compounded the pattern across the previous decade: improving opportunities to access higher education for students from under-represented groups, but not equalising opportunities"<sup>25</sup>.

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17. Carretero, S., Napieralo, J., Bessios, A. et al. (2021) What Did We Learn from Schooling Practices During the COVID-19 Lockdown? Insights from Five EU Countries. JRC Science for Policy Report (Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg).
18. Anders, J., Macmillan, L., Sturgis, P. and Wyness, G. (2021) Inequalities in Young Peoples' Educational Experiences and Wellbeing during the Covid-19 Pandemic. CEPEO Working Paper No. 21-08. (Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, UCL: London). <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:ucl:cepeow:21-08> [Accessed February 2023].
19. Kubenz, V. and Kiwan, D. (2021) The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Disabled People in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Literature Review. (The University of Birmingham: Birmingham, UK).
20. Day Ashley, L. and Pennacchia, J. (2020) Educating the most vulnerable in the Covid-19 pandemic: The challenges facing the Alternative Provision Sector. Written Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry of the COVID-19 Education Committee [July 2020]. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/9036/html/> [Accessed February 2023].
21. Kelly, A. (2021) A tale of two algorithms: The appeal and repeal of calculated grades systems in England and Ireland in 2020. *British Educational Research Journal* 47(3), 725-741.
22. Bhopal, K. and Myers, M. (2020) The Impact of Covid-19 on A Level Students in England: Preliminary Report of Findings. (The University of Birmingham: Birmingham/The University of Nottingham: Nottingham).
23. Bhopal, K. and Myers, M. (2023) The Impact of COVID-19 on A Level exams in England: Students as consumers. *British Educational Research Journal* 49(1), 142-157.
24. Murphy, R. and Wyness, G. (2020) Minority report: the impact of predicted grades on university admissions of disadvantaged groups. *Education Economics* 28(4), 333-350.
25. Hunt, E., Tuckett, S., Robinson, D. et al. (2022) COVID-19 and Disadvantage Gaps in England 2020. (Nuffield Foundation: London).
26. Millward, C. (2022) Regulating fair access to higher education in England, 2006-2021, Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper No.78. <https://www.researchcghe.org/publications/working-paper/regulating-fair-access-to-higher-education-in-england-2006-2021/> [Accessed February 2023].



The picture regarding student performance when in higher education is also not straight forward. Some international studies have suggested that the enforced shift to remote learning during the first year of the pandemic may actually have had the effect of improving the performance of university students in summative assessments, possibly due to this engendering more efficient study habits or lowering the demands placed on students<sup>26</sup>. In the UK, early evidence also points to a potential reduction of inequality in the performance of university students from different ethnic groups. Results from the academic year 2019/2020 saw the largest decrease ever observed in the gap between white students and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students who were awarded the highest (either first-class or upper-second class (2:1)) degree classifications. This long-standing disparity was still very much present (at 9.9 percentage points), but did decrease 3.4 percentage points from the previous year – a much larger annual fall than previously recorded<sup>27</sup>.

#### EVIDENCE REVIEW KEY POINTS – EDUCATION

- A range of studies show that challenges brought by a shift to remote learning during school closures was greater for (secondary education) students from less affluent families and young people with special educational needs.
- The suspension of formal exams in the UK also raised concerns that the replacement procedures followed to award educational qualifications would be unfavourable to students from ethnic minority backgrounds and/or non-fee-paying schools.
- These experiences of disrupted learning and assessment during the pandemic may, in turn, limit the aspiration or opportunities for young people from these backgrounds to subsequently move into further or higher education.

#### 4.2 YOUNG PEOPLE IN (AND OUT OF) EMPLOYMENT

The lockdown measures introduced by governments to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus were the source of a sudden shock to economies across Europe. As in previous international economic downturns (most recently recessions linked to the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent Eurozone sovereign debt crisis), the impact on labour markets were particularly felt by young people. Across the European Union as a whole, the employment rate for 15-29-year-olds was 2.8 percentage points lower in July-September 2020 than in the corresponding three-month period of 2019 prior to the pandemic. A recovery over the following year, however, meant that the equivalent figure in the third quarter of 2021 was only 0.1% lower than in 2019<sup>28</sup>.

This fall in the employment rate during the first year of the pandemic occurred in all EU member states, including those such as Italy, Spain and Greece that



26. Gonzalez, T., de la Rubia, M.A., Hincz, K.P. et al. (2020) Influence of COVID-19 confinement on students' performance in higher education. PLoS ONE 15(10), 1-23.

27. Michaut, C. and Poullaouec, T. (forthcoming) Les Effets Du Covid-19 Sur Les Conditions D'étude Et De Réussite Des Étudiants De Licence [Chapter submitted to EUniWell Policy Commission call for evidence]. Codrioli McMaster, N. (2021) Ethnicity Awarding Gaps in UK Higher Education in 2019/2020. (Advance HE: London).

28. Eurostat (2022) COVID-19 Strongly Impacted Young People's Employment. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220331-1> [Accessed February 2023].

already had high levels of structural youth unemployment. However, the rise in unemployment amongst young people in 2020 was especially marked in some European countries, including the Netherlands and the Czech Republic<sup>29</sup>.

The economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic did have some unique features in comparison to past recessions. Most fundamental was the complete shutdown of certain sectors of the economy – such as hospitality, non-food retail, and air travel – during periods in which extensive social distancing restrictions were in place. This is significant because these industries are large employers of young people (as well as those in lower paid roles). An analysis of this situation in the UK found that employees under 25 were around 2.5 times more likely to work in sectors that were in-effect closed than employees from other age groups. In particular, 36% of female employees under 25 worked in these sectors (compared to 25% of male employees in the same age range). These figures do not include part-time employees in full-time education, who are also likely to be over-represented in the types of service jobs that were suspended through parts of the pandemic<sup>30</sup>.

Another analysis of the impact of the first year of the pandemic on the labour market in the UK highlights a disproportionate effect on young people from ethnic minority groups. Based on labour force survey data comparing April-September 2020 to previous years, this report finds that the fall in employment rate was four times greater for young Black people (16-24 years-olds) than white people of the same age. For young Asian people, the fall in employment was also three times greater than for young white people<sup>31</sup>.

An area of concern is the effect that these trends had on young people who were leaving full-time education and seeking to enter the labour market at the height of the pandemic<sup>32</sup>. The removal of many jobs in lower-paid sectors at these times would in particular have reduced opportunities for those leaving school at 16 or 18 to secure their first full-time employment. Young people graduating university with degrees, by comparison, may have been forced to take lower-paying jobs than they would in a pre-pandemic labour market, but would be less likely than those with lower qualification levels to be unemployed<sup>33</sup>. A further factor compounding this narrowing of opportunities for school leavers was a dramatic fall in the number

of apprenticeships (and other forms of work-based learning) available as the initial shock of the pandemic severely restricted the capacity of employees to take on young people in these roles<sup>34</sup>.

This is important as longitudinal evidence tracking the effect of past economic downturns has established that young people experiencing a period of unemployment or financial insecurity early on in their working lives are more vulnerable to suffering from lower income levels and poor health outcomes in the future<sup>35</sup>. These potentially long-term “scarring effects” are in-part related to the impact of economic insecurity on the mental wellbeing of young people. This theme will be returned to in the final part of this chapter.

As noted above, the youth employment rate in Europe as a whole rebounded strongly in 2021 after falling sharply in 2020. A recent analysis from the UK notes that a strong labour market recovery since the economy re-opened may have largely reversed the fall in employment rate and/or job quality experienced by education leavers during the pandemic. This does not, however, account for other effects that could still hurt the future career development of these cohorts, such as missing out on opportunities for valuable on-the-job training or other work experience due to lockdown measures<sup>36</sup>.

29. Lambovska, M., Sardinha, B., Belas, J. (2021) Impact of covid-19 pandemic on the Youth unemployment in the European Union. *Ekonomicko-manazerske spektrum*, 15(1), 55-63.

30. Joyce, R and Xu, X. (2020) Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN278. (The Institute of Fiscal Studies: London).

31. Wilson, T. and Papoutsaki, D. (2021) *An Unequal Crisis: The Impact of the Pandemic on the Youth Labour Market*. (Youth Futures Foundation: London).

32. Fiaschi, D. and Tealdi, C. (2021) Young people between education and the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, *International Journal of Manpower* 43(7), 1719-1757.

33. Henahan, K. (2020) *Class of 2020: Education Leavers in the Current Crisis*. (Resolution Foundation: London).

34. Green, A. (2020) ‘Getting on the ladder’ – challenges facing young people leaving education during COVID-19, City REDI blog [12/05/2020], <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/getting-on-the-ladder-challenges-facing-young-people-leaving-education-during-covid-19/> [Accessed February 2023].

35. Banks, J., Karjalainen, H. and Propper, C. (2020) Recessions and health: the long-term health consequences of responses to the coronavirus, *Fiscal Studies* 41(2), 337-344.

36. Ray-Chaudhuri, S. and Xu, X. (2023) *Are the Kids Alright? The Early Careers of Education Leavers Since the COVID-19 Pandemic* (The Institute for Fiscal Studies: London).





The reason why the shock of temporary economic lockdowns did not have larger effects on labour markets lies in-part with the mitigating effect of strong job protection measures (such as wage subsidy or employment furlough schemes) introduced in response to COVID-19 by almost all European countries<sup>37</sup>. For instance, an analysis of labour market entrants during the pandemic in the Netherlands suggests that they have been less affected than cohorts leaving education during past recessions, which is largely attributable to a wage subsidy scheme and other measures taken by the national government to protect the supply side of the economy<sup>38</sup>.

These job protection schemes may, however, have not (or only partially) covered young people in more precarious employment situations. In particular, workers without permanent employment contracts or guaranteed hours were more likely to lose their jobs during the first months of the pandemic in 2020<sup>39</sup>. Previous research has shown labour market precariousness in Europe to be highest among women, immigrants, and those with lower qualification levels as well as young people. Workers in these situations are also more vulnerable to financial insecurity, a lack of employment rights, and poorer health and well-being<sup>40</sup>. These existing socio-economic inequalities will therefore have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>41</sup>.

This category of precarious employment also increasingly includes young people working as independent contractors (often through digital platforms) in the “gig economy”. A study of these workers in France, focusing especially on drivers and food delivery bikers, highlighted that many were able to carry on working in these roles through the pandemic. However, they still may have experienced a significant income loss or stress from potential exposure to the coronavirus (although the research finds that working outside through lockdowns could also have brought mental health benefits for some delivery bikers)<sup>42</sup>.

37. Drahokoupil, J. and Müller, T. (2021) Job retention schemes in Europe: A lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic, European Trade Union Institute Working Paper 2021.07. <https://www.etui.org/publications/job-retention-schemes-europe> [Accessed February 2023].

38. Bussink, H., Vervillet, T. and ter Weel, B. (2022) The short-term effect of the COVID-19 crisis on employment probabilities of labour-market entrants in the Netherlands. IZA – Institute of Labour Economics Discussion Paper Series. (IZA – Institute of Labour Economics: Bonn).

39. Gray, B.J., Kyle, R.J., Song, J. and Davies, A.R. (2022) Characteristics of those most vulnerable to employment changes during the COVID-19 pandemic: a nationally representative cross-sectional study in Wales. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 76(1), 8-15.

40. Julià, M., Vanroelen, C., Bosmans, K. et al. (2017) Precarious employment and quality of employment in relation to health and well-being in Europe. *International Journal of Health Services* 47(3), 389-409.

41. Matilla-Santander, N., Ahonen, E., Albin, M. et al. (2021) Covid-19 and precarious employment: consequences of the evolving crisis. *International Journal of Health Services* 51(2), 226-228.

42. Apouey, B., Roulet, A., Solal, I. and Stabile, M. (2020) Gig workers during the Covid-19 crisis in France: financial precarity and mental well-being. *Journal of Urban Health* 97(6), 776-795.





#### EVIDENCE REVIEW KEY POINTS – EMPLOYMENT

- The unprecedented shutdown of large sectors of European economies (e.g., hospitality, tourism, non-food retail) during the first year of the pandemic disproportionately affected the employment and work experience opportunities of those under 25.
- Different analyses of this situation in the UK point towards this labour market shock particularly affecting female workers, education leavers with lower qualification levels, and young Black and Asian people.
- The pandemic also deepened existing challenges of economic precarity faced by young workers in temporary or casual employment arrangements.
- These dynamics are especially concerning as past evidence has shown that periods of joblessness or loss of income early on in people's working history can adversely impact employment and health outcomes throughout the rest of their lives.

A larger group of “key workers” also continued to provide essential in-person services throughout the pandemic. These notably include those in health and social care related occupations, as well as public transport workers and shop assistants. As the option to work from home was not available for people in these front-line jobs, they carried a greater risk of COVID-19 infection and the considerable anxiety that this environment brought<sup>43</sup>. Research based on data from the UK has highlighted that, in comparison to other age ranges, a lower proportion of workers under 25 (at all levels of education) were in occupations that could normally be performed from home during the

lockdowns. Key workers were also more likely to be female (especially in the health and social care sectors) and from ethnic minority groups<sup>44</sup>.

43. Côté, D., Durant, S., MacEachen, E. et al. (2021) A rapid scoping review of COVID-19 and vulnerable workers: intersecting occupational and public health issues. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 64(7), 551-566.

44. Blundell, R., Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R. and Xu, X. (2020) Covid-19 and inequalities. *Fiscal Studies* 41(2), 291-319.

### 4.3 THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE

As noted earlier (chapter 2), the impact of the pandemic on the mental well-being of young people was one of the main concerns that motivated this EUniWell Policy Commission. This is in-part related to the disruption in their education and employment covered in the preceding two sections, but also more generally to the effect of lockdown measures on their social relationships, physical (in)activity, and living environments.

The evidence now available indicates that these concerns were well founded. Academic studies investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in the wider population of countries including the UK and Italy have found that lower age was one factor associated with mental health symptoms related to, for instance, anxiety, depression, and psychological distress<sup>45</sup>. Another finding of note, generally consistent across the different studies reviewed here, is that the mental well-being of young females (already lower before the pandemic) was more negatively affected than that of young males during lockdown periods<sup>46</sup>.

Looking more specifically at the different groups of young people within the scope of this Policy Commission helps uncover some of the reasons why their mental health may have worsened through the pandemic. For young people up to the age of 18, academic studies have linked declining mental well-being to isolation from peers and other sources of social support during lockdowns, an increase in screen time and sedentary behaviour, and falling optimism or security over future education and career plans<sup>47</sup>. Greater use of social media during the pandemic may have contributed to a sedentary lifestyle, but research has highlighted that this can also be the source of valuable information about exercise and diet that helped families and young people to maintain healthy behaviours<sup>48</sup>.

#### EUNIWELL CITIZEN FORUMS – IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

The mental health impacts of the pandemic were also a topic covered in the EUniWell Citizen Forums held with 16-17-year-olds in Birmingham and Cologne (section 3.3). Participants in both of these events talked about a lack of direct social contact with their peers, and uncertainty about when the situation would revert to normal, as among the most challenging aspects of the periods in which they were largely confined to staying at home. They also reported finding it difficult to adapt to new social distancing and hygiene rules in place when they were first able to return to school and other public spaces. In Birmingham, the students noted the impact that mental health struggles could have on their education and therefore the need for preventative support to be offered by schools on a more routine basis.

The Citizen Forum in Cologne also explored the broader views of the participants on the social restrictions introduced by their government. These were perceived to be in place primarily to protect older people and other groups at-risk from infection with the coronavirus, with little regard for the impact they would have on the lives of people their age. So, while the students understood the need to comply with the rules, they also felt that in some respects (for instance, relating to curfews at night or gathering in outside spaces) they were excessive and confusing. This sense of unfairness was reinforced by a belief that, with these changes being imposed upon them without consultation, they had not been 'seen' as young people during the pandemic.

*Sources: i) Vallance, P. and Miller, R. (2022) Minutes of EUniWell Citizen Forum at University of Birmingham School – 18/03/22. ii) Berninger, I. and Springob, J. (2022) Minutes of EUniWell Citizen Forum in Cologne – 21/06/22*

Two submissions to the Policy Commission from academics at the University of Birmingham referred to adolescents aged from 11 to 14/15. This is a reminder that concerns about youth mental health also apply to this earlier age group who fall outside the 15-24 range specified in the call for evidence. Both of these submissions highlight the importance of supportive family relationships, feelings of safety and ease, and positive or fun experiences during lockdown, as factors that helped protect adolescents of this age from suffering a decline in mental well-being<sup>49</sup>. A number of studies identified through the literature search focus on the mental well-being of young LGBTQ+ people during the pandemic. This especially applies to those who were confined to their family home during lockdown periods with

unsupportive parents and barriers to accessing their usual sources of outside social support<sup>50</sup>. Another EU funded project, involving Linnaeus University and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (an EUniWell associate partner of Leiden University), focuses on adolescents who provide care for a family member with a chronic illness, disability, or addiction. This highlights the strain put on the mental health of young people in this situation during lockdown periods, particularly when other sources of support for their family members were not available. These young carers may also have found it especially difficult to keep up with schoolwork during the pandemic, increasing the already heightened risk that they become part of this age-group who are 'Not in Employment, Education, or Training' (NEET)<sup>51</sup>.

45. Kwong, A.S.F., Pearson, M.F., Adams, M.J. et al. (2021) Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in two longitudinal UK population cohorts. *The Journal of British Psychiatry* 218(6), 334-343.  
 46. Pierce, M., Hope, H., Ford, T. et al. (2020) Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population. *Lancet Psychiatry* 7(10), 883-892.  
 47. Prati, G. (2021) Mental health and its psychosocial predictors during the national quarantine in Italy against the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 34(2), 145-156.



A large body of research documents the mental health of university students through the pandemic. This shows that a high proportion of students, and particularly those living away from home under social restrictions and without face-to-face teaching, experienced a pandemic-related decline in mental health. For instance, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in the UK, drawing on data from a combination of three different surveys, concluded in November 2020 that more than half of students had worse mental well-being than before the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Results from one of these surveys also found that university students reported higher levels of anxiety, and lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness, than in the general UK population<sup>52</sup>. These effects were still present later in the pandemic: ONS survey data from February to March 2022 found that 36% of university students reported their mental well-being

had deteriorated since the start of the academic year in autumn 2021<sup>53</sup>.

International academic studies have identified a range of factors that contributed to these outcomes for university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include:

- Living alone and/or experiencing financial precarity<sup>54</sup>;
- Poor housing conditions and/or lack of access to outside spaces (e.g. gardens, terraces, balconies)<sup>55</sup>;
- Anxiety about being able to complete their degree and a related perception that the support they are receiving from their university is not sufficient<sup>56</sup>.

There are two other student communities that the literature identifies as experiencing distinctive pressures on their mental health at this time. First, international students unable to travel

home may have found themselves isolated in their host cities during lockdown without the same access to campus-based activities services on which they rely<sup>57</sup>. Second, for postgraduate doctoral students – and also in this category early career researchers – the pandemic may have reinforced existing issues around financial precarity in these positions and uncertainty about their future in academia<sup>58</sup>. Examples of steps taken by the EUniWell university partners to provide mental health support to their students through this period are further outlined in chapter 6.

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46. Amerio, A., Bertuccio, P., Santi, F. et al. (2022) Gender differences in COVID-19 lockdown impact on mental health of undergraduate students. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12(1), 1-8.
  - Prowse, R., Sherratt, F., Abizaid, A. et al. (2021) Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic: examining gender differences in stress and mental health among university students. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12(1), 1-11.
  - Stroud, I. and Gutman, L.M. (2021) Longitudinal changes in the mental health of UK young male and female adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychiatry Research* 303(1), 1-5.
  47. Ashworth, E., Hunt, A., Chopra, J. et al. (2022) Adolescents' lockdown-induced coping experiences (ALICE) study: a qualitative exploration of early adolescents' experiences of lockdown and reintegration. *Journal of Early Adolescence* 42(4), 514-541.
  - Toussaint, E., Florin, A., Galharret, J-M. et al. (2022) Anxiety caused by COVID-19 and perceived support among children and adolescents during the pandemic in France. *Enfance* 4(4), 435-454.
  - McKinley, A.R., May, T., Dawes, J. et al. (2021) "You're just there, alone in your room with your thoughts". A qualitative study about the impact of lockdown among young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMJ Open* 12(2), 1-11.
  - Sander, M., Patzina, A., Anger, S. et al. (2021) The COVID-19 pandemic, well-being, and transitions to post-secondary education. Institute of Labour Economics Discussion Paper Series No.14797. <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/14797> [Accessed February 2023].
  48. Goodyear, V.A., Boardley, I., Chiou, S-Y et al. (2021) Social media use informing behaviours related to physical activity, diet and quality of life during COVID-19: a mixed-methods study. *BMC Public Health* 21, 1333.
  - Goodyear, V.A., Skinner, B., McKeever, J. and Griffiths, M. (2023) The influence of online physical activity interventions on children and young people's engagement with physical activity: a systemic review. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 28(1), 94-108.
  49. Ashworth, E., Putwain, D. W., McLoughlin, S. et al. (2022) Ordinary magic in extraordinary circumstances: factors associated with positive mental health outcomes for early adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Adversity and Resilience Science* 3(1), 65-79.
  - Pallan, M., Adab, P. Clarke, J. et al. (2021) Impacts of the First Covid-19 Lockdown on Learning, Health Behaviours and Mental Wellbeing in Young People Aged 11-15 Years. (Institute of Applied Health Research, University of Birmingham).
  50. Fish, J.N., McInroy, L.B., Pacey, M.S. et al. (2020) "I'm kind stuck at home with unsupportive parents right now": LGBTQ youths' experiences with COVID-19 and the importance of online support. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 67(3), 450-452.
  - Salerno, J.P., Devadas, J., Pease, M. et al. (2020) Sexual and gender minority stress amid the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for LGBTQ young persons' mental health and well-being. *Public Health Reports* 135(6), 721-727.
  - Gato, J., Barrientos, J., Tasker, F. et al. (2021) Psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health among LGBTQ+ young adults: a cross-cultural comparison across six nations. *Journal of Homosexuality* 68(4), 612-630.
  51. Psychosocial Support for Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing Among Adolescent Young Carers in Europe, <https://me-we.eu/> [Accessed February 2023].
  52. Tinsley, B. (2020) Coronavirus and the impact on students in higher education in England: September to December 2020: A summary of research into how the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected students in higher education in England during the autumn term of 2020. (Office of National Statistics UK: London).
  53. Johnston, C. and Lis, R. (2022) Coronavirus and higher education students: 25 February to 7 March 2022. (Office of National Statistics UK: London). <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/25februaryto7march2022> [Accessed February 2023].
  54. Essadek, A. and Rabeyron, T. (2020) Mental health of French students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 277, 392-393.
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  55. Amerio, A., Brambilla, A., Morganti, A. et al. (2020) Covid-19 lockdown: housing built environment's effects on mental health. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17(16), 1-10.
  56. Plakhotnik, M.S., Volkova, N.V., Jiang, C. et al. (2021) The perceived impact of COVID-19 on student well-being and the mediating role of the university support: evidence from France, Germany, Russia, and the UK. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12(1), 1-13.
  57. Chen, J.H., Li, Y., Wu, A.M.S. and Tong, T.T. (2020) The overlooked minority: mental health of international students worldwide under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 54, 102333.
  58. Byrom, N. (2020) COVID-19 and the research community: the challenges of lockdown for early-career researchers. *eLife* 9(1), 1-3.
  - Goldstone, R. and Zhang, J. (2022) Postgraduate research students' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and student-led policy solutions. *Educational Review* 74(3), 422-443.



The health crisis brought by COVID-19 also put an additional strain on young people in employment. In particular, the psychological impact was especially acute for people in health and social care occupations who, as discussed in the previous part of this chapter, continued to work on the frontline of the pandemic throughout<sup>59</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, becoming unemployed (or losing income) during the economic downturn has also been found to be related to a significant drop in mental well-being<sup>60</sup>. In the most serious cases, the economic disruption and financial insecurity experienced by young people can contribute to feelings of defeat and entrapment that increase the possibility of suicidal thoughts<sup>61</sup>. These risks have been compounded by the extra difficulties those with socio-economic disadvantages, as well as other vulnerable groups such as the homeless or immigrants and asylum seekers, may have faced in accessing mental health services during lockdown periods<sup>62</sup>.

#### EVIDENCE REVIEW KEY POINTS – MENTAL HEALTH

- A large body of evidence is now available that confirms the mental health of young people declined markedly during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This is drawn from surveys of the population as a whole in different European countries, but also more targeted studies of the mental well-being of groups such as adolescents, LGBTQ+ youth, university students, and young people in or out of work.
- The youth mental health crisis deepened by the pandemic also appears to cut across demographic lines, although a consistent finding across a range of studies is that this has impacted young females more than young males.
- Many of the factors behind this increase in poor mental well-being can be linked to loss of social interaction with peers and reduced physical activity during periodic “lockdowns” enforced by European governments to limit the spread of the coronavirus.
- Beyond these temporary restrictions, however, the wider implications of the pandemic for young people’s education, work, and living conditions have also contributed to this situation.
- For both secondary and tertiary education students, the disruption to their normal learning and assessment routines, as well as greater uncertainty about their future plans, have been reported as sources of increased anxiety during the pandemic.
- The financial precarity experienced by young workers without secure employment, as well as some university students, is also highlighted within the academic and grey literature as a risk factor for the development of low self-esteem or depression.
- A larger proportion of young people in employment continued to work outside the home during times of peak coronavirus infection (including those in health and social care sectors), and were therefore potentially exposed to acute levels of stress from this experience.

59. Rodríguez-Rey, R., Garrido-Hernansaiz, H. and Bueno-Guerra, N. (2020) Working in the times of COVID-19: psychological impact of the pandemic in frontline workers in Spain. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, 8149.

60. Gagné, T., Nandi, A. and Schoon, I. (2022) Time trend analysis of social inequalities in psychological distress among young adults before and during the pandemic: evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study COVID-19 waves. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 76(5), 421-427.

Liu, S., Heinzl, S., Haucke, M. N. and Heinz, A. (2021) Increased psychological distress, loneliness, and unemployment in the spread of COVID-19 over 6 months in Germany. *Medicina* 57(53), 1-11.

61. Samaritans (2021) *The Impact of Economic Disruption on Young Adults*. (Samaritans: Epsom).

62. Aragona, M., Barbato, A., Cavani, G. et al. (2020) Negative impacts of COVID-19 lockdown on mental health service access and follow-up adherence for immigrants and individuals in socio-economic difficulties. *Public Health* 186, 52-56.



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## 5. Policy Context

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The evidence reviewed in the previous chapter identifies effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the well-being of 15-24-year-olds over the past three years. These consequences of a major health crisis will have marked the lives of virtually all young people across Europe, but our review shows that impacts have varied along lines of socio-economic advantage, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability. In particular,

the research now available supports the thesis that additional barriers to educational progression and transition into secure employment generated by the pandemic have often reinforced existing inequalities between different groups of young people.

This chapter will begin to look forward and situate the above theme of young people and the pandemic in a changing

context as Europe moves on from what appears to have been the peak years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021). The discussion here will frame the policy lessons and recommendations that are outlined in the final chapter.

## 5.1 THE EVOLVING POLICY CHALLENGE

*Inflation Rate EU and EUniWell countries – October-November 2022*

An important theme throughout the evidence summarised above is that many of the impacts of COVID-19 on the education, employment, and mental health of young people are not transitory in nature, but will continue to shape their lives after the pandemic itself has ended. In the near term, this will include their effect in influencing the paths that teenagers and young adults follow over the next few years as these age cohorts progress further through the education system and into the world of work. On a longer timescale, however, there is also a danger that the “scarring effects” of educational disruption, unemployment, economic insecurity, social isolation, and poor mental health experienced over the last three years will be a lasting burden on the well-being of young people most affected by the crisis. This means that even with the threat to public health posed by the coronavirus now seeming to fade, government policies should still prioritise support for young people to help mitigate and reverse the enduring effects of the pandemic.

Since the beginning of 2022, however, a new set of interrelated crises have emerged across Europe that risk diverting government priorities from this task. In February of that year, Russia launched an unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, bringing large-scale armed conflict back to Europe in the 21st century. Beyond the tragic human cost of this unfolding war and refugee emergency, it has also caused significant disruption in supplies of energy, food, and other materials to the rest of Europe. This has raised prices for these essential goods and contributed to a cost-of-living crisis that deepened over the winter of 2022/2023. The inflation rate for the European Union in October 2022 was 11.5%, and for the individual countries represented in the EUniWell alliance the corresponding values ranged between 6.2% and 22.5% (see table 1).

TERRITORY	INFLATION RATE	REFERENCE MONTH (2022)
France	6.2	November
Germany	10.0	November
Hungary	22.5	November
Italy	11.8	November
Netherlands	9.9	November
Spain	6.8	November
Sweden	10.9	October
United Kingdom	11.1	October
European Union	11.5	October

Source: *Trading Economics* [Accessed December 2022]

Governments across Europe have responded to this crisis by providing extra support to alleviate the pressure on household energy bills<sup>63</sup>. Despite this, the drag of rising inflation (and interest rates) on consumer and business spending is a large factor in the economic recession that had been forecast for the economies of the EU and most of its individual member states (as well as the UK) from the last quarter of 2022<sup>64</sup>.

For young people, the combination of a cost-of-living crisis and contraction in the wider economy will compound the economic hardship, growing unemployment or job precarity, and uncertainty about future career prospects, that were amongst the most damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on well-being. These impacts will have weakened the financial

resilience of many younger people and left them especially vulnerable to further rises in the cost of housing, food, and energy. Higher levels of stress, depression, and social isolation caused by these economic conditions will also prolong the youth mental health crisis of recent years.

The most recent edition of the Eurofound Living, Working and COVID-19 Survey shows that these issues were prevalent across the continent in the spring of 2022, as concerns about the cost of living began to increase. In particular, this research finds a higher proportion of 18–29-year-olds – 28% in the EU27 countries – had “a feeling of being excluded from society” than respondents from older age groups<sup>65</sup>. Another survey of 16-25-year-olds in the UK from August 2022 finds that 49% of young people report feeling anxious about their future

63. Ali, S. and Almeida, T. (2022) Inclusion, inequality, and responses to the cost-of-living crisis, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2022/09/08/inclusion-inequality-and-responses-to-the-cost-of-living-crisis/> [Accessed February 2023].

64. European Commission (2022) Autumn 2022 Economic Forecast: The EU Economy at a Turning Point, [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/autumn-2022-economic-forecast-eu-economy-turning-point\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/autumn-2022-economic-forecast-eu-economy-turning-point_en) [Accessed February 2023].

65. Eurofound-ETF (2022) Living, Working and COVID-19 in the European Union and 10 EU Neighbouring Countries. (Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg).



on a daily basis, and 51% feel they now have lower aspirations following the pandemic, cost of living crisis, and other global events since 2020<sup>66</sup>.

The lingering nature of these issues encourages us to view the COVID-19 pandemic not as an isolated event, but as part of a much longer and ongoing series of dynamics in European societies that are transforming the objective conditions for individual and collective well-being. As our evidence review emphasised, many of the impacts of the pandemic on young people reinforced existing social and economic inequalities experienced in education, work, and personal health.

One positive legacy of the coronavirus crisis may lie in increasing the attention paid to these disparities in the public discourse, and encouraging government and civil society to work together to develop solutions. Policy responses to these challenges must, however, be able to address structural divisions of class, ethnicity, and gender in the education system and labour market.

The next section will outline existing policy responses at the level of the European Union and discuss how these can be reinforced through a focus on well-being.

## 5.2 TOWARDS A EUROPEAN POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY?

The focus of this Commission on people aged 15-24 aligns with key policy priorities over the last three years as countries across Europe have looked ahead to a post-pandemic recovery. At the European Union level, a major financial package of support for member states – Next Generation EU – was introduced in 2020 to help counteract the economic shock brought by the pandemic. This funding instrument will operate until 2026 and, as well as aiming to “mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic”, will also contribute to longer-term EU objectives by helping to “make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions”<sup>67</sup>. To access this funding, member states were required to submit National Recovery and Resilience Plans by mid-2022. These plans needed to explain what the country proposed to do with these investments in six strategic pillars prioritised by the EU. One of these pillars is “policies for the next generation”, covering education and skills for young people<sup>68</sup>.

Another key policy process is the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). This is a set of 20 principles covering the European Commission’s commitment to fair and equal opportunities for its citizens in relation to education/training and employment, working conditions, and

social protection. These principles include explicit mention of gender equality in work, economic and social inclusion of people with disabilities, access to housing for those vulnerable to homelessness, and equal opportunities for other underrepresented groups including ethnic minorities<sup>69</sup>.

The EPSR was first announced in 2017, but the publication of an Action Plan to realise this vision took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2021). A joint declaration of European partners following the Porto Social Summit in May 2021 included a clear emphasis on helping younger people overcome the challenges they were facing:

“We will prioritise action to support young people, who have been very negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which has profoundly disrupted their participation in the labour market as well as their education and training plans. Young people represent an indispensable source of dynamism, talent and creativity for Europe. We must make sure that they become the driving force of the inclusive green and digital recovery to help build the Europe of the future, including by using the full potential of Erasmus+ to foster mobility across Europe for all students and apprentices”<sup>70</sup>.

In the wake of the pandemic, the 27 EU member states have also committed to a “reinforced” version of the existing Youth Guarantee that ensures those under the age of 30 will receive a good offer of employment, continued education, or

66. Prince’s Trust (2022) Class of Covid Report 2022. (Prince’s Trust: London).

67. European Commission (no date) Recovery Plan for Europe. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en). [Accessed February 2023].

68. European Parliament (no date) Recovery and Resilience Facility. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/recovery-and-resilience-facility/en/home#:~:text=It%20supports%20the%20way%20out,available%20to%20the%20Member%20States> [Accessed February 2023].

69. European Commission (no date) The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 Principles. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en) [Accessed February 2023].

70. European Council (2021) The Porto Declaration. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/the-porto-declaration/> [Accessed February 2023].

71. European Commission (no date) The Reinforced Youth Guarantee. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en> [Accessed February 2023].

training within four months of leaving education or becoming unemployed<sup>71</sup>.

The ability of young people to take advantage of these opportunities in education, training or employment will, however, be shaped by their uneven experiences of the pandemic. As discussed above, those whose lives have been most profoundly marked by the pandemic, and subsequently by the cost-of-living crisis, may continue to suffer poorer mental health or socio-economic circumstances that will act as barriers to their inclusion in any future recovery. It is, therefore, vital that these young people are given extra support to overcome remaining gaps in confidence, skills, or other resources that may prevent them from participating in further education or gaining valuable work experience.

The European Commission has designated 2023 as the European Year of Skills. This focus on training and lifelong learning aims to ensure that all EU citizens are equipped to adapt to changing labour market needs and to engage fully in the civic life of their communities<sup>72</sup>. Notably, there were also calls from within the European Parliament to make 2023 a European Year of Mental Health as part of a campaign to increase the work that the

EU does on this issue<sup>73</sup>. The European Commission work programme for 2023 does include a commitment to develop a 'comprehensive approach to mental health'<sup>74</sup>. This is vital, as a broader perspective on the subjective well-being of citizens, especially in the post-pandemic context, will address both a growing public health crisis and the socio-economic challenge of integrating marginalised groups into education and work. The mental health strategy should, for instance, be directed towards the almost 9 million people aged 15-29 across the EU who are currently 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET)<sup>75</sup>.

2022 was also the European Year of Youth. At the core of this programme was the engagement of young people in helping to shape the vision for a more sustainable and inclusive future for Europe. It is important that this kind of dialogue continues now that this year has ended. As the EUniWell Citizen Forum in Cologne highlighted (section 4.3), some young people may feel that their interests had not been properly considered in decisions taken by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another key piece of feedback to this Commission, received when the emerging findings were presented to a

group of postgraduate students from across the EUniWell partners, was the importance of young people themselves being given a meaningful voice in the development of policy responses for the post-pandemic recovery. Not only will this help ensure that interventions respond to the genuine needs of young people, but it will also provide a valuable opportunity for the participating citizens to feel more included in the process of making decisions that will affect their lives. This engagement of young people with social and political issues can also be enabled by schools and universities that adopt a focus on civic education and volunteering for their students<sup>76</sup>.

The responsibility of actually implementing EU initiatives such as the EPSR or Youth Guarantee falls mainly on national or regional governments across the continent. To be able to do this successfully at a local level, these authorities have to draw on the capabilities of other organisations in the public, private, and civil society sectors. The next section will explore how these stakeholders can work together, concentrating especially on the potential role of universities in supporting the well-being of young people.

72. European Commission (2022) Commission Kick-starts Work on the European Year of Skills. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10431&navItem-relatedDocuments> [February 2023].

73. Mental Health Europe (2022) Let's make 2023 the European Year of Mental Health. [https://www.mhe-sme.org/making-2023-europeanyearofmentalhealth/#:~:text=On%20Tuesday%205%20July%2C%20MEP,MEPs\)%20at%20the%20European%20Parliament](https://www.mhe-sme.org/making-2023-europeanyearofmentalhealth/#:~:text=On%20Tuesday%205%20July%2C%20MEP,MEPs)%20at%20the%20European%20Parliament) [Accessed February 2023].

74. European Commission (2023) Commission Work Programme 2023: A Union Standing Firm and United. (European Commission: Strasbourg).

75. Eurofound (2022) Young People in the EU. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/youth> [Accessed February 2023].

76. Peterson, A., Civil, D. and Ritzenthaler, S. (2021) Educating for Civic Virtues and Service: School Leader Perspectives, Initial Insights. (The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, University of Birmingham: Birmingham).



## 6. Universities and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This chapter will summarise responses of eight EUniWell university partners to the pandemic. The examples featured here were mainly submitted directly to a Policy Commission call for institutional best practices, but some were also received through the main call for evidence or other EUniWell engagement activities (see chapter 3). Together they illustrate ways in which higher education institutions in different European countries adapted to the crisis, with a particular focus on their concern for the well-being of students. These examples mostly refer back to exceptional circumstances during early peak periods of COVID-19, but the practices they describe also represent opportunities for more general learning about approaches to pedagogy and pastoral support in increasingly hybrid (in-person/distance learning) modes of higher education provision.

### 6.1 STUDENT WELL-BEING

As outlined in the main evidence review, the closure of secondary and tertiary educational institutions across Europe through parts of 2020 and 2021 necessitated a significant change in modes of teaching and learning. All the universities in the EUniWell alliance deployed new technology to enable their traditional classroom teaching to be moved to online platforms. For some, this shift to remote learning required their IT infrastructure and services to be upgraded at short notice. This included the University of Cologne, where the Vice-Rectorate for Teaching and Studies made use of a regional Covid-19 emergency fund provided by the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to supply staff and students with access to new digital learning and communication tools. Some of the measures introduced

to achieve a quick transition to hybrid teaching practices did, however, need to be adapted over time. For instance, the University of Florence reported that, with the introduction of social distancing restrictions, they installed turnstiles to regulate access to classroom spaces and collect data for monitoring purposes. These turnstiles were not, however, well received by their students and were subsequently removed (in April 2022).

A number of the EUniWell universities mentioned the introduction of new forms of online assessment to replace traditional exams when these could not be held in-person. Some also gave examples of how these changes were accompanied by special exemptions made for students facing difficulties in fulfilling their course progression requirements during the pandemic. For instance, Nantes Université arranged



extra exam sessions for students who had tested positive for COVID-19 or been in contact with others who had. The University of Murcia temporarily suspended a requirement for students to gain a certain number of credits in their first year to remain enrolled at the institution. And the University of Cologne granted students a possible short-term withdrawal from exams and allowed them additional re-take attempts when these were failed. During the pandemic, the Vice-Rectorate at Cologne also developed a concept for the implementation of micro-credentials in the institution, with “the long-term goal of making course structures more flexible, promoting digital competencies, and supporting life-long learning”.

Other EUniWell universities emphasised changes to their mental health services in their good practice examples. For instance, in addition to maintaining their established on-campus support through periods when in-person teaching was suspended, the Student Welfare Office at Linnaeus University began to provide their counselling services online. This meant they could reach students who were based in other cities in Sweden or outside the country at this time, and those who were unable to meet in-person because they had symptoms of COVID-19 infection. Other initiatives aimed at supporting the well-being of students in this institution, such as workshops on stress management, study skills, and drug or alcohol abuse prevention, were also moved to online platforms.

There has also been notable collaboration between members of the EUniWell alliance around the issue of student well-being. For instance, the Mental Health Symposium, a student-led project supported through the EUniWell Seed Funding Call, was organised by Semmelweis University but included participation from all original university members of the network. This project was focused on a three-day symposium held in Budapest in October 2022 that brought together students and staff from these universities to review the mental health support resources available across the partners and discuss ways in which these could be strengthened in the future<sup>77</sup>.

#### WEEKLY ONLINE GROUP TUTORIALS (UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM)

One of the pressing issues for universities during the closure periods was a risk that students would feel disengaged from their courses without regular in-person interaction and, in some circumstances, could be exposed to social isolation as a result. This included a particular consideration for international students, many of whom were remotely located in their home countries at these times. In response to these concerns, the University of Birmingham introduced weekly online group tutorials for all taught students from early 2021. These served as a regular point of contact for students that ensured they remained connected to their peers and the wider university community. As part of a programme rolled out across the whole institution, an important function of the tutorials was “signposting” to a range of other support services that were available to the students. Amongst these, access to the mental health support offered by the University was also extended during the pandemic, and external partnerships with local health services strengthened. The success of this example of “compassionate pedagogy” has encouraged the University of Birmingham to continue these regular tutorials even as students have subsequently returned to campus and embed them as “an integral part of an inclusive and accessible learning environment” in the institution.

#### CARING UNIVERSITIES CONSORTIUM (LEIDEN UNIVERSITY)

A submission to the main call for evidence from Leiden University was centred on its participation in the Caring Universities consortium. This cross-partner project, now involving seven higher education institutions in the Netherlands, has been focused on assessing and improving the mental well-being of their student bodies. To inform this work, a series of online surveys were conducted throughout 2020 and 2021. These indicated that the psychological state of the students who did respond had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and this had affected their educational progression. The survey results also highlighted that many students suffering from poor mental well-being do not seek out the sources of support already made available by universities. To engage with a broader cross-section of students, and crucially to provide earlier interventions before serious mental health conditions may arise in some individuals, the Caring Universities initiative is therefore focused on developing low-threshold e-health programmes that students can access online.

Sources: i) *Caring Universities (no date): an International Endeavour*. <https://caring-universities.com/info/> [Accessed February 2023]. ii) Struijs, S. (2022) *The mental well-being of students during the COVID-19 pandemic III: The third measurement by the Caring Universities consortium*. <https://caring-universities.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-mental-well-being-of-students-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic-III-report-by-Caring-Universities-31032022.pdf> [Accessed February 2023].

Submissions from three of the other EUniWell universities – Cologne, Murcia, and Nantes – included a focus on measures taken to provide extra financial assistance to their students. As highlighted in the evidence review, young people in higher education were among the groups that may have

been exposed to significant economic hardship or heightened stress due to the effect of the pandemic on their personal finances. All three of these universities mentioned some forms of direct monetary transfer for students facing economic difficulties, possibly drawing on support from regional

governments or associations. These, for instance, included complementary grants for students without a scholarship from the Spanish ministry (Murcia) and compensation provided for students who had lost their jobs or internships as a result of the pandemic (Nantes). Other support provided by these universities was through more indirect channels, such as the loan of computing equipment for those without the necessary technology to access online learning resources, deferments of tuition fee payments for students struggling to pay (Murcia), and the distribution of free meals by a student association (Nantes). The University of Murcia also helped students on the EU Erasmus+ mobility scheme who wanted to return home by chartering buses for specific transfers.

## 6.2 A WIDER CIVIC ROLE?

Some of the other submissions to the call for best practices referred to ways in which the EUniWell universities were helping with the wider response to the COVID-19 crisis in their regions. These reflected the existing role of many of these institutions within their local public health systems. For instance, students from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Cologne assisted with the pandemic response in their University Hospital, which contributed to the practical component of their course. This institution also reported establishing a Centre for Disease Prevention during the crisis, and working with a psychologist at the University Hospital in the creation

of a Mental Health Working Group that will help raise awareness of support for mental well-being in the University and wider city of Cologne. Nantes Université made a range of public health contributions in their region, including through research projects investigating the effect of the coronavirus on different groups, and the production of online videos by a Professor of Health in the University Hospital to raise awareness of COVID-19 and help counter false information in circulation. Students from this University also developed an online platform to “establish bridges and connections between volunteers and people in need” during the public health crisis. The Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at Linnaeus University reported making donations of laboratory and protective equipment when there was a shortage of these essential materials in the early stages of the pandemic. Semmelweis University is also a specialist higher education institute focused on medicine and health. Its involvement in the Policy Commission had previously included communication of a direct role in the response to COVID-19 in Hungary. This included the contribution of its students to testing for the coronavirus and the vaccine rollout in local communities.

These are examples of universities performing a “civic” engagement role during the pandemic. This role can include a concern for the well-being of its students as current and future citizens, but also suggests a responsibility

towards the needs of the city and/or region in which the institution is located. Despite this mission being integral to the original foundation of institutions of higher education across the world, in the 21st century it has arguably become of secondary importance for universities who now prioritise being recognised for research excellence and attracting fee-paying students on a national and international scale<sup>78</sup>. Universities also, however, remain embedded within particular places, and the resources and capabilities they possess as large “anchor institutions” should be mobilised for the social, economic, and cultural benefit of local communities<sup>79</sup>.

As the preceding part of this report discussed, the well-being of young people should be a sustained area of focus for policymakers across Europe in a post-pandemic context. For universities, this clearly includes continuing support for higher education students, building on the types of practices illustrated above by the members of the EUniWell alliance. However, many of the young people most affected by the ongoing impacts of the pandemic are part of the population who do not attend higher education. Universities can therefore contribute more fully to the post-pandemic recovery in their cities and regions by collaborating with other civic actors to engage with young people who are not their students. This will be outlined further in the next policy lessons section.

77. EUniWell (no date) The Mental Health Symposium: Exploring and Enhancing Mental Health Initiatives and Resources. <https://www.euniwell.eu/what-we-offer/seed-funding-programme/projects-of-the-second-seed-funding-call-2021/collaboration-project-on-mental-health-in-the-euniwell-community>

78. Vallance, P. (2016) The historical roots and development of the civic university. In Goddard, J., Hazelkorn, E., Kempton, L. and Vallance, P. (eds.), *The Civic University: The Policy and Leadership Challenges*. (Edward Elgar Publishing Limited: Cheltenham), pp.16-33.

79. O’Farrell, L., Hassane, S. and Hoole, C. (2022) The University as a Just anchor: universities, anchor networks and participatory research, *Studies in Higher Education* [Advance Access].



## 7. Policy Lessons

This concluding section will summarise the lessons that can be drawn from this EUniWell Policy Commission. The seven areas identified here are based on the evidence of impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on 15-24-year-olds reviewed earlier. They also, however, respond to the updated policy context outlined in the preceding chapters, and the associated challenges of sustaining an inclusive post-pandemic recovery for young people. These implications of the report have also been informed by feedback received on earlier versions of the evidence review and presentations of this to different audiences during the second half of 2022.

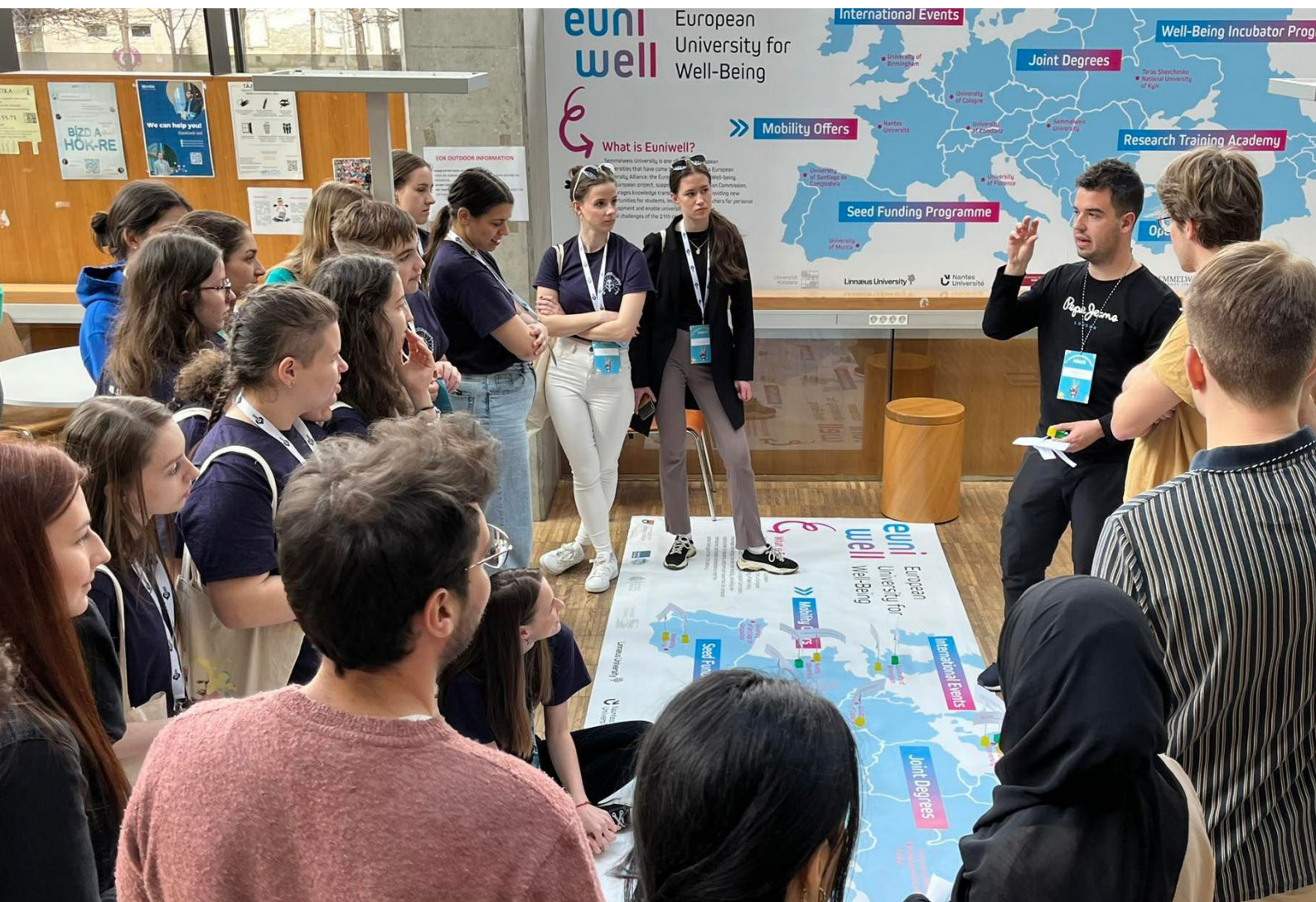
As an initiative of the European University for Well-being, the recommendations from this Policy Commission include a special concern with the role that universities can play in a post-pandemic recovery – both as educational providers

and civic actors. The scope is, however, wider than this, and speaks particularly to policy agendas driven at the level of the European Union and its institutions (principally the European Council, Parliament, and Commission).

The EU is the common environment shared by all members of the EUniWell alliance, apart now from its UK representative – the University of Birmingham. The Policy Commission is, however, led from this institution, and we believe that most of the lessons drawn here remain as relevant to the UK case as other European countries. There is, therefore, a need for the UK government to ensure that young citizens have access to similar opportunities as their peers in the European Union, and that public authorities and services at a sub-national level across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have the capabilities and resources to

deliver on this post-pandemic vision. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund, introduced to supersede access to the EU Structural and Investment Funds, includes provision for high-quality skills training tailored to local economic needs. To function as an effective replacement for the Structural Funds, however, this new Shared Prosperity Fund will have to be extended in a way that allows sub-national actors to make longer-term strategic spending commitments in this area.

More generally, we also recognise that across the other member states represented in the EUniWell alliance, these European policy agendas are predominately implemented by a range of national and regional actors. These policy lessons will, therefore, have to be taken forward at the level of each university member of the network and their associate partners.



### 1) FOCUS ON THE LEGACY OF THE PANDEMIC FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The most serious threats to public health posed by COVID-19 may have passed, but the impacts the pandemic has had on the education, employment, and mental well-being of adolescents and young adults will continue to be felt over the next decade or longer. There is therefore a need for policy responses that provide ongoing support to mitigate and reverse these effects as current cohorts of young people progress through the education system and into the labour market.

The European Union is set to play an important role in making funding available for these policies to be implemented in a context where national and regional/ municipal governments may (at least in the near term) face severe budgetary constraints due to a challenging economic climate. It is, therefore, important that funding instruments such as Next Generation EU are fully aligned with social and economic objectives that provide particular support for young people.

### 2) BUILD ON EU TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

As part of its strategy to encourage a post-pandemic recovery, the European Commission has reaffirmed its commitment to training and employment support programmes that help young people into good jobs. In particular, initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and Youth Guarantee are focused on extending these opportunities to all citizens under 30 across the European Union. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic covered in this report have, however, varied along lines of socio-economic advantage, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability. Often this has had the consequence of reinforcing existing inequalities in well-being between different groups of young people. There is therefore a need for the implementation of these programmes, with their commitments to providing universal opportunities for all young people, to also prioritise targeted help for disadvantaged groups facing the greatest barriers.



### 3) PRIORITISE THE WELL-BEING OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

The existing European Commission approach can also be augmented by incorporating a more explicit concern for the well-being of individuals and communities within their policy goals. This would help to ensure that young people suffering from poor mental well-being, other health conditions (including those related to “long Covid”), or unfavourable socio-economic circumstances will not be excluded from taking up the opportunities for education, training, or employment that become available to them through programmes related to the EPSR or Youth Guarantee. In particular, the current proposal for the European Commission to develop a “comprehensive approach to mental health” should be prioritised and linked to its work in supporting youth employment, education, and training.

### 4) ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE IN SHAPING THEIR FUTURE

Building on the European Year of Youth (2022) initiative, young people should be actively involved in the shaping of policy interventions that will affect their future lives following the pandemic. International actors such as the European Youth Forum (and national level Youth Councils) are important advocates for this more democratic approach. This can make use of digital tools to connect together young people from across Europe. However, this type of engagement may also be especially

effective at a local level, involving meaningful and sustained consultation with a representative cross-section of young citizens in a neighbourhood, city, or region. Not only will this help empower young people, but the outcomes co-produced with public authorities and civil society organisations will be informed by their lived experience of the challenges they encounter in that specific community.

### 5) COMMISSION LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH INTO THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

This policy commission report has highlighted some of the considerable evidence that is now available relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and young people. The enduring nature of the social and economic impacts identified, however, means there is a need for longitudinal research into the effects on cohorts of young people over an extended time period. One function of this research should be to support evaluation of the measures taken by governments during the pandemic so that policy lessons for any comparable future crises can be identified. In particular, the public health benefits of lockdown measures (including the temporary closure of educational institutions and work places) should be balanced against an informed understanding of the negative effects that these restrictions are likely to have on the short-term wellbeing and longer-term development of young people. Academics in universities across Europe can play an important role in this process of research and evaluation.



## 6) SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF (HIGHER EDUCATION) STUDENTS

An important theme that has emerged through this report is the impact the pandemic had on the mental health of higher education students and the corresponding steps taken by universities to enhance the support they offer in this area (as illustrated by those in the EUniWell alliance in the previous chapter). It is essential that this focus is maintained as the move to a more hybrid form of learning necessitated by the pandemic becomes established as a more prominent feature of higher education moving forward. This development has implications for the practice of all university staff (including lecturers and programme support staff), and not just those in specialist well-being support roles. The response to this Policy Commission has demonstrated that this is an area of concern for universities across different European countries. European University Alliances (such as EUniWell) may, therefore, be a vehicle through which good practices in this area can be shared and developed on a trans-national basis.

## 7) LEVERAGE THE CIVIC ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES TO SUPPORT ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

As important civic actors and anchor institutions in their home cities and regions, universities should also contribute to activities that support the well-being of young people who are not their students. This mission can be achieved through the extensive applied research and teaching that many higher education institutions already undertake in fields related to physical and/or mental health. More broadly, it can also draw on their expertise in other areas that are relevant to the educational, social and economic challenges that young people face. This knowledge can be mobilised by working closely with other civic actors. For instance, universities should be encouraged to collaborate with local secondary schools to help pre-university age students who face additional barriers in progressing onto higher education due to the disruption they have encountered over the pandemic. This support could focus on improving their foundational knowledge and study skills, developing confidence in their academic abilities, or planning for their future study or careers. Universities should also be incentivised to engage with further education colleges, employers, or local and regional governments, to help school leavers who do not enter higher education, including those who are struggling to secure stable employment.





# Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who has contributed to the work of this EUniWell Policy Commission. This includes the members of the Policy Commissioner group and WP4 steering group from across the EUniWell network who have provided guidance throughout the process. Thank you also to Stefano Manservigi for chairing the Policy Commission launch event in June 2020, and to those who participated in this discussion.

We are especially grateful to everyone across the EUniWell network who took the time to respond to our call for evidence and call for university good practices. Jan Springob and Ina Berninger from the University of Cologne organized the Citizen Forum event in Cologne that we draw upon in the report. We would also like to thank the staff and students from the University of Birmingham School who participated in the Citizen Forum organised in

Birmingham. Prithvi Perepa from the University of Birmingham facilitated the consultation with a parent of a young autistic person in April 2022.

In the University of Birmingham, we would like to extend thanks to our colleagues Robin Mason, Erica Arthur, Hannah Lowe, Daniel Walker, and Ruby Eittle for their invaluable guidance and support. Christian Bohm and Rachel Posaner from the Health Services Management Centre (HSMC) conducted the academic and grey literature search. Mark Watts and Ryan Hunter from LP Brussels provided additional support in our engagement with external policymakers.

An earlier version of the evidence review part of this report was presented to a number of audiences during the second half of 2022. These included the EUniWell Summer School 'COVID-19; impact on European health & well-being' in The

Hague, the EUniWell Mental Health Symposium hosted by Semmelweis University, and an online workshop 'Placing youth well-being at the centre of post-pandemic recovery in Europe' sponsored by the Regional Studies Association as part of the European Week of Regions and Cities. We would like to thank everyone who helped in organising and participating in these events that provided very useful feedback on the Policy Commission. In particular, Alessandro Da Rold (EU40) and Xuan Dong (Linnaeus University) generously contributed as speakers for the European Week of Regions and Cities workshop.

The views expressed in this report reflect the discussions of the Policy Commission and the research that informed them. They do not necessarily reflect in their entirety the personal opinions of the individuals involved.

**PAUL VALLANCE AND ROBIN MILLER**

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