EUROPEAN SCHOOL STUDENTS' COOPERATION
The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.

OBESSU is supported by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe.
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BACKGROUND

This publication is aimed for use by school students who wish to become more involved at European level. It was created by participants of OBESSU’s “European School Students’ Cooperation” event from 3-8 March 2018 in Gdansk, Poland. This event and publication were financed by the VISEGRAD fund.

OBESSU

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) is the platform for cooperation between the national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe. It was founded in April 1975 in Dublin, Ireland and brings together Member, Candidate and Affiliate Organisations from all over Europe. All Member Organisations are independent, national, representative and democratic school student organisations.

As OBESSU we stand together:

• to represent the school students as stakeholders of their educational systems, and in issues concerning their lives;

• to provide the national school student unions with assistance and support and to co-operate for the development of school student representative structures;

• to encourage and enable exchange of experience and good practice among the national school students unions;

• to promote equal access to education and to strive for the end of all discrimination and injustice within the educational systems;
• to contribute to the development of democratic educational systems in Europe, that promote active citizenship in all forms;

• to promote solidarity and understanding between young people;

• to promote new teaching methods in learning and promote healthy teaching environment.

**Visegrad Fund**

The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organisation established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries - Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote both regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) but also between the V4 region and other countries.
For over 40 years school student unions have cooperated under the umbrella organisation of OBESSU. There are many benefits to cooperating together at this level.

1. Political strength - Stronger together

While education policy is widely regarded as a national competence, the European institutions have become increasingly influential in shaping national reform through policy recommendations, benchmarking and monitoring, as well as different forms of peer learning between states. These European policy processes are mainly facilitated by the European Commission who works on almost all aspects of education systems, ranging from the competences of learners to labour market transition and educational mobility. However, the Council of Europe also deals with education in relation to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

It is important that school students are active participants in these debates and decision-making processes. Having school students elected through their own student unions working together gives student voice the democratic legitimacy to advocate and lobby institutions, therefore minimising tokenism.
2. Sharing of best practices

School student unionism has been alive in Europe for almost 100 years. Most school student unions will experience similar challenges and focus on similar issues throughout their lifetimes. While each national context is most certainly different, the opportunity to share experience and tools can be very rewarding.

Sharing of best practice can also be used as evidence when lobbying on a national level.

3. Exploration of more specific topics

Working on a national level school student unions may need to focus on current issues affecting learners. With turnover of those involved in school student unions being relatively high, knowledge may be lost which means student unions tend to focus on the same topical issues. Topics which may not be the first priority of an organisation, but nevertheless are very important, may not be addressed. Working with learners from other countries can allow these topics to be explored collectively.
There are many opportunities for students involved at all levels to participate on a European level. The most effective way for school students to participate on a European level is through their national student union. If learners are not affiliated with their student union, or there is no national structure, there are also other forms and routes for participation. Check out below how to participate at all of these levels.

1. Politically

OBESSU is the recognised representative structure for school students in Europe, so working through OBESSU is the most effective way of getting student voice heard on a European level!

The political direction of OBESSU is chosen by its member organisations, who are national school student unions. The direction and aims of OBESSU are outlined in the Political Platform of the organisation. These can be amended at Statutory Meetings; the General Assembly (GA) and Council of Members (COMEM). These meetings generally occur 6 months apart. A member organisation can amend the current Political Platform by presenting their amendment at these statutory meetings and receiving more than half of the votes in favour of the amendment.

The Political Platform outlines the main beliefs and aims of OBESSU, but for a more in-depth look at certain topics and to create more in-depth policy, OBESSU also has Working Groups and Policy Papers. Working groups are comprised of a small number of individuals (typically 3-5), from Member Organisations, working with Board members on exploring a particular topic. A working group may organise events, conduct research and represent OBESSU on the particular topic. From their research and work they may also formulate a Policy Paper.
Policy Papers may also be proposed by OBESSU Member Organisations at the COMEM or GA. If adopted, the policy paper becomes part of OBESSU's policy, until it is reviewed in whole after 4 statutory meetings. Policy paper proposals and current policy papers can also be amended by Member Organisations at the Statutory Meetings.

The Political Platform, along with the Policy Papers and advice of Working Groups direct the Board in its lobbying and advocacy. By inputting into these, one inputs into the work of OBESSU!

OBESSU works with a multitude of institutions like the European Union and Council of Europe and with other stakeholders in education and youth affairs.

Mapping the European Union Institutions

The European Union (EU) is a union of 28 member countries (currently) which share political and economic relations. The fundamental purposes of EU are to promote greater social, political and economic harmony among the nations of Europe. The EU also has bilateral agreements with a number of non-member states in Europe.

There are 7 institutions of the European Union

- European Parliament
- European Council
- Council of the European Union
- European Commission;
- Court of Justice of the European Union
- European Central Bank

As school student activists, we work mostly with the European Parliament, European Commission and the Council of the European Union.
European Parliament

The European Parliament (EP) is the directly elected by the citizens of the 28 member states - legislative body of the EU. Together with the Council (see below) its main task is to create new laws, but also to approve the EU budget and approve the 28 Commissioners. The 751 parliamentarians are elected in a Europe-wide election every five years, the last one in 2014. The number of parliamentarians (usually referred to as “MEPs”, or Members of the European Parliament) per country is dependent on the size of each country’s population. For example, the biggest EU country Germany has 96 MEPs and the smallest country Malta has 6.

The voter turnout has often been low in the European Parliament elections, in particular among young people. In 2014, only approximately 28 % of those aged between 18 and 24 voted.

Each of the 751 MEPs sits in one or several committees, organised according to the topics that is being handled. The Committee on Trade deals with trade-related matters, the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development deals with topics related to agriculture, and so on.

In the European Parliament there are also several “Intergroups” – these are less formal than committees and, unlike committees, they do not vote and cannot take official decisions. They are organised thematically according to topics which do not belong in any committee.

The EP is based in Brussels for most of the times, but the plenary sessions in which decisions are taken are in Strasbourg, France. 12 times a year the MEPs travel to Strasbourg for a four-day session.

As activists we can work with the European Parliament in a number of ways:

1. Follow the work of the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Employment & Social Affairs (EMPL).
2. Input to rapporteurs’ and shadow rapporteurs’ work in these committees. Sometimes having a national or language connection with MEPs can really help (but it’s not necessary!).
3. Contacting MEPs from all countries and parties that will be voting on these pieces of legislation / recommendations in parliamentary plenary.

**European Commission**

The European Commission (EC) is the institution which runs most of the day-to-day business of the EU and is often called the “executive” branch, but it should not be confused with a government.

Each Member State nominates one Commissioner for a five-year period, and these have to be approved by the European Parliament. Even though each Commissioner is nominated by a Member State, a Commissioner is not supposed to represent his/her country. Instead, they are supposed to represent the whole EU. Usually there are tough negotiations between different Member States and within the EP before the final approval. The head of the 28 Commissioners is Jean-Claude Juncker from Luxembourg. The Commission is based in Brussels.

Under the 28 Commissioners there are different Directorate-Generals, or DGs. There is a DG for Environment, for Energy, for Education and Culture and many others. There are 33 DGs in total, so some Commissioners are responsible for more than one DG. You can find a full list at [http://ec.europa.eu/about/ds_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/about/ds_en.htm).

The European Commission is a much more closed institution, and it can be harder to lobby towards. OBESSU works with the Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC) and Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL). We can input here in a number of ways:

1. Follow the work of the DGs
2. Input into Structured Dialogue consultations
3. Liaise with other stakeholders who work with the Commission (e.g European Youth Forum and Lifelong Learning Platform).
The Council of the EU, also often referred to as the Council of Ministers, or simply “the Council”\(^1\), consists of the ministers from all 28 Member States. If they discuss a topic related to education, it is the Ministers of Education that meet, if the topic is about energy it is the Ministers of Energy, and so on. So unlike the other two institutions mentioned above, the Council represents country-specific interest.

Saying that this institution consists of ministers is a bit simplified. Apart from the ministers there are also Permanent Representations to the EU where a lot of the work is being prepared.

The Council is chaired by a rotating Presidency, where each country is chair for six months at a time. This means that as long as there are no new Member States, every country will chair every 14 years. During the Presidency many meetings take place in the Presidency country.

In the Council, the ministers often try to find compromises and reach consensus rather than vote on proposals. This is of course not always easy, since many of the 28 Member States often have views which are

As the Council consists of ministers from each member state of the EU, OBESSU does not work with this institution. Member organisations of OBESSU and other groups in EU member states can contact their ministers regarding European affairs. This can be done effectively in the following steps:

1. Follow legislation and recommendations being brought to the Council.
2. Contact and lobby the relevant ministers regarding any potential legislation or recommendations. As the Council works mostly by consensus, student voice can have a big impact.
3. Hold ministers accountable once legislation or recommendations are agreed on a European level - ensure it is brought home!

\(^1\) This Council should not be confused with the European Council or Council of Europe, which are something completely different.
How do the three main institutions work together?

Here follows a brief outline of the work of the main institutions. Please note that it is a simplified version and that reality can include more elements than those explained here.

All legislation is initiated by the Commission. The Commission prepares a draft and sends it to both the European Parliament and to the Council. Both of these two have to adopt the proposal, and this is called the co-decision procedure. When the Parliament has agreed internally on its position (after discussing and voting in the committee(s) and in plenary), the person responsible for the specific proposal (called the “rapporteur”) is ready to negotiate the position on behalf of the Parliament. When the Council has agreed on its position internally, the person who is responsible for the proposal (a representative of the Presidency country) is ready to negotiate. The rapporteur, the Council representative and the Commission representatives meet to negotiate the position and these meetings are called “trialogues”.

When the three have agreed on a position, often after long negotiations, it has to be formally adopted by both the Parliament and the Council. Then it becomes legislation.
Note that not all acts are legislation. The institutions can also write non-binding recommendations, reports and communications.
Other institutions

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe (CoE) has not to be confused with the aforementioned Council of the European Union or the European Council. The main aim of the Council of Europe is to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. It was founded in 1947, and it is formed by 47 countries, including the 28 EU countries; actually no country has ever joined the EU without first belonging to the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe can not make binding laws, but it has the power to enforce select international agreements reached by European states on various topics, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, enforced by the European Court of Human Rights (one of the main bodies of the CoE).

The body of CoE entitled of dealing with education-related issues is the Steering Committee for Educational Policy and Practice (CDPPE). OBESSU is an observer member of the CDPPE, taking part in its meetings and being recognised as relevant stakeholder in the education field.

OBESSU is also actively cooperating with the Youth Department of the CoE in different ways: first of all, through the European Youth Foundation (EYF) of the CoE, that provides financial and educational support for European youth activities; OBESSU runs at least one activity per year funded by the EYF. Another direct cooperation between OBESSU and the Youth Department is through the Study Session, an international youth event which bring together members of youth organisations or networks and experts for discussions on a specific subject leading to conclusions relevant to the priorities and programmes of the Council of Europe Youth sector. The Study Sessions are hosted by one of the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest.

The Youth Department of CoE has a co-management system: this involves representatives from youth non-governmental organisations and government officials who together then work out the priorities for the youth sector and make recommendations for future budgets and programmes. The Advisory Council on Youth comprises 30 representatives of non-governmental youth organisations and networks:
OECD

A non-European institution working on education is also the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), consisting of 34 member countries (most of them high-income countries) and based in Paris. OECD Education is perhaps most famous for the PISA tests (Programme for International Student Assessment). Happening every three years, PISA tests knowledge and skills of 15 year old students across the world, and uses it as basis for assessing national education systems.

OBESSU, while critical of PISA test approach, cooperates with OECD on variety of topics, through participation in events and meetings, or contributing to their publications.
Input to other stakeholders

European Youth Forum

The European Youth Forum is the umbrella body for national youth councils and youth-led international NGOs in Europe. With this massive coverage, they are seen as the largest representative group for youth in Europe. Their work covers a wide array of areas, and as OBESSU is only member representing school students in education, this leaves a lot of space for input. OBESSU is very active in this organisation, nominating many Board members in the past and sitting on Expert groups and in networks.
https://www.youthforum.org/

Lifelong Learning Platform

The Lifelong Learning Platform is an umbrella organisation for European organisations working in the field of education, training and youth. Their membership includes those working with formal, informal and non-formal education, with several millions of beneficiaries throughout Europe.

OBESSU is very active in this platform, being a part of the steering committee, working in the Erasmus Plus Coalition and inputting into their other ongoing work.
http://lllplatform.eu/

SIRIUS Network

The SIRIUS Network is a network of organisations working in the field of education of people with a migrant background. The purpose of the network is to encourage inclusive policy making on national and European levels, so that governments, authorities, schools and communities take action to promote and implement policies and measures aimed at promoting equity and social justice in education, at improving educational opportunities, promoting social inclusion and fight against discrimination. OBESSU has been working a lot on this topic in recent years with the “Seeds for Integration” regranting scheme.
www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/
Strategy for change
Lobbying vs Advocacy

Students across Europe can face common struggles, and tackling them can be equally challenging regardless of where you are from. When trying to achieve change through a stakeholder, for example the Ministry of Education, it can be particularly difficult. Knowing how to approach stakeholders and how to work with them effectively is very important, and this is where cooperating with other student unions can be helpful. By sharing experiences through OBESSU we can learn from each others successes and challenges, and make better decisions about what is the best course of political action for our organisation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lobbying vs Advocacy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lobbying</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To influence a legislator on a issue.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Advocacy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public support for or recommendations of a particular cause or policy.</td>
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**Differences**

When lobbying you influence a decision maker on a certain matter that you want to get changed.

When advocating you are influencing the society or a large group of people to recognize a certain issue or a matter you would like to achieve changes.

**Applications**

For school students who are actively trying to change the society, it is more important to start advocating than lobbying. When the circumstances are that the decision makers are not willing to change your ideas you can advocate the society, to start creating a discussion about your matter, in order to support your ideas and put pressure on decision makers. When your matter has been recognized by the society you can start lobbying the decision makers.
Concrete ways to advocate:

- Create a campaign brief/action plan/strategy paper
- Share your best practices with stakeholders
  - Student councils
  - National student unions
  - School students
  - Teachers
  - Principals
- Media campaign

How to approach decision makers (Lobby)?

When approaching decision makers, you will need to be prepared for difficult questions. You should be prepared with facts that supports idea, otherwise decision makers may not take you seriously. Bringing advantages and disadvantages of your idea can support it.

Lobbying - Tips & tricks

- Be formal - make sure you behave according to the working culture of the person you approach.
- Be prepared (debate with someone or yourself about the matter, find the advantages and disadvantages so you have an answer for both).
- Be polite to the decision maker (do not interrupt and be respectful).
- Listen carefully during the discussion (Bring someone else to the meeting who will write down the discussion and someone who can support you during the meeting).
2. Sharing of best practices

Learning from each other is one of the most effective ways of improving our competences as activists. Sharing of best practices and fostering cooperation with other school student unions and with networks and umbrella organisations, like OBESSU, can help with board transitions and continuity of projects and skills within the organisation.

We can share our best practices as school student unions at events on particular topics. This can involve presenting the realities and solutions from our home countries, or inputting into the outcomes and solutions at a particular event.

Outside of events, sharing of best practices is made easier thanks to the horizontal approach to networking built into the online platform for Member Organisations of OBESSU (Basecamp). In this way, school student unions do not need to wait for a meeting or a structured dialogue from the Board, they can simply communicate with each other. Using technology, social media and discussion platforms is a way that any activists can liaise with each other openly and efficiently.

Cooperation with other groups

These international experiences and connections are particularly useful for national organisations. Sometimes, a group of organisations can come together and immediately find the similarities between them and create threads and networks to learn, share and cooperate. Other times, it may seem like unions from various parts of Europe are at completely different levels or that regional or cultural barriers might be too great to find a common area to work on. However, it is these differences that make us stronger by engaging together - namely if another school student union has already done a project that you are thinking of doing, or has achieved a change in the national level that you are still fighting for, then chatting to them and using the learning that they gathered in order to apply it at home can be hugely beneficial. Similarly, stepping back and understanding the struggle that it took to get to where your union is today can be hugely motivating to continue working and to achieve even greater equality and engagement for students.
Peer Learning

Peer learning is one of our greatest strengths as student activists, as it allows us to talk to like-minded people from similar contexts and learn effectively from each other. By collaborating and networking with each other, we can develop trust and mutual understanding, which are necessary to mentor and support each other. This is why reaching out and sharing best practices is so important for us as activists.

For non-school student unions

For grass root structures and organisations, there are many ways of sharing best practices with other organisations in Europe. From approaching similar organisations to your own in other countries to participate in a joint project, to participating in study visits to other countries, or simply following other organisations online - the only limit is your own passion and creativity.

As mentioned earlier, with modern technology, it is easier than ever before to get in touch, ask a question and to show other organisations your solidarity and support. Our cooperation is all about integration, mutual support and empathy - by showing solidarity as student union activists, we help each other to stay motivated and driven to achieve change. Sometimes, change at a European level can be difficult to push. The enormous scope of the European institutions, and the great number of different interests groups within it that are lobbying in their interest can be overwhelming. However we, as representatives of our peers and fellow students, need to stay strong and united in pursuing change and in ensuring that the voice of students is listened to and treated fairly along with the other partners in education and society.
3. Exploration of more specific topics

The work of OBESSU is planned and voted on by membership in the Workplan. Certain key topics are chosen as a focus for each upcoming year. The OBESSU Workplan also gives space for topics which membership sees as important in a European context. Some topics will be explored with an event like a summer school or convention, while others may have a working group formed to discuss and explore the topic.

By sending members of your organisation to European events, for example trainings with SALTO\textsuperscript{1} or an OBESSU event, you are providing them with an opportunity to learn new things and to bring them back home. Participants who complete these events return home with new skills, experiences and sometimes even ready-to-use work plans for the organisation. They also return with a new network of international friends and colleagues who can support or guide them with the implementation of the projects.

Example: Seeds for Integration

Seeds for Integration is a project run by OBESSU with the support of Open Society Foundations (OSF) which grant money to school student groups who wish to undertake a project about refugees and migrants.

Some trainings took place on a European level on this topic and a toolkit was created for the inclusion of migrants and refugees in education. These initiatives, along with the funds available to local, regional or national projects - have allowed many projects to take place on this topic.

\textsuperscript{1} SALTO-YOUTH stands for Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth. It is a network of six Resource Centres working on European priority areas within the youth field. Learn more about their offer: https://www.salto-youth.net
Resources

OBESSU Toolbox
The OBESSU ToolBox gathers several different pedagogical activities aimed at supporting school student activists and school student organisations in their educational initiatives.

Find the Toolbox here: www.obessu.org/toolbox/

YFJ’s toolkit on quality standards for youth policy
The toolkit was developed by the Youth Forum’s Expert Group on Youth Policy, made up of representatives from the Youth Forum’s member organisations, with the aim of developing a practical tool for youth organisations to assess the quality of youth policy in their own context (whether national, local, regional or European) and to support advocacy work calling for policies that fulfill young people’s rights.

The Expert Group has identified 8 quality standards that represent good quality youth policy. For each standard there is a set of indicators that help members to comprehensively analyse the situation in their context.

Find the toolkit here:
www.youthforum.org/toolkit-quality-standards-youth-policy

COMPASS
COMPASS is a manual published by the Council of Europe’s Youth Sector. COMPASS provides youth leaders, teachers and facilitators of human rights education activities, whether professional or volunteers, with concrete ideas and practical activities to engage, involved and motivate young people in living, learning and acting for human rights. It promotes a comprehensive perspective on human rights education and sees young people as actors for a culture of universal human rights.

Find the manual here:
https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass