GEN C
GENERATION CHANGEMAKER

INSIGHT PAPER



SPEAK UP.
JUMP BEYOND THE LINE.
MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 04

FOREWORD 06

SYNTHESIS & SUMMARY 07

CLIMATE CHANGE 09

AI &YOUTH PARTICIPATION 10

GENDER EQUALITY & WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT 12

EDUCATION SYSTEM REFORM 14

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION & POLITICAL LITERACY 16

MENTAL HEALTH & YOUTH WELLBEING 18

MIGRATION, CONFLICT & BELONGING 20

MEET THE GENERATION CHANGEMAKER 22

REFERENCES 23

Introduction

Generation Changemaker 2026 is an international youth initiative convened by Ashoka. It is bringing together around thirty young changemakers from Belgium, Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and the United Kingdom.

What you are reading, is a short version of the Generation Changemaker Insight Paper: Together, we produced an evidence-based publication that we will present in the lead-up to Parma's year as European Youth Capital 2027.

The six chapters we address in the paper we did not select by chance: Each of them names a domain where young people are heavily affected by decisions they had little role in shaping. In our view, this urgently needs to change.

Our paper is for policymakers, educators, researchers, civil society organisations, and youth organisations. We invite you to join us, and help us act on our recommendations!

Yours sincerely, GenC 2026 cohort

Foreword

As the thirty young changemakers from eight countries worked together and led the writing of this paper, they kept coming back to the same point: a critical, long-standing problem in our social systems that goes back to a time when children and young people were seen as "less than" adults, and one we still live with. Young people are harmed by social, ecological and technical systems, yet they have little opportunity, power or money to change them.

Every generation inherits problems it did not create. In this paper, they are not requesting a courtesy; they are making a claim on their own futures.

They highlight that they are sometimes invited to consult, but rarely systematically afforded the right to be co-designers. Involving young people is not only the right thing to do. At Ashoka, we see working with them as equals as essential to building a better future for all. Young people know where systems fail them because they live with it every day, from waiting lists for mental health care to AI tools that shape their daily lives. They also bring their playfulness, their resistance to outdated power structures, their imaginations and the knowledge they build together.

If we afford them time, money and real decision-making power, the strengths they bring could help us build something better than the systems we have all inherited.

Read the calls to action closely, and you'll notice that many of them cost very little: a new module in the curriculum, a space for conversation, a consultation hour, a new study. These ideas are valid and smart, but they also reveal something about how little young people are usually given to work with. Schools and conversations are the tools society has handed them, so those are the tools they reached for.

We'd ask you to treat each recommendation as a starting point and ask what these thirty minds could do with real resources. Give them budgets to allocate as they see fit. Give them voting seats on the boards that shape their lives. Offer young women meaningful routes into STEM and AI. Fund lasting prevention of violence against women and girls, designed together with young people. Bring students into curriculum reviews.

And commit: let every institution reading this paper pick one recommendation, name who is responsible for it, and report back publicly in 2027 when Parma is European Youth Capital.

These young people have shown what they can do with almost nothing. Imagine what they could build with real access.

Dr. Bella Day, Ashoka Leadership Group Member: Youth Programmes Europe
Stephanie Cox, Managing Director Ashoka Austria & Co-Initiator GenC

Synthesis & Summary

The six chapters of this paper were written by separate teams on separate subjects. Read together, they make one argument:
The gap is rarely a missing policy.

It is the distance between what exists on paper, and what actually reaches young people. Four findings carry that argument and each draws on several chapters at once.

Being heard is not being answered. Young people are consulted on AI, on how schools are run, and on mental health. But in each case *nobody* is obliged to respond. Student councils exist in almost every member state and are often ignored.
Three chapters land on the same remedy: a duty to state what was adopted, what was not and why. Denmark already does this: Its climate minister is legally required to reply to a youth-led climate council. (Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5)

Background decides access before ability does. Two students who have learned the same, end up on different paths when one is sorted into a lower school track at age ten and her family cannot afford tutoring. Across the EU, 47% of immigrants with a university degree are unemployed or working below their qualifications, against 30% of the native-born.

Participation is filtered the same way: hackathons, forums and exchanges mostly reach the young people already equipped to find them. (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6)

Instruments exist but do not count. Micro-credentials, short certified courses outside the formal curriculum, carry no weight next to the final exam. The EU mental health framework sets no binding waiting times.

What does work, often runs on short-term money: Austria's free youth mental health programme is funded until June 2027, an Austrian prevention NGO had its funding cut in April 2026, and Italian anti-dropout projects depend on public tenders that expire. (Chapters 2, 3 and 5)

The measures that hold up put the load on the institution. They reach young people in places everyone passes through anyway, usually schools, instead of waiting for them to sign up. They also ask the institution to change rather than the individual.

Germany's Kickfair runs its youth dialogue through schools. Zurich's QUIMS programme gives extra resources to schools rather than to individual students. (Chapters 1, 3 and 6)

In short: *Young people in Europe are not lacking invitations to speak. What is missing, is the duty to answer them. And the legal force and funding to make that answer hold.*

CLIMATE CHANGE

There is no climate chapter in this paper and that is deliberate.

Thousands of papers have already been written, everything has been said.

Thirty of us chose the six following topics:



Almost nobody chose **Climate Change**. Not because we don't know about it, nor because we think it's not important, but because we know it's not enough.

Education, participation in AI and democracy, mental health, equality, human rights and peace **are not separated from environmental action**.

They are part of the foundation that allows people to imagine a future, believe they have a place in it, and have the power to protect it.

Tackling climate change is the first, necessary, step to obtain a world to live in.

However, if the other issues won't be solved, then we'll just have a world in which nobody wants to live in.

AI &Youth Participation

AI is shaping our future, but are young people shaping AI?

Young people are regularly consulted on policies regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI). But they are rarely allowed to shape these policies.

Governance continues to rely more and more on the use of AI systems. Meanwhile, the European youth currently does not have a voice in deciding how and where these systems are implemented, neither by which principles and assumptions they operate.

There is a gap between young people's widespread exposure to AI systems and their limited influence in the decision-making processes that govern them.

Problem breakdown:

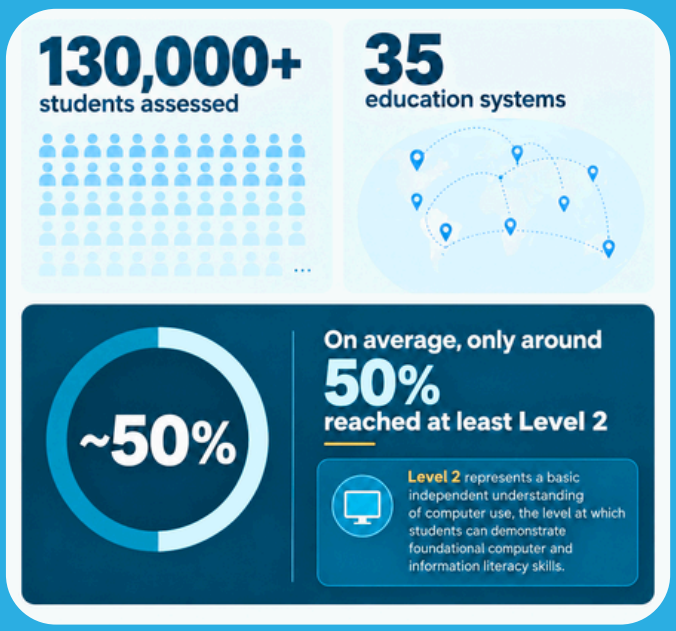
– Young people are consulted only as **observers**, not as **co-shapers** of AI policy.

– A widespread lack of **AI literacy** makes it harder to create **youth participation.**

– The existing **legal duties** for AI use were not written with **participation** in mind.

Running the numbers

The International Computer and Information Literacy Study assessed more than 130,000 students across 35 education systems. On average, only around half reached at least Level 2 in computer and information literacy, the level at which students demonstrate a basic independent understanding of computer use.



Call to Action

Extend the **"Youth Test"** to AI systems: The city of Parma already assesses public policy for its **generational impact**. The same test should apply before the city deploys an AI system. This could create a **model** for how to let **young people participate** in AI policy-making.

Challenge the **AI knowledge gap**: An **"AI Microlearning Tour"** and recruiting through schools and youth organisations will broaden the base of young people possessing **the AI literacy** necessary to meaningfully engage in **AI policy implementation**.

Set up a **public register** of municipal **AI systems.** This should include **who** a system affects and **how** a person can **contest** its decisions.

AI literacy must be expanded among young people. Then institutional frameworks are needed for letting them co-shape public AI policies.

"A system can be more consistent than an official, yet it should not make decisions on behalf of the people it affects."

♀ Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment

Equal opportunities. Stronger voices. A fairer future.

At the current pace, it will take 120 years until full gender parity will be reached around the world. Moreover, in many parts of the world, societal changes threaten the progress women already achieved.

Despite progress in gender equality across the EU, inequalities remain, resulting in multiple gender gaps across disciplines.

Women's health, cyberviolence, as well as employment and education remain key areas in which decisive action is needed.

Full gender equality is still far from a reality in the EU and abroad. Without focused attention for gender-related inequality, existing achievements could easily be lost.

Problem breakdown:

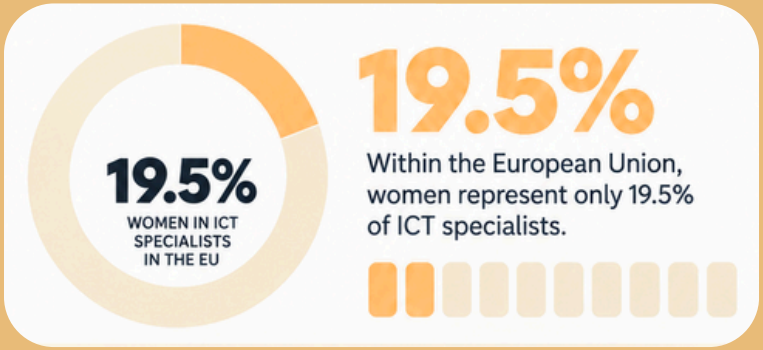
– Women's health is a systematically under-served and under-researched area, directly impacting women's well-being.

– Education and skill gaps in STEM-related fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) still prevent women from achieving their full potential.

– Violence against women, from mental and emotional to verbal, physical and sexual remains widespread, often stigmatised and hidden from view.

Running the numbers

Within the European Union, women represent only 19.5% of ICT specialists and face systematic barriers in accessing employer-sponsored advanced digital and AI training (Eurostat, 2026).



(Eurostat, 2026)

Call to Action

Health Care institutions in the city of Parma are encouraged to hold **"youth health" consultations**. This would create a space for discussions about gender equality within the medical system.

A comprehensive **study about gender bias in healthcare** focusing on women up to 25 years should be conducted. This study would serve to gain a deeper perspective on necessary actions to **decrease inequality** in the field of **healthcare**.

We call for a **multi-level effort** across different **societal settings and institutions**: Only in this way will we be capable of permanently reducing gender skill and confidence gaps within STEM fields.

Comprehensive education about safety and **risks of violence** needs to be expanded. **Boys and young men** should be **actively invited** into the conversation. This lowers the risk of harmful behavior against girls and women later in life.

Gender equality cannot be reached via a single policy. It has to be considered and enforced on multiple fields within societies.

"Gender Equality and empowering women are the foundations for a united and just world for everyone."

Education System Reform

Education shapes the future, so who gets access to it matters.

Schools and universities are essential institutions for the education of Europe's youth. Still, many countries fall short of their education goals. And many students look back at their time inside the education systems with negative feelings.

Why is it so hard to turn schools and universities into institutions where talent is truly fostered, regardless of a student's societal or economic background?

How a young person performs in the education system today depends primarily on their background and on the format they are assessed in – not on what they actually have learned.

Problem breakdown:

– Several member states still have **binding track decisions** between **ages 10 and 12**, deciding a student's future in the education system **far too early**.

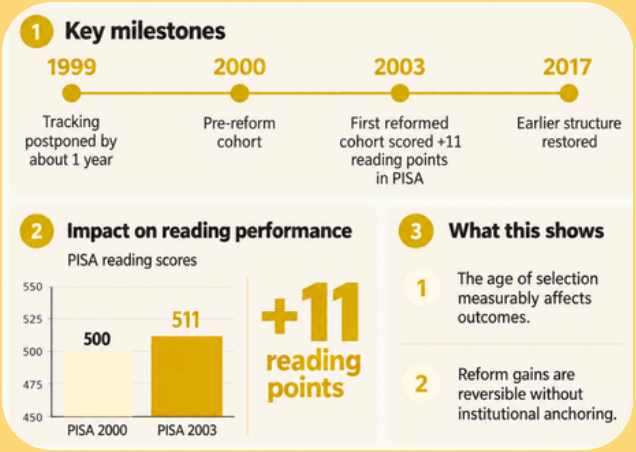
– **Single exams** carry too much weight for assessing a student's performance. **Portfolio-based** assessment should be given **more weight**.

– **Family income** converts directly into **grades**: Wealthier families buy tutoring on the **shadow education market**, which is not monitored on EU level.

– A profound **professional frustration** is widespread among **teachers**, generating a feeling of professional powerlessness.

Running the numbers

Poland's 1999 reform postponed tracking by roughly one year, and the first cohort to pass through the reformed comprehensive stage scored around 11 reading points higher in PISA 2003 than the pre-reform cohort of 2000.



The 2017 reform abolished the comprehensive lower-secondary stage and restored the earlier structure. Two things follow: the age of selection measurably moves outcomes, and reform gains are reversible without institutional anchoring.

Call to Action

Postpone the binding decision and anchor it: The **first binding selection** for the education track should come no earlier than at **age 15**.

Make the money visible: Comparable **data** about the **shadow education market** needs to be published, turning it into a policy object than can then be addressed.

Establish permanent **pedagogical and psychological support** figures within the school system to **prevent distress** and support teachers in understanding classroom dynamics.

Grant **student representation** genuine **decision-making competences**. Only that way the youth will truly learn how **democracy works**.

Cap the single moment and broaden what counts: The importance of **single exams** should be **reduced**. A European framework for **competence-based assessment** should be established until 2028.

Our education systems need to be rebuilt: as inclusive institutions working towards a shared goal of expanding education rather than separating students.

"Teaching must be based on negotiation, active listening, and ongoing dialogue, in which nurturing relationships is the foundation of all meaningful learning."

Democratic Participation & Political Literacy

Democracy works best when young people have a voice.

Across the European Union, young people exhibit a paradoxical relationship with democratic life. While many of them are actively engaged in informal civic spaces, this fails to translate into institutional political participation.

This gap stems from a lack of structural access and the acquiring of practical civic skills: When young people feel ill-equipped to navigate complex decision-making structures, a sense of political alienation emerges.

Increased youth engagement and participation is needed to sustain and further develop the European democratic system.

Problem breakdown:

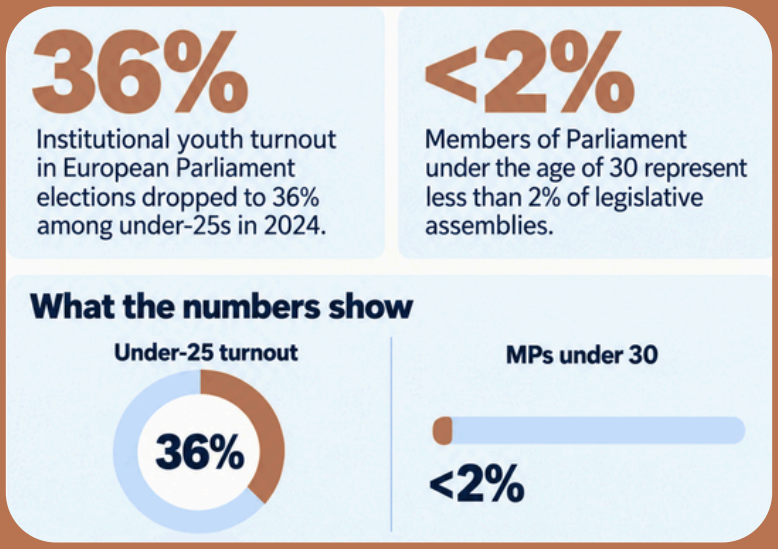
– While **informal engagement** remains high, **youth turnout** in European parliament elections **dropped** considerably in 2024.

– A lack of **practical civic skills** prevents young people from engaging in political decision-making structures.

– Accordingly, the **institutional representation** of people **under the age of 30**, for instance as Members of the European Parliament, remains very low.

Running the numbers

Institutional youth turnout in European Parliament elections dropped to 36% among under-25s in 2024 *(EU Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2024)* and Members of Parliament under the age of 30 continue to represent less than 2% of legislative assemblies. *(European Parliament, 2023)*



Call to Action

Create party list **youth quotas** to increase the proportion of **elected young policymakers**: This will directly strengthen the youth's voice within democratic institutions.

Scale **interactive civic education** models: Competence-based curricula, mock elections, and school participatory budgeting in secondary education should be expanded.

Harmonize the **voting age** across Europe at **16 years**: Building on success models in Austria, Malta, Germany and Belgium will foster life-long voting habits early.

Young people need to experience early that their voice matters. That way they will build a lifelong habit of engaging in democratic processes.

"The absence of firmly established democratic education across all European countries is an ever-growing concern."

Mental Health & Youth Wellbeing

A healthy future starts with healthy young people.

The earlier mental health problems are addressed, the better are the chances of overcoming them permanently.

But access to mental health support for young people often depends on affordability. Or on whether a person is located in an area with the necessary infrastructure.

As a response, young people often turn to the digital environment in their search for help. Without the necessary digital health literacy, this can in turn create new problems – or at least fail to solve the existing ones.

Barriers for young people's access to mental health support must be removed, so they can get the needed help from health professionals.

Problem breakdown:

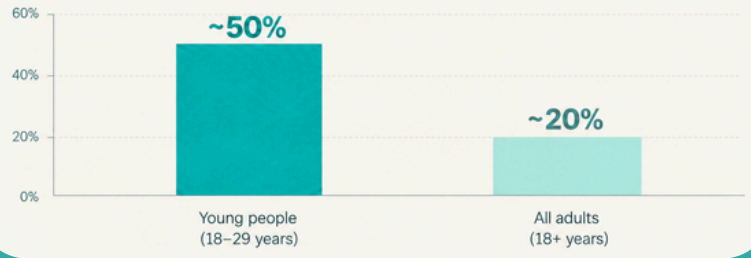
– Asymmetry of response: **Digital environments** react **much faster** to young people's health needs than mental health systems.

– Financial, geographical, social and age-related **barriers** can **prevent young people** from receiving available support.

Running the numbers

Around half of young people aged 18 to 29 in the EU reported unmet mental-health care needs in 2021 and 2022, more than double the share among all adults.

Around half of young people aged 18 to 29 in the EU reported unmet mental-health care needs in 2021 and 2022,
more than double the share among all adults.



Call to Action

Measure youth mental-health **waiting times** and strengthen **timely access** to competent, free of charge, **human support**.

Collect **better data** on financial, geographical, workforce, social and institutional **barriers** to improve care.

Improve **digital health literacy** and clarify responsibilities around **emerging AI** and **platform-based** interactions with distressed **young people**.

Create spaces for **involving young people** in designing, implementing and evaluating policies and services **affecting them** and their future.

Availability and accessibility are two fundamentally different things when it comes to youth mental health support.

"As long as the delay is not measured, the fastest responder in a young person's life may continue to be an algorithm."

Migration, Conflict & Belonging

Where we come from should never determine where we belong.

Migration is not the same experience for everyone. A young person who moves to Europe to study or work has different reasons and needs than a family escaping war
or insecurity.

The term “migrant” therefore includes many different groups: such as workers, students, people joining their families, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Questions about identity, belonging, and what feels like home have consequently become important social issues.

Language barriers, social exclusion and discrimination make it harder for migrants to participate in society and feel accepted.

Problem breakdown:

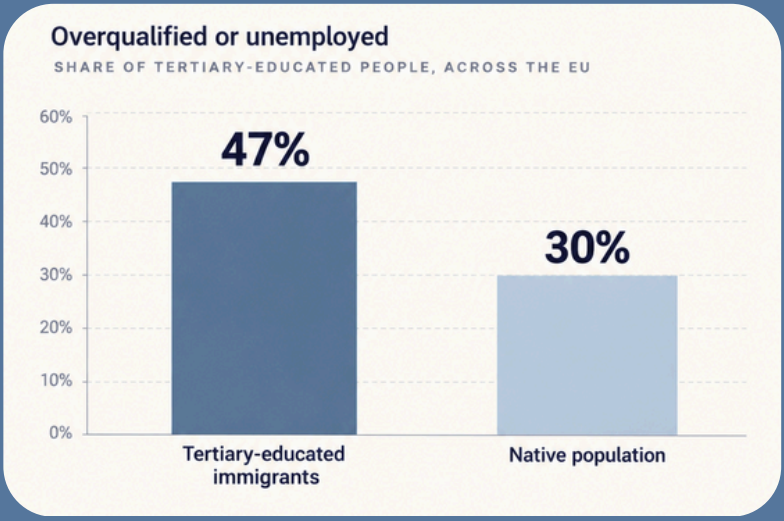
– Migrants often run into s**ocial barriers** when trying to **integrate** into the societies they migrated to.

– At the same time, **long-time residents** can feel concern about a **quickly changing population** and its influence on housing situation, public services or social cohesion.

– **Highly qualified** migrants often have to work in jobs far **below** their **level of education**. The reason for this is a lack or delay in **recognizing professional experience** and degrees acquired in **foreign countries**.

Running the numbers

Across the EU, 47% of tertiary-educated immigrants are either overqualified or unemployed, compared with 30% of the native population.



Call to Action

Improve access to **reliable data** so that public debates can distinguish **actual social trends** and problems from **unsupported assumptions**.

Create **more opportunities** for migrants and local residents **to meet**: through sports, volunteering, education, cultural activities, and community projects.

Ensure that language learning, education, employment, and community participation are **affordable** and **accessible**.

Create transparent mechanisms through which **local residents** can **raise concerns** about migration, housing, employment, and public services and receive **evidence-based responses**.

Migrants are not a homogenous group and should not be publicly portrayed that way.

"Qualification-appropriate employment is an important part of social inclusion and economic participation."

Meet the GENeration Changemaker
Cohort 2026

Alena Petric
21, Austria

Alejandro Tomeniuc
20, Austria

Ariadna Moldoveanu
21, Austria

Berina Kulaš
21, Austria

Clara-Johanna Fersterer
16, Austria

Ellen Grösel
19, Germany

Emilie Alge
16, Austria

Emmanuel Mirus Ponon
25, Belgium

Felix Von Der Geest
20, United Kingdom

Florian Huber
20, Austria

Hannes Wimmer
20, Austria

Isabel Herren
18, Switzerland

Julia Gawin
17, Austria

Kaja Posnik
23, United Kingdom

Krzysztof Malinowski
19, Poland

Leander I. Klinger
20, Austria

Leonardo Turati
16, Italy

Leonhard Kick
23, Switzerland

Lexy Gössler
16, Austria

Lilya Burhan
19, Austria

Nawres Hassen
20, Liechtenstein

Nooshin Pourkamali
25, Germany

Ida Tscherry
17, Austria

Simone Tripetta
23, Italy

Sofiia Stoikova
18, Poland

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References

Here you can find the long version of this Insight Paper including a comprehensive list of all sources:



GEN_CHANGEMAKER

Every generation inherits problems it didn't create, but rarely gets a say in what comes next. This Insight Paper changes that. Written by around thirty young changemakers from eight countries across Europe, it confronts six issues shaping the next decade: artificial intelligence and youth participation, gender equality, education reform, democratic participation, mental health, and migration and belonging. Through real stories, hard evidence, and country case studies from Germany to Switzerland, it exposes a single uncomfortable pattern, young people are consulted, but rarely heard where it counts.

This is not a paper asking for permission to speak. It is a claim young people are making on their own future, backed by research, testimony, and concrete policy proposals ready to be acted on. Read it not as an ending, but as a starting point, for whoever is ready to answer the question this generation keeps asking: not whether young people should be heard, but what they were actually able to change.