

Mandatory Career Support Services (CSS) at all EU high schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mandatory Career Support Services (CSS) at all EU high schools democratize access to higher education by offering students a comprehensive service based on advice & help, practical support, and integration into the higher education system. Targeting high schools is essential as they are the most socioeconomically diverse space in formal education. CSS strengthen democracy directly and indirectly on at least four different levels: education, knowledge creation, leadership, and decision & policymaking. CSS ensure more equitable access to higher education and as such diversify the student body in higher education institutions. This brings new backgrounds and experiences into these institutions and creates more diverse debates and knowledge. In the long term, a diversified body of graduates will increase the number of people from marginalized backgrounds in leadership positions. As a result, decision- and policymaking processes will increasingly take people from different backgrounds into account. Thus, through education, CSS strengthen democracies.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

There is a significant gap in access to university attendance which disadvantages students from non-academic and socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. Low income negatively affects students' transition between high school and university, the level of dropout from secondary higher education, and even when finishing a degree, it tends to pay off less than for their peers. Thus, the status quo poses a challenging and inequitable environment for students from marginalized backgrounds to reach secondary education institutions and high-ranking leadership positions (Handbook for Innovative Democracy, edition I, proposal 4.4). Furthermore, lacking diverse representation in leadership positions leads to the neglect of certain demographics in decision- and policymaking in the public and private sectors. This illustrates that access to higher education is an inherently democratic issue. Therefore, it is crucial that students from all backgrounds have access to higher education. A mandatory Career Support Service at all high schools in the EU is a necessary tool to tackle this challenge.

CSS: A TANGIBLE SOLUTION

- to the EU's Policy Goal on Widening Participation -

CSS aim to overcome deficiencies in current widening participation strategies across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The most obvious issue of these strategies comes from the decentralized approach that is allowed by university-level autonomy in the implementation of widening participation programs.

It is important to recognize that while education is a social good, and serves as its own justification, university degrees also serve the function of passports to status and financial security, as well as economic and political power. The importance of positive widening participation schemes, therefore, has economic, social, and political implications. In fact, the Council of the European Union has defined the policy goal of increasing and widening participation within the European Higher Education Area, aiming for 45% tertiary education attainment among 25–34-year-olds by 2030 (The Council of the European Union 2021). Mandatory Career Support Services are in line with and offer a tangible solution to achieve the EU's policy goal for more equitable access to higher education by:

1. Implementing a cohesive approach to widening participation that includes advice & help, practical support, and integration assistance.
2. Recognizing the character of universities as gateways to economic, social, and political power, and that without equity and diversity, they can simply serve as nurseries for the reproduction of power.
3. Providing a long-term and sustainable support system for students throughout and beyond their orientation-, application- and realization phase towards and beyond higher education.

CSS are implemented through an API system, offering Advice & help, Practical support, and Integration assistance into higher education.

Schematic Solution:

Implementing Career Support Services (CSS) through the three-phased API-system

Advice & Help: Orientation Phase

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The primary aim of these meetings is to introduce students to different career paths, universities, and study programs, and to help them navigate within these career opportunities. Furthermore, economic risk assessment and income prospects help students to make choices that are likely to sustain themselves in the long-term.

After each meeting, the Career Support Service advises the students towards additional extracurricular learning material or activities that serve as a guide for students to further deepen their understanding of different career opportunities.

The Career Support Service gives advice & help during a student's orientation phase, which spans over the last three years of a student's high-school education. Throughout this time, it schedules mandatory one-on-one meetings every semester. In addition, students are able to schedule Career Support Service meetings on demand.

Students are also introduced to different prerequisites and necessary documents needed to apply for the career paths that are of interest to the student.

Practical Support: Application Phase

Practical support is provided by the Career Support Service during a student's application phase. That means that the Career Support Service assists and guides a student through the application process.

Specifically, the Career Support Service raises the student's awareness on the necessary application documents and how to acquire them in time.

Furthermore, the Career Support Service gives practical guidance on CV & cover letter writing and refers to additional learning materials to guide the student in this process.

The Career Support Service connects students to a student mentorship program that links high-school graduates to university students. This adds another layer in the form of peer-to-peer support by a person who went through the application process and who has lived experience in the institution and study environment.

Integration Assistance: Realization Phase

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Therefore, the Career Support Service provides bureaucratic support, particularly for students who move to a different place and must find housing. In addition, the Career Support Service gives advice on where and how a student can get financial support, including scholarship opportunities, and the continuation of the student mentorship support system.

In any way, students are able to access their high school's Career Support Service even after graduation by scheduling individual one-on-one meetings to discuss additional or alternative career opportunities. This way, the students can rely on a long-term and sustainable support system.

Once the student has been accepted, the Career Support Service offers integration assistance during the realization phase, as many marginalized students from non-academic backgrounds face several bureaucratic and financial hurdles which hinder them from accessing higher education despite being accepted to a study program.

If the student was unsuccessful with the application, the Career Support Service initiates another meeting with the student to discuss alternative educational or work opportunities.

As a result, access to higher education is democratized for all students, particularly those that face higher hurdles due to socioeconomic marginalization, by providing a mandatory Career Support Service.

SUPPORTING DATA & EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

CSS: A PROVEN MECHANISM

- to Democratize Access to Higher Education -

A similar model called the Widening Participation Units (WPC) has been effectively implemented in Northern Ireland in 2010. These are university units that reach out to marginalized student groups, by mainly targeting high schools through different inclusive programs. These programs include but are not limited to visits and organizing orientation days at the respective university.

At almost 50% Northern Ireland now has the highest participation rate from young people in any area of the United Kingdom and it outperforms the other regions in increased access to Higher Education for students of marginalized backgrounds. CSS builds on the proven success of the WPC model and offers an even more comprehensive mechanism to democratize access to higher education throughout Europe.

FINANCIAL AFFORDABILITY

- Likely Long-Term Financial Pay-Offs -

There are significant costs arising from people's suboptimal career decisions, and thus gains to be made from efficient career guidance. In a 2019 Swedish government committee report on career guidance, economists calculated that if a career counsellor spent 10 hours each with 240 students, it would only require that one of them was guided to the right career path and saved from long term unemployment for the investment to pay off.

IYTT YOUTH PANEL DATA

Do you think that it is important for democracy to increase participation in higher education for individuals from non-academic family backgrounds?



The European Youth Panel supports the CSS proposal saying that: *“Democracy and higher education are profoundly intertwined”*.

The European Youth Panel is a diverse body consisting of 120 youth from 32 countries to give critical and constructive feedback throughout the different working phases of IYTT projects. As these are mainly youth from both academic and non-academic households, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds in their last years of high school or first years of secondary education, the data from the European Youth Panel is particularly fitting and of great importance to democratize and enhance the development of this policy proposal. In a panel round in December 2022, the panelists expressed strong support for increased measures toward widening participation in higher education as a key issue for a functioning democracy.

94,6% says that it is important for democracy to increase participation in higher education for individuals from non-academic family backgrounds; 56,8% says that they have not had any form of career guidance during their time in high school; 62,2% says that they themselves or their friends have personal experiences from entering university studies from a non-academic family background; and 81,1% thinks that mandatory career guidance in high-school would contribute significantly to widening participation in higher education. The full panel results are found on the IYTT homepage and include a rich variety of personal comments supporting CSS.

“Social mobility is one of the most important segments of social cohesion and stability. Individuals, especially those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, should have access to higher education, which might help them climb up social ladders and improve their socioeconomic situation.”

BACKGROUND

This policy brief originates from the policy proposal 'Mandatory career service & mentorship program at all EU high schools' which was developed during the IYTT Youth Conference 2021, and published under the 'Learning and Education' chapter of the IYC 2021 Final Report 'Tone of Democracy'. To further develop the proposal into this policy brief has the IYTT conducted research on 'Widening Participation & Career Guidance' that has been published in the form of the IYTT Working Paper no.3. Both the initial proposal and the working paper can be found and are freely accessible and downloadable under the 'Publications' rubric on the IYTT homepage.

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK

The IYTT is a Gothenburg-based initiative mobilising youth from diverse backgrounds across Europe with the aim of promoting a democracy movement based on open society values. Activities center around annual youth conferences in which participants develop and present policy proposals for strengthening an open and democratic society, while being brought together with executives from industry, academia, culture, politics, and civil society. Participants publish their proposals in a conference report and, engaged afterwards as Youth Fellows, develop them into policy briefs through the "IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advise Loop", an infrastructure for policy proposal development, involving open deliberations with decision-makers, scholars, peers in the IYTT European Youth Panel, and engaged community groups in the form of Citizens' Panels.

Contact

Urban Strandberg
Managing Director / Co-Founder
urban.strandberg@lindholmen.se
iythinktank.com

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