

“INTERNATIONAL YOUTH AT WORK: DISTRUST OF THE CORPORATE WORLD AND POLITICAL DEMANDS?”

CONFERENCE REPORT

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In the wake of the EYES report published by the think tank SKEMA Publika, and in particular the subsequent detailed analysis of international youth's distrust of the world of work, a conference was held on 20 May 2022 in Brussels and online, in partnership with UNIDO Brussels. The invited stakeholders got to expose a useful variety of viewpoints and suggest some ways forward on this major issue.

CONTEXT

In his introduction to the conference, Patrick Gilabert underscored the unique nature of the [EYES](#) study, as well as the importance of the note devoted to international youth at work, the topic of the day's event. He expressed how crucial it was for UNIDO to work with SKEMA Publika on common issues.

Claude Revel detailed the four particularities of SKEMA Publika. It is very much an international think tank, drawing on the expertise of its researchers located across the five continents and always on international sources. SKEMA Publika's aim is to inform public policy by tackling political and societal issues from the angle of early signs. The work of the think tank is based on a multidisciplinary and hybrid approach to information processing, combining human and digital intelligence. The think tank's publications include recommendations or operational suggestions aimed at policymakers, to better guide them in their decision making.

The EYES report analyses the political concerns of 18- to 24-year-olds in five countries (South Africa, Brazil, China, the United States, and France) on five issues (traditional media and the press, social media, new technologies, security, and the world of work) identified as major by groups of international students from SKEMA Business School. The goal of this unprecedented study is to provide decision-makers with early insights into the informal opinions of young people. The EYES report revealed three major points:

- **young people around the world are all discussing similar topics, but their realities differ depending on the country.** Decision-makers should take this into account to avoid misunderstanding the expectations of youths;
- young people want **state regulation** in several areas;
- **young people's distrust of the world of work.**

Both the conference and the issue note based on the EYES report focused on this third point.

THE METHODOLOGY USED FOR THE EYES REPORT

Xavier Desmaison explained the methodology used to carry out the study. Antidox conducted social listening to analyse the spontaneous opinions of young people, based on keyword searches. This methodology is also a precious tool for mapping power relations and conversation dynamics using the data gathered, including big data. The study analysed 55.5 million tweets posted between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2021. The five themes were chosen based on interviews conducted with 36 SKEMA students of ten nationalities.

Twitter was chosen because young people are partial to engaging in debate and expressing themselves on this platform. Xavier Desmaison raised the potential biases in this methodology (representativeness of the opinions expressed, conversation coloured by strong feelings, opinion manipulation online, lack of certainty as to the age of the population concerned, influence of the COVID-19 crisis). The analysis of young people's attitude to work shows that they see it as

involving risk and difficulty. One of the words that comes up the most is “unemployment”, mentioned in 3.2 million tweets (except in China).

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH’S ATTITUDES TO THE WORLD OF WORK

Sarah Vallee presented the issue note on international youth at work, based on the EYES report.

The study enabled the detection of a general and transnational negative perception of the corporate world among young people. The sentiment analysis of the tweets posted on the subject of the corporate world by 18- to 24-year-olds revealed that 50% of the tweets had a negative connotation in South Africa, Brazil and the United States. For France and China, the figure was around 35%. Around 10% of tweets were positive (20% for France). **In drafting the issue note on youth at work, the aim was to understand the origin of this distrust of the corporate world.** To accomplish this, the results of the study were compared with the international work done by other think tanks and companies on young people’s perceptions of the world of work and of the corporate world. Several findings emerged, such as:

- the importance of a company’s reputation (ethics, political stance, environmental and social responsibility efforts, etc.);
- the desire for better work-life balance (flexibility in working hours, paid leave, mental health days, etc.);
- work is a means to provide for one’s needs and is no longer seen as a way to self-actualize;
- remuneration is a top criterion when choosing a first job;
- the desire for digitalisation to be effective and not overly present;
- the feeling of being underprepared when entering the job market (lack of essential skills).

In light of these findings, **two broad recommendations can be made to companies.** The latter would benefit from **adopting a useful digitalisation while maintaining social connection** (balance between workplace attendance and teleworking), as well as from **developing their CSR practices** (social and environmental responsibility) and encouraging work-life balance. Public authorities and international organisations, on the other hand, could help solve these issues by having soft skills taught in secondary and tertiary education establishments, since they are necessary for a successful entry into the job market or workforce, along with ensuring better training in critical thinking, something young people are crying out for. Finally, international institutions and decision-makers must start finding new ways to encourage the workforce integration of young people, notably by changing attitudes toward work.

ROUND TABLE

Four speakers shared their viewpoints on the conference themes:

- Mr. Pablo Cornide, Policy Officer - Youth Employment at the European Commission
- Ms. Beatrice Richez-Baum, Director General at [ecoDa](#) (European Confederation of Directors Association)
- Mr. Thomas Ruspil, student at [SKEMA Business School](#), former president of the association [PourParlers](#)
- Ms. Raquel Torres Prol, Vice President at [JEUNE](#) (Young Entrepreneurs Organization of the European Union)

A DISTRUST THAT IS NOT PERVASIVE

Thomas Ruspil indicated that Twitter is often used to express negative sentiments and expressed some reservations about certain conclusions of the report. Yes, young people’s distrust of the corporate world is real, but the COVID-19 crisis has led to increased criticism of companies and of the world of work. This criticism goes hand in hand with young people’s demand for companies to better implement CSR policies, and to be mindful of the environment and social issues.

Nevertheless, this distrust is not pervasive. **Young people who have a higher education and parents with job stability are much less likely to develop a distrust of companies.** The demand for companies to take a political or ethical stance comes from young people who have done higher studies enabling them to choose their job and the company for which they wish to work. However, this situation should be contrasted with that of non-Western countries (with the exception of China).

According to the Workforce Institute (2019), 54% of young people consider salary to be the most important factor when choosing their first job. Yet salaries increase according to the number of years of study, but especially according to the skills acquired, the industry of employment and the country.

To improve the way young people perceive the world of work and to lessen the distrust of companies, public authorities should ensure pupils (lower secondary school/middle school and upper secondary school/high school) are exposed to working people very early on. Companies must also transform themselves to address the new concerns of young people, by adopting policies more focused on CSR to contribute to the common good. The rise in entrepreneurship and the development of teleworking can also be interesting avenues and a solution to the lack of transformation in companies.

HAVE THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE HEARD BY EUROPEAN AND CORPORATE DECISION-MAKERS

Raquel Torres Prol presented the actions of JEUNE. The association represents 1.6 million young people in more than 20 countries, interested in the world of entrepreneurship. JEUNE has three objectives: to support entrepreneur associations across Europe; to represent young entrepreneurs and have their voice heard by European institutions; to fight against unemployment and find solutions to encourage youth employment. At the European institutions level, several measures have been put in place to promote youth entrepreneurship, such as Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, a cross-border exchange programme which, since 2009, has helped 10,000 entrepreneurs to get trained by SME operators in the countries taking part in the initiative.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are even further encouraging companies to speak up or to take a stand with regards to societal issues (boycotts, social media campaigns, online discussions, etc.). Social media platforms have become an opinion forum for (privileged or underprivileged) young people, and also a way to drive change in companies. **Companies must transform themselves to meet the expectations of young people and repair their relationship with them.**

A CRUCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF COMPANIES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY AND THE EXPECTATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Beatrice Richez-Baum presented ecoDa, the European Confederation of Directors' Associations. The directors sit on the boards of companies and are responsible for strategy and oversight. Today, their role is changing significantly, as they must analyse the environment of the company, flag up any changes, and adapt the organisation accordingly. A huge paradigm shift is occurring in the role of directors and in how they work (attracting younger profiles qualified in emerging issues, having employees on the board, creating committees with young people to obtain their opinions, etc.). Companies no longer have a choice; they are now obligated to take a stance on societal issues and this obligation is now backed by a host of laws (legislation governing remuneration policies, diversity in boards of directors, transparency, whistle-blowers, duty of care at the European Union level, "Loi PACTE" in France). Companies will have to ensure that all their suppliers along the value chain follow international rules (international standards). All of these changes require adjustments or changes to be made to the business model, an issue of major concern right now for boards of directors. These days, to ensure their longevity companies must manage their reputational risk and justify their usefulness to society.

The pressure is coming from the legislature, from civil society, but also from investors. Indeed, to meet the criteria of the European taxonomy (a classification of economic activities that have a positive impact on the environment), investors must fund green projects. The pressure on companies is thus real and in a way they are replacing public stakeholders, by implementing what governments have been unable to.

Young people's distrust of the corporate world is a major source of concern within companies. On the corporate side, **four hypotheses can explain young people's distrust:**

- a time lag between when changes are made by companies and when civil society perceives these changes. It takes time to form public opinion and it takes looking beyond preconceived ideas. It could be that the changes made by companies are not yet evident to society;
- inappropriate communication by the legislature. Rather than seeing this increase in legislation as a means to support them in achieving sustainable goals, companies are perceiving it more as a sanction. The legislature should not stigmatise companies, but instead position itself as a supporter of the necessary changes;
- timidity on the part of companies, which now fear communicating about their activities due to the reputational risk involved (bad buzz, smear campaigns on social media, media that often report on companies with business practices deemed unethical, etc.);

- expectations from young people that may be too high due to a lack of understanding of what a company is. This can be due to companies missing the mark when communicating with their employees, who then give young people the wrong idea.

To resolve this distrust, companies could use their governance as a change agent. Companies can also lean on their fundamental reason for being (Loi PACTE in France), by getting their employees invested in a common objective that will give them an aim and create a sense of unity and purpose.

The exploration of new organisational forms such as the “liberated company” (non-hierarchical) can also satisfy the new generation, which needs to have some control over the duties entrusted to them by the company and expects a collaborative approach to work. This organisational form invites companies to rethink risk management, requires a stronger commitment from employees, and changes the responsibilities of each person in the company, including those of the person at the top. This has an impact on the governance of companies and pushes them to implement a different company culture.

Young people’s salary expectations, as described in the EYES report, can be surprising and seem to be in contradiction with the expectations of non-financial responsibility from companies. While companies are being asked to shift away from a purely money-driven approach to business, young people seem to prioritise salary level when choosing their first jobs.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION MEASURES TO SUPPORT EMPLOYMENT

Pablo Cornide exposed the European Commission’s role in youth employment, particularly through the reinforced Youth Guarantee. Since 2013, this commitment by all Member States of the EU aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship, within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or completing their studies/training. The goal is to help young NEETs (neither in employment nor in education or training) acquire the right professional skills, including digital and ecological, to enable them to find long-term employment. This programme is reinforced by the European Pact for Skills, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions, and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships. The Member States and the Commission have established the legal frameworks by taking into account the changes in society and in the expectations of young people. Commission communication campaigns aimed directly at young people (through apps, events, dedicated social media accounts, etc.) are already in place, although there is room for improvement.

In terms of remuneration, within Europe there is a mass of vulnerable young people who do not get to choose their salary or their independence. Young people, whether highly qualified or not, are often underprepared for the job market and workforce and have a little knowledge of the professional world, resulting in expectations that are sometimes unrealistic. To overcome this problem, some public and private stakeholders are working on these expectations and on the soft skills needed to enter the job market. **Public policymakers can tackle these problems by adapting and modernising public policies pertaining to work** (establishment of more effective programmes, better selection of participants). It is also essential to include soft skills and the view of the corporate world in education as early on as lower secondary school (middle school in the US), to restore trust among the younger generation.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

Patrick Gilabert concluded the debate by indicating that while France’s results are good, in comparison to the other countries in the study, this is no doubt the result of proactive public policies supported by the European Commission. He reiterated his wish to push further on these issues.

The discussions with the audience revealed some interesting observations that provided food for thought and enabled further reflection on the issues. It was noted that in the conversations analysed for the EYES study, the young people did not mention company size. They do not seem to differentiate between SMEs and large companies. This question was not analysed, since it fell outside the scope of the study. The goal of the EYES study was to capture the perceptions of young people on five political issues, including work. The study also did not look at the minimum income required by a young person to live independently without family support, but this could be the object of a future analysis.

The question of first-job salaries was raised. It was raised in the EYES study, with the same findings for all countries, but likely for different reasons. The idea of a “deserved” salary and of work-life balance is mainly found in the West. In less economically privileged countries, young people seek above all to take a job based on the opportunities presented to them. The dichotomy between remuneration and the societal expectations young people have of companies can be resolved by encouraging young people to look more closely at a company’s remuneration policy (wage progression, bonuses, benefits, etc.) rather than the entry-level salary offered by the organisation. This policy is also a way of getting employees to commit to the company’s development long term.

When it comes to young people’s distrust of the corporate world, how the latter is portrayed during their school years plays a vital role. In secondary school, when studying environmental issues and social inequalities, companies are often “incriminated”. This is reinforced by the fact that young people are not exposed to companies until very late in their academic life.

Moreover, young people are often unaware of the different actions of European institutions and public authorities, or they never hear about them.

These are two additional factors that might explain young people’s distrust of companies.

Read SKEMA Publika’s publications:

- [EYES study](#)
- [Note on international youth at work](#)

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