



NEW EDUCATION ON EUROPE

POLICY PAPER, MAY 2023



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Issues covered
in this policy
paper :

- Introduction
- The platform
- The piloting
- The European perspective
- What to follow ?

Abstract

Providing sound civic education on Europe and the EU in schools is demanding. Teachers are lacking appropriate material and are feeling insecure about the dynamics in Europe. The MEGA platform is meeting these challenges by providing up-to-date pedagogical material for teachers and pupils alike, helping them to be up-to-date with the latest developments in the EU and offering innovative methodological approaches to their teaching. Teachers can use the MEGA platform to make their education about the EU and Europe more versatile, diverse and, in the end, more appealing to pupils.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union still appears to be a “mystical beast” to many of its youngsters. According to the European Parliament Youth Survey from 2021, 55% of the respondents say that “they don’t understand much or anything about the EU”.^[1] At the same time, youngsters themselves do not seem to be happy with this. Within the “Conference on the Future of Europe”, they brought forward a position paper asking for

“a minimum level of education on the EU and especially its democratic processes, including the history of European integration and European citizenship. People of all ages should be able to benefit from such programmes, which should be designed in an engaging and age appropriate manner, for instance through the development of specific programmes and educational material for children and schools; and civil society organisations active in the field of non-formal education” (European Union 2022, p. 80).^[2]

In the same contribution they also ask for

“support [in] the training of teachers, to learn from best practices and use up to date innovative and creative teaching techniques that reflect the evolution of teaching methods” (European Union 2022, p. 89).

These demands show that there is still room for improvement when it comes to education about the EU in general and in formal educational settings, in particular. This relates to the sheer extent of knowledge about the EU as well as to its depth and quality.

In order to shed light on the reasons why education about Europe is still not as well developed as many citizens of the EU would like it to have, the MEGA project performed interviews with 80 headmasters, 675 teachers, and 1283 pupils across five European Member States^[3] and asked for their perception of this matter. Their answers were revealing: Apparently, the five European Union Member States under consideration do have education about Europe and the EU as part of their mandatory curricula for more than 20 years now. However, there still seem to be difficulties in the everyday transmission of the related knowledge.^[4]

[1] European Parliament Youth Survey September 2021

[2] European Union (2022). Conference on the Future of Europe. REPORT ON THE FINAL OUTCOME. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en.

[3] These are Portugal, Spain, France, Germany, and Croatia.

[4] See: MEGA White Paper

The research provided three main insights:

- First, teachers have difficulties finding high quality educational material about the EU and Europe that are evaluated by experts against objective criteria – despite a plethora of information about the EU on the internet. Teachers lack the time and often the knowledge to judge whether the material at hand is up-to-date and provides quality content – both substantially and in terms of pedagogical methodologies applied.
- Second, teachers have difficulties finding educational material on the EU and Europe that fits their educational environment in school. The school system with short classes of 45-90 minutes and only a few hours of EU education per school year demands a lot from the provided material. Teachers often find themselves in a situation in which they have found very appealing educational material but cannot fit the content or the methods to their classroom setting. They also lack the resources to adapt the material accordingly. Hence, they fall back to the standard schoolbook-type teaching and do without innovative and appealing methodologies.
- Third, teachers articulate their insecurity when it comes to teaching about such a dynamic political system like the European Union. They often lack the latest information and miss the latest discussions about the current state and future of the EU. Hence, they express their need to refresh and deepen their knowledge on Europe and the EU in order to be confident enough to teach it in class.

With these research results in mind, the ERASMUS+ Project “MEGA” (Make Europe Great Again) developed a platform that tackles these specific difficulties. A first complete version of the platform was launched in autumn of 2022, tested and evaluated ever since by pupils and teachers in all five participating countries.

This policy paper briefly describes the principal structure of the MEGA-Platform and explains how it is reacting to teachers' and pupils' demands. It is also presenting evaluation results of the various testing rounds. Furthermore, it is making the case for a European perspective on education on Europe. Eventually, it is giving some recommendations about how European education can best be implemented in school and highlights how the MEGA Platform can assist teachers with this task.



2. THE PLATFORM

Following the MEGA project's research results the MEGA platform has three major sections each addressing one of the major issues.

a. Providing selected, high-quality material - The Material Library

Although teachers can easily find plenty of educational material about the EU and Europe on the internet, the temporal expenditure to find high quality material that adds value to their teaching is described to be extensive and hardly manageable. Therefore, the MEGA platform contains a Material Library which is a pool of high-quality resources being offered to teachers. They have been selected and evaluated by our partner organisations and are helping to make European education in school more attractive and appealing. The chosen material is up-to-date both in terms of hard facts and pedagogical methodologies. Therefore, teachers can save precious time when preparing themselves for their teaching.

b. Pick and Teach

Even if teachers manage to find high quality resources for their teaching, they are mostly not directly usable in the classroom and need to be adapted. This is often escaping the organisational and temporal capacities of a regular school teacher. Therefore, the MEGA platform offers teachers ready-to-use pedagogical material about the EU and Europe that are specifically designed to match the regular classroom setting in the five participating member states. This means that every lesson is between 45-90 minutes long, and can be easily adapted if necessary. The lessons and exercises come with detailed descriptions for the teachers how the course can be implemented. This includes introductory presentations as well as digital and print material that can be used during the courses. The pick and teach materials are prepared for a digital and non-digital setting so the teachers do not necessarily need to rely on technical equipment to implement the action. Furthermore, the pick-and-teach section provides material in a basic and an advanced version. The basic exercises have a reduced complexity and are suitable for younger students or lower-level education. The advanced exercises are more demanding both in terms of content and methodology and are ideal for older students with higher analytical competences and better educational background.

c. The E-learning modules

Teachers and headmasters articulated that teacher training is an important aspect in improving education on the EU and Europe. It is indeed very hard to follow the dynamics of the European political system, being up-to-date with the latest European policies, and understanding the latest volts in European politics. The sheer extent of European subjects and the high pace in which European political issues change easily overstrain experts and non-experts alike.

In order to help teachers to get an overview of important foundations and actual developments in the EU, the MEGA platform contains five E-learning courses in which the teachers can enrol and educate themselves. The e-learning section is divided in five units:

- **Unit 1: What is the European Union?** contains information about the foundations of the EU;
- **Unit 2: How does the European Union work?** provides insights into the inner processes and decision-making procedures of the EU;
- **Unit 3: What does the EU bring in our everyday life?** showcases the daily impact of the EU on its citizens;
- **Unit 4: What is on the agenda of the European Union?** discusses the latest EU policies; and
- **Unit 5: The European Green Deal** presents the European Green deal as one of the central policies of our time.

The courses consist of a variety of interactive multimedia content (e.g., infographics, videos, podcasts), which makes learning exciting, intuitive and enjoyable. Rather than just listening to lectures about the EU, the MEGA e-learning courses mix different methods of teaching and learning. This will ultimately help and inspire teachers across Europe to use the platform for their own teaching as well.

What's special about the e-learning courses is the fact that teachers can follow them at their own pace and can autonomously work their way through the course. Once they completed a unit, teachers can also attain a certificate that attests their successful participation.

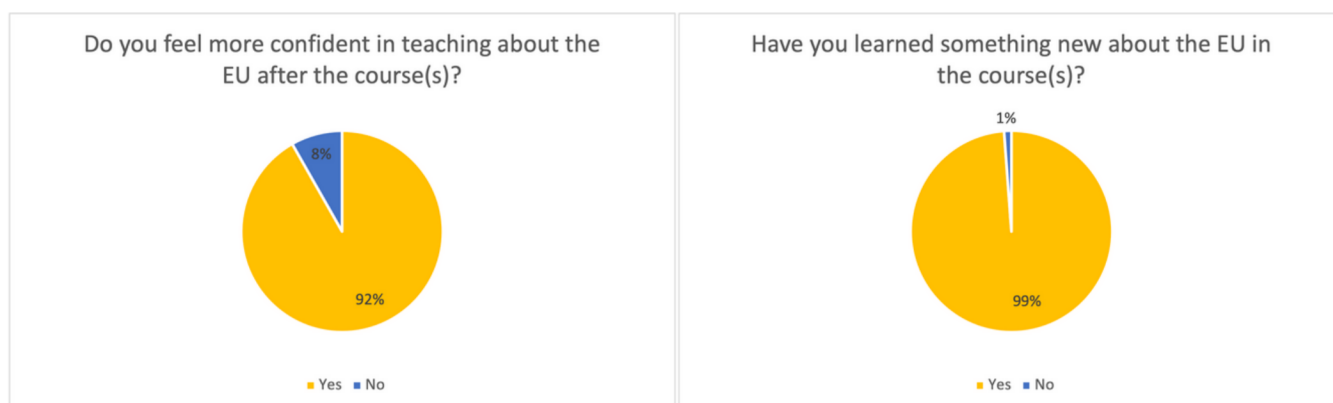
3. THE PILOTING

Ever since the launch of the MEGA platform's beta version, it has been tested and evaluated by the different target groups in the five participating member states. Two main testing rounds were performed during the project to evaluate the main components of the MEGA platforms namely the e-learning modules and the exercises provided in the pick-and-teach section.

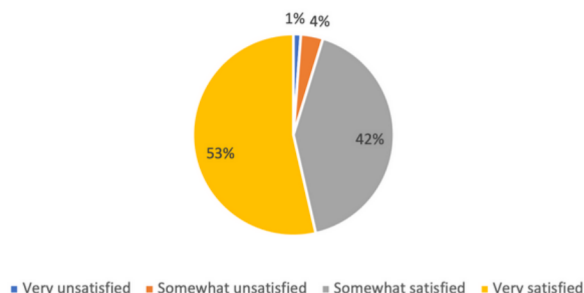
The exercises of the pick-and-teach section were performed and tested by a total of 49 teachers and 937 pupils. After selecting and performing the exercises the teachers and pupils filled out a questionnaire in which they could declare their opinion and impression of the activities.

An overwhelming majority of teachers were somewhat or completely satisfied with the methods, tools, and techniques that were used in the activities. Most teachers expressed that the presented activities are useful for their teaching and that they will recommend them to their colleagues. The pupils had a very similar opinion. An overwhelming majority was satisfied with the exercises and said that they have learned something new about the European Union and Europe.

When it comes to the e-learning section of the MEGA platform a total of 85 teachers took the effort to go through one or several modules and formulate their related thoughts in a semi-structured questionnaire. First, they could rate the courses quantitatively and had the possibility to leave comments and make suggestions how the courses could be improved. The questions related both to the content of the e-learning courses as well as to the usability and design of the platform.



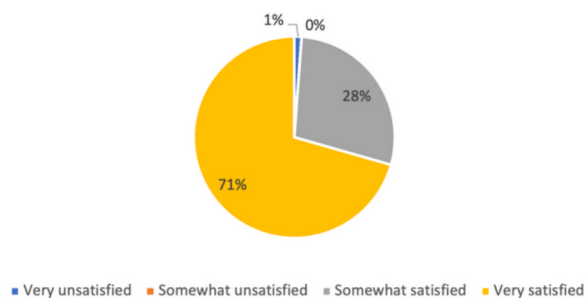
How satisfied are you with the tools and techniques used in the courses?



Would you recommend the materials and training to colleagues and other professionals in education?



Overall, how satisfied are you with the MEGA content and activities?



In general, a large majority of the respondents was very or somewhat satisfied both with the content of the activities and with the tools and the techniques of the courses. Almost all of the respondents would recommend the materials and training to colleagues and other professionals in education and state that they have learned something new about the EU. Even more importantly, however, more than 90% of the teachers felt more confident to teach about the EU after they have completed one or several MEGA modules.

Testimonials

The platform is a real refreshment in teaching about the EU (Croatia)

I discovered that the EU does more for us than we think (Portugal).

It has allowed me to open my horizons on questions that I did not necessarily address in class (France).



4. THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Due to the fact that the European Union has very limited sovereignty in the policy field of education it is very difficult to inject a European perspective into the mandatory curricula in the member states. Accordingly, even education about Europe and the EU can be assumed to be approached from a national perspective. Implicitly, we are used to teaching about our own national understanding of how the EU and Europe should work or be set up without really knowing a lot about what people in other EU member states think about European matters. Therewith, education about the EU and Europe might achieve the opposite to what it intends to do. Instead of preparing the future generations for a life on a somewhat united continent it might foster misunderstandings in how Europe should look like and how it should function. Nationally dominated education on the EU and Europe might result in a situation in which everyone is in favour of a common European future but differences in opinions about how this could be attained rather create division instead of a form of integration.

The MEGA project is purposefully taking a European perspective on education on the EU and Europe. Being the result of a collaborative effort by civic education providers from five EU member states, the MEGA platform goes beyond a single national perspective and incorporates opinions, views and perspectives from all of their national contexts. Surely, bringing such diversity together and having it materialised in a technical output is and was demanding. But, by highlighting the things that unite us, the MEGA project can be seen as a pilot project that is searching for a genuine European approach to European civic education.

When teaching about the EU, one thing should be certain. The EU is more than its institutions and legislative procedures. It is more than the members of parliament or the EU administration. The EU is something that goes beyond that – the EU is a perspective.

It is a perspective in a way that the EU is a symbol for a peaceful partnership among states and their people. It shows us that cooperation is key when building a strong and vital future for us all. So, when teaching about the EU, one should always make the target audience aware of this: the EU is a unique historical opportunity for our continent and depends on each and every citizen whether or not the opportunity is taken.



WHAT TO FOLLOW ?

1

Taking a step back from the development, design, testing and dissemination work that comes with the production of such a technical platform, one begins to see its principal contribution to teaching and learning about the EU and Europe. Politics in general, but the EU and Europe in particular are moving targets for teachers. Changes happen so fast and are so numerous that it is difficult to be up-to-date with them all the time. This requires from teachers constant training and updating in order to be able to present pupils the right facts and circumstances. Therefore, it is also hardly possible to rely exclusively on standard and static textbooks. Once school authorities decide to acquire a certain schoolbook about the EU, much of its content is already outdated. Elections may have reshuffled the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, fundamental treaties may have changed, new member states may have joined or old ones may have stepped out, or the next international crisis may be forcing the EU to develop new approaches and common policies.

2

Accordingly, a digital tool like the MEGA Platform can provide valuable assistance to get a grip on teaching about the EU and Europe. A platform is a living infrastructure where teachers find actual and up-to-date teaching and learning content both for themselves and for their pupils. Hard facts about the EU can be easily changed according to the real-world developments, teaching material can be added or even taken down if they are not helpful, new methodologies and approaches to teaching can be tested and further developed according to the feedback of the target groups.



WHAT TO FOLLOW ?

3

Therewith, teachers can use such a platform as an important complement to their existing resources and as an idea generator for their teaching. Teachers can use this input to improve their teaching about the EU and Europe – to make it more versatile, diverse, appealing and of higher quality.

4

As the different evaluation rounds have shown, teachers welcome such a complementary tool - especially if they have the freedom to decide how to integrate the platform's resources into their teaching. This relates to both their personal training with the e-learning modules and the usage of the pick-and-teach materials. They are the ones who can best assess their individual training needs as well as the preparedness and motivation of their pupils to deal with Europe and the EU. The platform responds to this demand by offering a high variety of possibilities for complementing the standard teaching about the EU and Europe. The platform gives them the freedom to innovate on the duties that are imposed on them by the formal educational curricula.

5

The educational system in general and headmasters and school principals in particular should grant their teachers the freedom to upgrade their teaching about the EU on their own. We believe that such a flexibility in teaching resonates well with pupils that are, generally speaking, usually not too enthusiastic about dealing with European political matters.



WHAT TO FOLLOW ?

6

One outstanding example of how teachers innovated their teaching with the help of the MEGA platform was when teachers used the e-learning modules together with their pupils to learn more about the EU and Europe. Although the e-learning was essentially designed for teacher-training, certain teachers took the opportunity to browse through the different e-learning modules together with their pupils and allowed them to play around with all the functionalities that the platform offered to them. The learning output of this idea cannot be overstated. By granting pupils the freedom to choose the EU-related subjects that are most relevant to them, by learning about new approaches to learning and, almost most importantly, overcoming the usual role distribution between the teacher and the pupils, they understood that we are all learners when it comes to the EU. It is not a fixed, monolithic block that is ruling into our lives – but an open and at times vulnerable construct that is only viable if we are all ready to contribute.



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Explore the MEGA
platform

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