

Abstract: 'Promising. Young People's Opportunities and Obstacles in 2021'

Exploratory study by the Council's Youth Platform, no. 22/02

This exploratory study is a follow-up to the *High Expectations* study (2019) by the Council's Youth Platform ('Council's YP'), which discussed the extent to which young people are sufficiently equipped for personal development and to establish an independent existence.¹ An important conclusion of that study was that an accumulation of obstacles and risks during the course of their life leads to young people living a 'life of postponement', and experiencing severe mental pressure. Two years on, that accumulation of obstacles and risks has only increased. Following on from the 2019 study, the four sections of the present study provide an update on the opportunities and obstacles faced by young people in terms of the 'milestones' of learning, working, housing, and family formation. It also focuses special attention on a number of specific topics, namely mental health, inclusion of young people with a chronic disorder or a non-Western immigrant background, entrepreneurship, and climate and sustainability.

The *High Expectations* study received a great deal of attention in the media and in political circles. Attention was thus drawn to the vulnerable position of young people, and they also made themselves heard to a greater extent. In June 2021, at the request of the Dutch House of Representatives, members of the Council's Youth Platform met with the *informateur* (whose task is to explore the options for forming a coalition government). The Youth Platform had already explained the study to members of the House of Representatives and to a number of ministers. All this led to some attractive promises. However, it will need to become clear in the coming period whether those promises will actually be delivered on, given that there are unfortunately still major problems. The COVID-19 crisis, for example, has made inequality of opportunity in education more apparent and has increased it. Job opportunities for entrants to the employment market have recovered to their level before the pandemic but inequality in job opportunities between those with different levels of education has increased. Moreover, young people are the first group to be affected by any economic downturn. In addition, it is difficult for young people, in particular, to find somewhere to live, a problem involving not only the scarcity of student housing but also throughflow from starter homes. All this leads to postponement of important life milestones by young people, such as moving in with a partner or having their first child. There is also increasing mental pressure among young people; that goes for students, young workers, and young parents. Finally, many young people are concerned about the climate. After all, they will be affected by the consequences of climate change for longer than older people, and their prospects in this regard are uncertain; it is as yet insufficiently clear what the government and the business community are going to do to avert an unliveable future.

This study shows that in many respects the position of young people has not improved over the past two years, in some cases even becoming worse. That applies in particular to certain groups of young people, such as those whose parents are from a less advantaged socio-

¹ Council's Youth Platform (2019) *High Expectations: Young People's Opportunities and Obstacles in 2019* [Hoge verwachtingen: Kansen en belemmeringen voor jongeren in 2019].

economic background, those with a chronic disorder, or those with non-Western immigrant origins. Not enough has been done in recent years to address the problems facing young people. It is important that those problems are not only recognised but also that something is done about them quickly, and that the basics for young people are set right.

The main findings from the study's sections on learning, working, housing, forming a family, and climate will be discussed below. Those sections give rise to a variety of ideas and recommendations (see Table 1). With a view to effective implementation of these, the Council's Youth Platform also makes four further recommendations; these will be explained at the end of this summary.

Post-secondary education

Dutch young people are highly educated, but not everyone has equal opportunities

Dutch young people leaving education are highly educated compared to those in many other countries. Inequality of opportunity is a major concern, however. There are differences – sometimes major differences – that result in some students having more opportunities than others. Factors such as the level of education and income of their parents play an important role in this regard. Children of parents with a lower socio-economic position appear to be more vulnerable during their time at school. As a result, they are in a less favourable starting position when they enter the labour market and are more likely to end up in a lower socio-economic position themselves. In the context of secondary education, for example, at the age of 15 it is predominantly prevocational secondary-school [VMBO] pupils and pupils with lower-educated parents who are at risk of functional illiteracy. At vocational secondary schools [MBO], the performance differences between male and female pupils are striking, with the performance of boys lagging behind that of girls. Moreover, the quality of internships and internship discrimination in the MBO and university of applied sciences [HBO] sectors are significant points of concern.

Higher education is generally well accessible, but that accessibility is under pressure. For example, the Youth Platform sees a number of risks with regard to the inflow and throughflow of some groups in higher education. In programmes with a limited number of places, fewer students are enrolled who come from an immigrant background, as well as fewer women and fewer students whose parents have a lower income. The student loan system and the underfunding of education also contribute to reducing the accessibility of education.

Pressure to perform in education

For a considerable time now, there has been attention for the increasing mental pressure that students experience. In the past ten years, various studies have revealed an increase in psychological complaints among schoolchildren and students. In 2019, the Council's Youth Platform called for additional research on this mental pressure among young people, and in 2021 it showed that the student loan system contributes to that pressure increasing among students. Recent research by the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) into the mental health of students in higher education has also produced some alarming figures. Half of the more than 28,000 students surveyed (51 percent) experience psychological complaints (such as anxiety and gloominess), and 12 percent of them to a serious extent.

An inclusive learning environment for all pupils and students

For young people with a chronic disorder, it seems to be more difficult to enter and pursue an educational programme. The Verwey-Jonker Institute found in 2019 that a significantly larger proportion of young people with a chronic disorder had dropped out of their programme without graduating (7 percent) than was the case with young people without such a disorder

(4 percent). Young people with a chronic disorder may also find it difficult to secure and undertake an internship. The study results of students with a non-Western immigrant background lag behind those of students without such a background, although their level of education is increasing. Young people with an immigrant background also have greater difficulty securing an internship, partly due to their lacking a personal network, but also due to discrimination.

Finding a job and starting a business

Young people are the first to be affected by any economic downturn

For many young people who graduate from *MBO*, *HBO*, or a research university [*WO*], the transition to the labour market is successful. One year after the end of their final year of study, 85% of them are employed or self-employed. There are also vulnerable groups, however. Early school leavers, pupils and students from special secondary education [*VSO*], practical education, and entrance-level courses for *MBO* education, and students with a second-generation non-Western immigrant background find it harder to get a job. Fortunately, most young people do secure a place within the labour market that matches their qualifications. However, men have a better chance of finding a job and of earning a higher hourly wage than women, and the difference in hourly wage also increases with age. This shows that the differences between men and women are already apparent when they start out on the labour market (and also even before that). The Dutch National Institute for Family Finance Information (NIBUD) found in 2020 that most 18-year-olds are unable to make ends meet financially while living independently. This applies in any case to 18-year-olds who receive social assistance benefit, study financing, or the minimum wage. It is also noticeable that the proportion of young men who are in work has declined over the past decade.

Many young people became unemployed in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Job opportunities for entrants to the employment market have since recovered to their level before the pandemic but inequality in job opportunities between those with different levels of education has increased. The COVID-19 crisis has once again revealed the high level of volatility: young people are the first group to be affected by any economic downturn. One reason for this is that young people are more likely to work on a flexible contract, meaning that they have less job, work, and income security and fewer opportunities for development. The Council's Youth Platform already warned in 2019 of the adverse impact of flexible employment practices on young people. Those consequences extend beyond just the labour market.² Such practices also mean that not all young people build up a sufficient pension, with young people in the 'blank space' [*witte vlek*] – i.e. who are not accruing pension entitlements – running the risk of receiving inadequate pension benefits. This is even though pension accrual at the start of one's working life will be more important in the new pension system. Moreover, many young people have little or no knowledge of how their pension accrual works and how important it is.

You can learn how to be an entrepreneur

In the *High Expectations* study, the Council's Youth Platform showed that entrepreneurship is popular among young people, but also that they discontinue their business sooner than their older counterparts. Developments in both the domestic and international labour market demand an enterprising workforce. That offers opportunities for young people. It is important, however, for them to be encouraged and prepared for this during their education, more so than is currently the case, for example by learning the right entrepreneurial skills.

The greatest increase in burnout complaints is among young workers

² Council's YP (2019) *High Expectations: Young People's Opportunities and Obstacles in 2019*.

Among all working people in the Netherlands, the proportion with burnout complaints is steadily increasing, but that is especially so among young working people aged 25 to 35. Such complaints are mainly caused by an accumulation or combination of different factors that are associated with work, the individual, and society in general. Various studies have shown, for example, that young people face a great deal of social pressure to perform.

The labour market is still insufficiently inclusive, including for young people

Young people aged 18 to 25 with a chronic disorder are less likely to have a paid full-time or part-time job than other young people (56 and 67 percent respectively). When surveyed, they often indicate that they work fewer hours than they would like to do. Moreover, they feel less understood at work and are less likely to feel that enough account is taken of them there. In general, these young people need more in the way of aids, facilities, support, and flexibility at work. They are also more vulnerable in terms of income, and they have limited financial prospects. They are more often financially dependent on their parents or partner, which makes them less able to be independent. There are also concerns about young people from an immigrant background. Despite their increasing level of education, there are still major differences between their labour market position and that of other young people. It is also questionable how quickly the position of this group will recover from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. The previous economic crisis showed that it takes a long time for young people with an immigrant background to regain their position.

Renting/buying for the first time

A major shortage of affordable housing, especially for young people

People who are looking for their first home or want to move are having increasing difficulty finding a suitable place to live. This is a particular problem for young people, (low) middle-income home-seekers, and those in a hurry to find accommodation. There is justifiable talk of overheating in the social rental sector, the private rental sector, and the owner-occupied sector. The availability, affordability, and accessibility of housing are therefore under great pressure. This applies to large groups of young people, especially those looking for student accommodation or those who wish to move on from a starter home. Eighteen-year-olds who live independently and who receive social assistance benefit, study financing, or the minimum wage are unable to make ends meet.

There is a major shortage of rental and owner-occupied housing, and that shortage already begins with student accommodation. This is due to the growing student population, but also because students remain in their student accommodation longer because they cannot find other affordable accommodation after graduating. In addition, housing costs for students have risen considerably in recent years. Besides availability, the affordability of rental and owner-occupied housing is also a problem, and that makes it particularly difficult for first-time buyers and renters to acquire a home. This affects young people to a greater extent given that they have a lower average income than older people. That increases their housing expense ratio, which was already deemed to be high-risk. In the tight housing market, there is an ever-increasing gap between those who already have a home and those who are looking for one. This is because newcomers from the rental sector are at a disadvantage on the purchasing market. People looking for a home who do not already own a property do not have any surplus value that they can use when buying a (new) home. If they have a student debt to pay off, that will also play a role.

For a number of young people, there is an additional problem

It is already very difficult in any case for young people to find suitable housing, but that applies even more so to those with a chronic disorder. That is not only because of the cost of rental and owner-occupied housing and the fact that these young people often have a lower

income, but also because of the accessibility and availability of housing (including student housing). Another problem is that these young people sometimes do not have sufficient energy to take care of themselves or do not receive insufficient assistance or guidance in doing so. They therefore require assistance – which they are in fact entitled to – but that assistance is not yet available to them in all cases. There are also regional differences in the support provided for these young people. The situation is also particularly difficult for young people with an immigrant background. They face discrimination and on average have less 'social capital' available, whereas in many cases having a social network can help young people find (affordable) housing.

Starting a family

The desired and the actual division of care tasks: two different things

Over the past decade, the average age at which both women and men have their first child has increased by a year. On average, women have their first child at the age of 30, while men are almost three years older than that when they become a father. One reason for this postponement of parenthood is the increased insecurity faced by young adults. It takes longer for them to find a steady job, sufficient income, a stable relationship, and a suitable home. For women, the fact that they increasingly enrol in higher education and therefore enter the labour market later also plays a role. It is also striking that the Netherlands is among the countries where having children has the greatest impact on a mother's income; for fathers, the arrival of children has virtually no such impact. An explanation for the decline in mothers' income may be found in social attitudes regarding the division of work and care between fathers and mothers. Most couples would prefer to divide up care and work equally, but in practice the tasks are often divided up more 'traditionally'. The one-and-a-half-earner model remains dominant, i.e. with the man working full-time and the woman part-time, although the size of that part-time job is increasing. There is therefore a gap between the desired and the actual division of care tasks. When it comes to caring for people other than one's children – for example, one's partner, a parent/parent-in-law, or an acquaintance – it appears that women provide help, or are prepared to do so, more often than men.

It helps 'task-combiners' to have a social network

Combining work and care responsibilities can put great pressure on young parents. 'Task-combiners' – i.e. those who combine a job and care tasks – are even more likely than other young people to say they feel under pressure. This was discussed in the 2019 *High Expectations* study; two years later, the problem has not diminished. It applies not only to young parents but also to young people who provide informal care. The availability of a social network can offer support in this regard, but unfortunately not everyone has an extensive social network.

Climate and sustainability

Quality of life under threat; it's time to turn the tide

Climate change is an increasing threat to our quality of life, and a great deal urgently needs to be done to turn the tide. What young people themselves can do for a liveable world and how they can participate in the new economy makes only a partial contribution to solving the climate problem. This is a collective responsibility, with the involvement of the government and the business community being absolutely essential. The Council's Youth Platform believes that if we really make a start – now! – on developing and implementing visionary, consistent, and ambitious long-term policies, we can still turn the tide. The present young generation want to put their shoulder to the wheel and do the utmost possible. The Youth Platform therefore calls on the government to cooperate fully with young people in tackling the challenges of the transition. Present and future generations will be saddled with the effects of

the choices that are made now, or that were made in the past. Action must be taken so as to ensure a liveable world for future generations.

Mismatch in climate policy

The Council's Youth Platform notes that current climate policy is not sufficiently attuned to the situation of young people and that insufficient account is taken of their interests. This applies to both the affordability and fairness of the climate and energy transition and to promoting sustainable choices. There is also a mismatch in both education and the labour market. The education sector can prepare young people more effectively for a job within the energy transition, while some current employees will need to be retrained so as to reduce the mismatch. These mismatches prevent young people from keeping up and saddle them with unnecessary and unfair future costs. The transition is consequently failing to involve precisely the group that could take the lead in that process as citizens, consumers, and (future) employees.

Recommendations

The sections summarised above give rise to various ideas and recommendations aimed at learning, working and doing business, housing, starting a family, and the climate and sustainability. Table 1 summarises them. In the coming period, the Council's Youth Platform will monitor how these ideas and recommendations are taken up and what becomes of them. The Platform is also eager to see how the plans set out in the government coalition agreement are worked out.³ For these recommendations to be properly implemented, the Youth Platform also recommends:

1. Ensure integrated policy for all young people and future generations

In recent years, the government has not shown itself sufficiently able to address the problems facing young people. Something now really has to be done to deliver on the promises made to all young people and future generations so that the whole of society benefits. Each government ministry – in cooperation with young people's organisations such as the Council's Youth Platform – must implement a coherent youth policy. This will make it possible to take account of the accumulation of policies that affect young people and thus ensure the fair distribution of opportunities across generations and between young people. This is also the idea behind the 'generational impact assessment' that the Youth Platform recommended in 2019. That assessment needs to be implemented at the earliest possible moment; the coalition agreement would be a good place to start.

2. Develop a youth strategy for the short and medium/long term

Current government policy focuses too much on one-off rather than structural solutions for young people. That has led to vulnerabilities for young people that particularly affect certain groups. The new Dutch government must move quickly to develop a youth strategy for all young people in the country – one that includes clear goals and that is drafted and implemented together with young people themselves. This is already happening in many other countries, and the importance of a youth strategy is recognised by bodies including the OECD.⁴ The youth strategy for the Netherlands must be designed and implemented together with young people, youth organisations, and relevant civil-society organisations. The Youth

³ *Looking out for each other, looking ahead to the future*. Coalition Agreement 2021-2025 between the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Democrats '66 (D66), Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA), and Christian Union (CU) (2021).

⁴ 'OECD evidence suggests that an effective youth strategy should be adopted at the highest political level, containing explicit objectives and measurable targets and (performance) indicators, and be supported by clear accountability, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms', OECD (2018) *Youth Stocktaking Report*, p. 10.

Platform envisages an important role for itself in this regard. In this way, action can be taken as quickly and specifically as possible to improve the position of all young people in the country.

3. Give young people a voice and also the necessary means

Despite all the fine promises and valuable initiatives to get young people more involved in public policy, not enough is being done with their opinions and ideas. Just sitting around the discussion table together is not enough. More must be done to organise and perpetuate participation by young people. That can only be done by giving young people not just a voice but also the necessary means, and then acting accordingly. This means structural funds being made available to improve the position of young people. The Council's Youth Platform considers it important that it be made clear how much money and what percentage of the country's budget is spent annually on matters concerning young people. This has already been done in Mexico and Wales.⁵ Another relevant idea is 'youth participatory budgeting', in which young people have a say in how public money should be spent on various issues that concern them. That has been done at regional level in Boston and at national level in Portugal, among other places.⁶ The Council's Youth Platform is already taking action to involve as many young people as possible in policymaking; it wishes to expand that role in the coming period (see the work agenda).

4. Invest in a broad network around young people

In its *High Expectations* study (2019), the Council's Youth Platform outlined the way society is increasingly evolving into a network society in which it is important to be 'known'. And in 2021, the Council noted that the opportunities that children and young people enjoy in life are still determined largely by the place and circumstances in which they grow up. The present study also shows that dividing lines exist between young people who have more or less social capital. The Council's Youth Platform considers it important that all young people can become acquainted with other social networks. It is not only the government that should play a role in achieving this; everyone can contribute. Specifically, the Youth Platform calls for a much larger and, above all, broader exchange of young people from within schools, sports clubs, and the voluntary sector. This is a task for municipalities, educational institutions (see the Council's advisory report on *Equal Opportunities in Education*), parents, and young people themselves.

Work agenda

In the coming period, the Council's Youth Platform will monitor how its ideas and recommendations are taken up and what becomes of them. It will also get down to work – both within and outside the Council – on a number of specific topics, namely:

1. Mental health and the development of children and young people;
2. Participation by as many different young people as possible;
3. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for young people's future.

⁵ OECD (2018) *Youth Stocktaking Report*, p. 36.

⁶ OECD (2018) *Youth Stocktaking Report*, p. 37.

Table 1: Ideas and recommendations aimed at learning, working and doing business, housing, starting a family, and the climate and sustainability.

Learning	<p>Improve understanding of the causes of declining reading skills in secondary education and possible ways for turning the tide. Improve the quality of primary and secondary education, including by investing in top-quality teachers and school leaders (see SER, 2021, <i>Equal Opportunities in Education</i>).</p>
	<p>Promote equal opportunities in education. See the Council’s advisory report on <i>Equal Opportunities in Education</i> (2021) on, among other things, the importance of later selection in primary and secondary education and attention to obstacles to inflow and throughflow at vocational secondary schools [MBO], and in higher education.</p>
	<p>Investigate the differences (and the explanations for those differences) between the performance of male and female students in the MBO sector.</p>
	<p>Improve assistance and support for young people with a chronic disorder. A better understanding is needed of what exactly such assistance and support should involve and how it can be made accessible/more accessible to everyone. Pay attention to the level of the Individual Study Allowance [<i>Individuele Studietoelag</i>] scheme and awareness of that scheme.</p>
	<p>All students should receive an internship allowance which at least covers their expenses (see SER, 2021, <i>Equal Opportunities in Education</i>).</p>
	<p>Facilitate initiatives to combat internship discrimination, increase knowledge of that issue among educational institutions, and encourage schools to take on a greater role in combating such discrimination. Educational institutions should shoulder their responsibility by supporting students in their search for an internship and by challenging companies that discriminate. In the MBO and HBO sectors, a properly functioning independent body should be established to monitor the quality of internships and internship problems such as exploitation of interns, unpaid internships, racism, discrimination, etc.</p>
	<p>Create greater scope in education regarding the mental health and development of children and young people. But above all, discuss and tackle developments within society that cause mental pressure among young people.</p>
	<p>Increase structural investment in higher education so that students can continue to receive the personal guidance they need so as to achieve success in their studies.</p>
	<p>Pay attention to the financial position of young people. The Council’s Youth Platform notes that the current study financing system has an unfavourable impact on the independence and future prospects of young people, the attention paid to students’ well-being and resilience, the promotion of equality of opportunity, and the provision of opportunities for the broad development of young people. The Youth Platform therefore proposes an alternative study financing system (see Council’s Youth Platform, 2021, <i>Studying without Pressure</i>).</p>
Working	<p>Pay constant attention to the adverse impact of flexible employment practices on young peoples’ job security, work security, and income security. There needs to be a long-term approach to youth unemployment instead of repeated one-off measures and a crisis-response approach (such as the National Work Agenda on Youth Unemployment). This includes investing in vulnerable groups and in young people who are distanced from the labour market.</p>

	<p>Young people must be better prepared for the skills and competencies required by the labour market. In addition, students/prospective students and their parents must be provided with up-to-date labour market information (on content and job opportunities) so they can make a more informed choice (see SER, 2021, <i>Equal Opportunities in Education</i>). This will improve their chance of finding a job.</p>
	<p>Invest in alternative routes (for example combined working and learning routes) for young people so they can find long-term employment (see SER, 2021, <i>Equal Opportunities in Education</i>).</p>

	<p>Provide compensation for young people who fall behind as regards pension accrual (because their employer maintains an escalating contribution rate (progressive scale of contributions) for existing staff). Ensure greater attention for the 'blank space' [<i>witte vlek</i>] problem (i.e. non-accrual of pension entitlements). For this purpose, use can be made of the Dutch Labour Foundation's '<i>Blank Space Pensions Action Plan</i>' [<i>Aanvalsplan witte vlek pensioenen</i>]. The government must make young people more aware of the need to build up a pension, including when they are looking for their first job or changing jobs. The 'Pension Label' developed by VCP Young Professionals (VCP YP, part of the Trade Union Federation for Professionals) can assist in this. The Pension Label can also clarify the level of contribution involved. Involve young people more in responsible pension investment. Employers must be subject to a legal obligation to inform their young employees of the consequences for pension accrual.</p>
	<p>A clearer picture is needed of the assistance and support required by young people with a chronic disorder, and how they can access it. More work experience placements for young people with a chronic disorder or mild intellectual disability, in the form of grants or other incentives (for example: companies need to be 'unburdened', see SER, 2021, <i>Equal Opportunities in Education</i>).</p>
	<p>Tackle work-related stress and psychological complaints among young people in the workplace. An investigation should be carried out as to how young people's independent access to a certified work and organisation psychologist can be improved, so as to prevent or mitigate burnout symptoms and promote enthusiasm. The Council's Youth Platform also recommends that the government make vouchers available to employers for this purpose. Best practices should also be identified and shared more effectively.</p>
Housing	<p>Ensure structural investment in public housing, in particular by focussing on expanding the housing supply.</p>
	<p>In addition, develop an approach specifically for young people and in particular for less advantaged groups, such as those with a chronic disorder and those with a non-Western immigrant background. It should be easier for young people with a chronic disorder to take their aids with them if they move to a different municipality, without the bureaucracy that is currently involved.</p>
Family formation	<p>The Council's Youth Platform once more draws attention to three (recent) Council advisory reports on combining working, learning, and care (<i>Een werkende combinatie</i>, 2016) and on a future system of childcare facilities (<i>Gelijk goed van start</i>, 2016), and <i>Een kansrijke start voor alle kinderen</i>, 2021).</p>
	<p>The Council's Youth Platform believes that the motion adopted by the Dutch Senate to raise the level of paid parental leave from 50% to 70% of the maximum daily wage should be implemented. In the coming period, the Youth Platform will also track the effects of the Additional Parental Leave (Introduction) Act (WIEG).</p>

Climate	Speed up the introduction of the 'generational impact assessment' as a means of understanding the socio-economic impact of climate policies on current and future generations. More research on that impact is also needed.
	Develop an approach in which the least energy-efficient homes that accommodate the most vulnerable households, including young people, are given priority in making those homes more sustainable.
	Subsidise sustainable choices (as well as pricing for unsustainable choices) to encourage the transition to sustainable behaviour (among young people) and cease issuing 'grey' subsidies.
	Involve young people more in climate policy, including its implementation.
	Invest in upskilling and reskilling, organise opportunities for workplace learning, and integrate sustainability into education.

	Companies must make internships and combined working-learning placements within the energy transition more attractive and accessible to young people.
	Investigate young people's motivation, set up a good promotional campaign, and tie in with existing campaigns to promote working within the energy transition.
	Sustainability must be given a clear place in education. That should not be by introducing it as a separate subject in the curriculum but rather by integrating this theme into the current curriculum.