



The voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe

# Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment

December 2022

(Resulting from the EBU youth meeting  
**"Engage in Europe and the world on equal grounds"**  
held in Pervolia, Cyprus, 28-30 October 2022)

## **Disability is not an obstacle to young people's aspirations to make the world a better place**

The world has dramatically changed in the last few years, societies are rapidly evolving into new forms with new opportunities and challenges for everybody, with the risk that political decision-making might become a less and less participatory process and that people with disabilities in particular are left behind, not fully benefiting from social, economic and technological developments. Young people with visual disabilities in particular can more harshly feel that the obstacles to participation at all levels are too strong for them and refrain from engaging, with the result that they become invisible when key decisions are made. Therefore, specific measures are to be taken to fully develop young people with visual disabilities' potential and promote their engagement in social changes on equal grounds with others.

With its European Union Youth Strategy and the European Year of Youth 2022, the EU is focusing on young people and it is committed to increasing their involvement in policy decision-making at all levels. "Engage", "Connect" and "Empower" are the key concepts of the process. Following this EU commitment, the European Blind Union gathered a pool of young, skilled people with visual disabilities coming from the different regions of wider Europe, to identify the action required to make more young people with visual disabilities aware of their potential and thus use their energy to become catalysts of social and political change at local, national and international level.

## Engage

**Reinforce the presence of youth with visual disabilities in national and international organisations**

**To shape future policies, young people with visual disabilities should take more responsibilities in civil society organisations and disability organisations, in particular but not only, in visual impairment organisations. Participation in international organisations is the result of an engagement that is gradually built at national level**

- It is important that organisations, in and beyond the disability sector, set up inclusive activities and training courses to also attract young people with disabilities and contribute to develop their skills and their sense of belonging. The pools of young talented and engaged persons should also be involved in working groups and discussion fora to ensure that their ideas and energy contribute to shape the policies of organisations from grassroot up to the highest level of decision-making.
- Organisations of persons with visual disabilities should set up and support, also with secretarial help, youth committees at local and national level with the purpose of involving young people, and entrusting them with responsibilities in shaping, developing and implementing the youth policies of the association.
- There is a need to develop more activities for young persons with disabilities by reinforcing national and international cooperation with organisations of the youth sector. All European organisations, in beyond the disability sector, should set up and support with secretarial help their youth committees, that will use inclusive ways of working and whose main objectives will be to work together with European youth organisations to coordinate European youth actions and influence EU youth policies. The youth committees of European organisations representing persons with disabilities will also support the youth committees of national disability organisations sharing good practices and finding opportunities for youth exchanges.

### **3 EBU Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment.**

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#### **Participation in political life**

**The loss of interest of young generations in participating in political decision-making must be counteracted by all possible means, as this deprives our societies of energy, smart ideas and moral engagement in a better future. Young people with visual disabilities encounter additional obstacles to engage in political life, increasing their feeling that they cannot have their say on the society they live in, so specific measures should be taken to tackle this issue.**

- For young people with visual disabilities, poor participation in political life, both to vote and stand as a candidate, is primarily due to lack of knowledge and information. Young people with visual disabilities should get accessible information on the programmes of political parties and be enabled to participate in political discussions and decision-making on equal footing with others, including through the use of accessible online platforms.
- Independent voting should be promoted as much as possible. People with visual disabilities should be able to cast their vote in an accessible, secret and independent manner.
- Decision-makers should approach young people with disabilities to make them aware of social and political issues that concern them as young persons and as persons with disabilities.
- Political parties should ensure that their youth sections are connected with and involve in their activities young people with disabilities.

#### **Defend human rights through active support to persons in vulnerable conditions**

**Young people with visual impairment can uphold the values they believe in and develop solidarity activities with people in vulnerable conditions. Their disability is not an immovable obstacle to this, following the examples of a number of visually impaired persons who succeeded in their dream of helping persons in vulnerable conditions, also in faraway developing countries.**

- Young people with visual disabilities should have access to the same opportunities in volunteering and non-formal education for social and solidarity aims as their sighted peers. Organisations running such programmes should have a proactive and flexible approach and be willing to take concrete steps to involve young persons with disabilities in their activities, both as beneficiaries and as trainers. Training for young people with disabilities to

#### **4 EBU Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment.**

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become trainers should be provided and the acquired competences should be certified so that they are able to use their expertise to support other people, in particular their peers in vulnerable conditions.

- Young people with visual disabilities can engage in development cooperation work, that also includes empowerment and capacity-building of local populations. Peer-to-peer training on self-awareness and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a fundamental part of any effort to build sustainable, equal and inclusive societies in developing countries, where persons with disabilities must have an active role to play.

## **Connect**

### **Using European instruments to increase young persons with visual disabilities' involvement and dialogue**

**European Union instruments, in particular those specifically aimed at engaging young persons, such as ERASMUS+, European Solidarity Corps and Discover EU, are a fundamental means for shaping European citizenship and should have inclusivity as a core value**

- The guidelines for all key action areas of the European instruments dedicated to the promotion of young people's skills and competences through transnational experiences should be drafted to considering the increased participation of young persons with disabilities as a main goal. Expert advice from disability representative organisations should be sought when drafting such guidelines. Some examples of elements that would have a positive impact are: a budget with clear rules, yet enough flexibility to cater for the various needs of persons with disabilities; or an extended age limit for persons with disabilities, as their health and emotional conditions could prevent them from taking advantage of such opportunities before reaching that limit.
- Online information and training platforms connected to European initiatives for young people must be fully accessible and usable by persons with disabilities. Expert advice from disability representative organisations should be sought during the design phase of such platforms and for all updates.

## **5 EBU Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment.**

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- Staff at National Youth Agencies and other entities involved in EU funding for young people, such as Erasmus+ desks at universities, should be trained in disability issues and be available to support young persons with disabilities providing clear, tailored information from the application phase forward, including financial advice, as well as facilitating contacts with the hosting institutions so that arrangements for accommodation and other services needed by persons with disabilities in international mobility can be made in advance, because the uncertainty about those arrangements is the main obstacle to participation for young persons with disabilities, and in particular those with visual disabilities
- Seamless support should be provided to young persons with disabilities in EU-funded international mobility ensuring that clear agreements are made between sending and hosting institutions and any other organisations that can provide useful services in the city of destination (such as support to study or work, initial orientation in the city, etc.).

### **Freedom of movement at European level**

**“Getting to know your neighbours is the best way to be a citizen of Europe, even with a visual impairment”. Freedom of movement is a fundamental right, for EU citizens it concerns the liberty to travel in order to connect to other cultures, and take up residence in another EU country in order to study or work. However, young persons with visual impairment are often confronted with more difficulties when trying to visit another country or take up residence there.**

- The access procedure to mobility support services for persons with disabilities should be simple and harmonised among countries, so that when travelling abroad it is easy for persons with disabilities to access them (i.e. a unified phone number to ask for mobility support at railway stations).
- Freedom of movement also entails, for young people with a visual disability, accessible services in the city they are visiting to allow them to fully enjoy the cultural heritage. Supporting the establishment of cooperation agreements among cultural sites and organisations of persons with visual disabilities is a way to welcome international visitors with visual impairment and offer a meaningful travel experience to them. A European network to facilitate this would certainly improve the participation of young

## **6 EBU Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment.**

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persons with a visual impairment in international cultural exchanges.

- A main obstacle to move to study or work in another country for young people with visual disabilities is the lack of immediate recognition of the right to disability-related welfare and service provisions. A disability does not disappear when you cross a national border but all the same people with disabilities still have to undergo an often lengthy assessment process before getting their disability recognised for welfare and service provisions. This issue and its very serious consequences, could be solved in EU by extending the adoption of the European Disability Card in all member countries and enlarging its scope to the entitlement of disability welfare and service provisions, with the aim, in future, of ensuring the same level of provisions in all EU countries and beyond.

## **Empower**

### **Higher Education**

**Good quality higher education is an important element for the empowerment of young persons with a visual impairment and the development of their social awareness and civic engagement. Although digitalisation greatly helped visually impaired persons in their studies, a lot still needs to be done to ensure that young visually impaired persons have the same study opportunities as their sighted peers**

- In all countries, young persons with visual disabilities should get study materials in accessible formats at all educational levels and at the same time as their sighted peers. Educational authorities and institutions, publishers and visually impaired people's representative organisations should make specific agreements for the timely provision of study books in accessible formats.
- All efforts should be made at national level to take advantage of the provisions of the Marrakesh Treaty to facilitate access to published works for persons with a visual impairment, a Treaty with more than 100 participant countries, enabling the sharing of accessible study materials, in particular in countries speaking the same language.

## **7 EBU Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment.**

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- Universities and visually impaired persons' representative organisations should work together to enlarge the number and variety of high quality curricula for students with a visual impairment, resulting in professional diplomas that can be used to enter the open labour market
- There should be a standard agreed among universities concerning the provision of accessible materials, including a clear framework for copyright exceptions, so the choice of a faculty or a university for a young visually impaired person would not depend on the teachers' personal willingness to share materials in an accessible format or not
- Just like access to study materials, access to digital platforms for training and examinations as well as websites providing study information (such as university websites) should be fully accessible and usable. All information provided by universities should be available and accessible on their websites.
- Training for teachers to make them aware of the educational needs of students with visual disabilities should be put in place when visually impaired students enrol.
- A department for accessible studies should be established at universities with staff specifically trained to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities, including those with visual disabilities. Experts in the various study fields should also assist students. Such department should also be responsible for making scientific study materials accessible. As part of the support, when needed, specialised training on assistive technology for study purposes should be provided to students
- Young visually impaired students should get effective support in planning, preparing for and implementing international mobility for study purposes. Seamless support from sending and hosting universities has to be guaranteed.
- Universities should support peer-to-peer exchange of good practices and provide a physical space where students with disabilities can meet to share their study strategies.

## **Independent living**

**Independent living is a fundamental step in the life of every young person, and it contributes to developing self-assessment skills,**

**self-esteem, a better balanced relationship with others and increased awareness about the challenges and advantages of the society we live in. However, taking this critical step entails overcoming a number of additional obstacles for young visually impaired persons that often make their process of emancipation very slow or unsuccessful.**

- Living independently means taking full responsibility for fulfilling one's own needs and duties, including those deriving from citizenship, but, to succeed in this endeavour, visually impaired youth need to be supported with coordinated and tailored services as well as adequate social benefits to cater for the additional needs arising from sight loss. All countries should adopt a comprehensive approach on this, also ensuring that information and advice about grants and provisions for extra costs are easily available to persons with disabilities and that they also get help with administrative procedures.
- In all countries young people with visual disabilities should have access to thorough training for independent living, including orientation and mobility, as well as computer and digital literacy, money management and personal safety. Psychological counselling should also be made available, considering the particular relevance of interpersonal relationships when leaving home.

## **Employment**

**Employment is certainly the greatest challenge for visually impaired youth. The rate of unemployment among young persons with disabilities in EU is more than twice as much as that of their peers without disabilities and in spite of the fact that some countries have a quota system for the employment of persons with disabilities, young persons with visual disabilities generally find it very difficult to get a job and much less a fulfilling job**

- Stronger, more articulated and adequately funded measures to support the employment of young people with visual disabilities should be taken at European, national and local level in order to enable them to compete on the open labour market, promoting their employability as well as their entrepreneurship skills for self-employment. Measures should include tax benefits for employers hiring visually impaired persons and the reinforcement of in-job

support, such as targeted training, mentorship and job-shadowing schemes.

- A specific effort should be made for young people with visual disabilities to have increased access to internships, apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning, including those provided for by the ERASMUS+ programme, with official recognition of the competences acquired.
- Targeted and comprehensive support should be provided to visually impaired job-seekers at employment centres and other concerned entities, such as persons with disabilities' representative organisations, that could, on the one hand, provide vocational advice and training, including personal mobility, independent living and digital skills and, on the other hand, mediate with employers.
- Sheltered workshop experience information should be collected and carefully studied as an alternative for young visually impaired persons who cannot access the open labour market due to additional health conditions.

### **Access to sport and leisure activities**

**Sport and leisure time activities are important to personal health, increase self-esteem and socialisation. However, in many countries, little effort is made to develop sport and leisure activities that are accessible to persons with a visual impairment.**

- There is a need for a general policy and adequate funding at local, national and European level to develop accessible sport and leisure activities for visually impaired people. This should aim at long-term support for both the development of specific sport and leisure activities for persons with visual disabilities and mainstreaming accessibility in general to sport and leisure activities, so that visually impaired people are included in such activities on a regular basis, not only in specific, time-limited initiatives.
- From their side, providers of sport and leisure activities should proactively take steps to ensure the active participation and inclusion of young people with visual disabilities also in mainstream sports and events, for instance, private and public sport premises should be made accessible and be equipped with sport items for visually impaired people to be enabled to play sports.

## **10** EBU Manifesto of young European citizens with visual impairment.

- It is important that children and young persons with disabilities are able to get sport and physical education at school, so school gyms and tracks should be adequately equipped for this purpose and PE teachers and support teachers should be specifically trained on this subject.
- In order to develop sport and leisure activities that are truly accessible to persons with visual disabilities, competent expert support is needed. It is important that the knowledge and experience acquired in this field is maintained and shared.
- Accessibility also concerns information and transport, because visually impaired people need easy access to them in order to be able to decide to take part in sport and leisure activities independently, without being constrained by the fact they have to be accompanied if they want to participate.

## About EBU

EBU is one of the six regional bodies of the World Blind Union, and it promotes the interests of blind and partially sighted people in Europe. Our 41 national member organisations in Europe include 25 European Union member states (all the EU except Latvia and Malta).

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