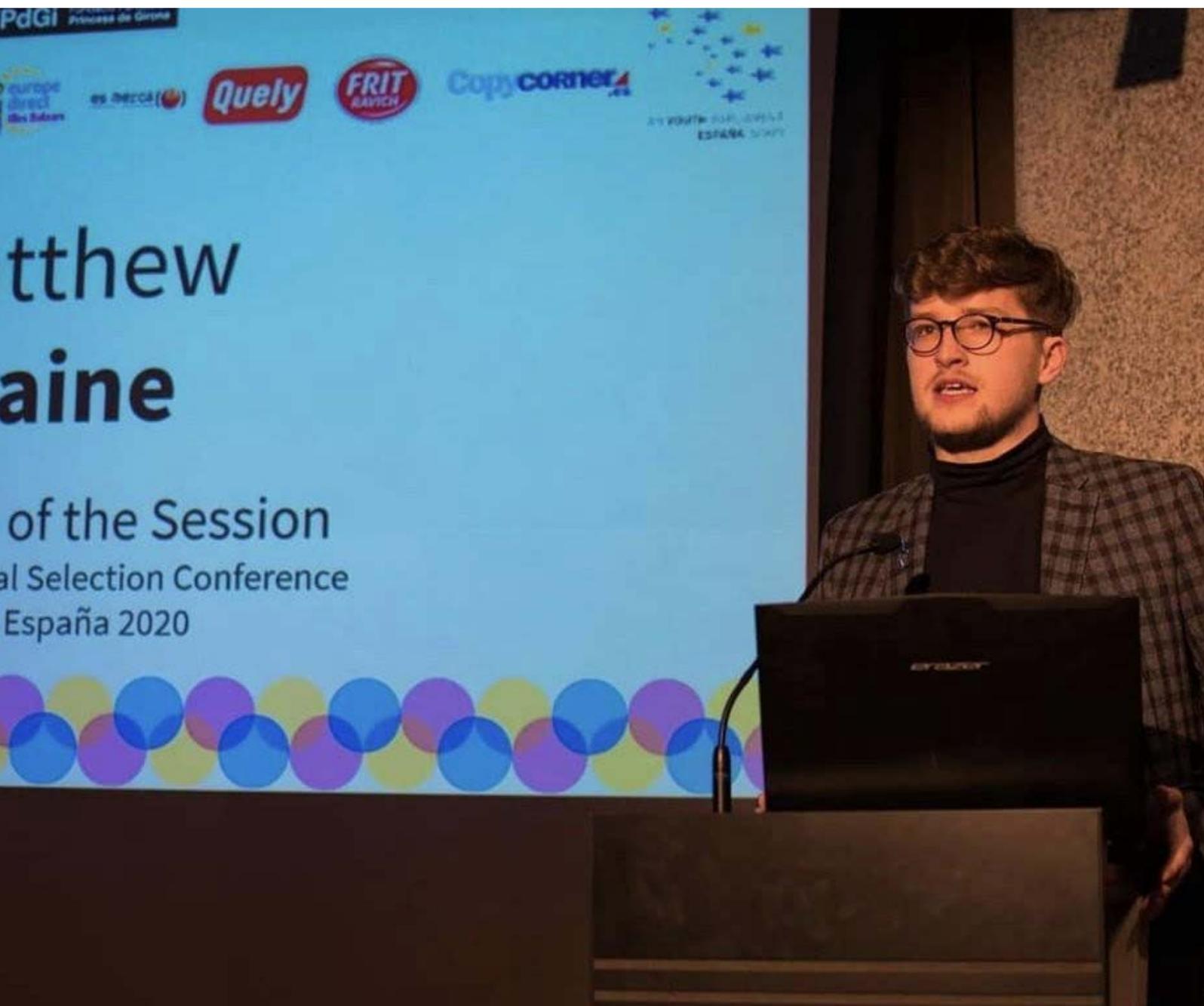


European Youth Parliament won't change the world: But it will change the people who do

Interview with Matthew Caine, Communications Trustee of the European Youth Parliament (EYP) UK.

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About the interviewee

Matthew is the Communications Trustee of the European Youth Parliament (EYP) in the UK (EYPUK). Matthew manages an elected group of communications coordinators, who run EYPUK's social media and public relations. The role includes coordination of international communication across the different country committees. He is also responsible for making sure the organization is on a sound financial footing. Matthew joined the EYP in 2015 by joining his school delegation in one of the national debating events held by EYPUK each year. He is involved in EYP in several ways, supporting the work of EYP organizations across Europe. In particular, he has led capacity building efforts across the EYP network through roles such as the Head Trainer of the Summer Academy in 2019.

Beyond his role in EYPUK, Matthew is a philosophy, politics, and economics graduate from the University of Manchester, where his research into development politics was Highly Commended by the Global Undergraduate Awards. He currently works as a trainee auditor at the UK's National Audit Office, where he also studies for the Institute of Chartered Accountants qualification.

Introduction

One of our plenary speakers during the Young People's Work, Employment and Careers Small Group Meeting (SGM) was Iain Wedge, Communications Coordinator of the EYP. Iain provided us a broad overview of the EYP, its values, organization, and its key purpose, and discussed the EYP perspective on the key employment-related issues facing European youth. To hear more about this youth-led organization and how it supports youth employment, in February 2021, I interviewed Matthew Caine, the current Communications Trustee of the EYPUK.

I asked Matthew about the importance of youth employment for the EYP, the key initiatives they engage in and the key challenges relevant for youth employment. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, we conducted our interview online. The interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. This is a summary of my conversation with Matthew Caine.

The interview

Belgin: *Why is youth employment is important for the EYP?*

Matthew: The EYP, as a youth-led organization, is run by young people, for young people. Youth employment strikes at the heart of everything we do. The main goal of the organization is to encourage and enhance active citizenship in Europe. We aim to provide a forum for young people in Europe where they can develop and express opinions on a broad range of social and political topics. We promote intercultural dialogue and produce a network of future leaders in Europe. We, therefore, equip young people with the knowledge and skills that are necessary for them to become change makers in their local communities. Being youth-led, our activities are peer-led informal educational activities. These provide opportunities for both personal and skill development.

Regional, national, and international events are at the core of the EYP's peer-led activities. Through these sessions, we bring together over 30,000 young people from across Europe every year. We offer them a safe space to develop and express opinions, while building intercultural experiences and developing active citizenship.

Each EYP session consists of a combination of several activities. We have team building activities for international working groups to engage in indoor and outdoor games. There are cultural programmes where young people get acquainted with each other's culture and traditions. We also have committee work, in which international groups of young people discuss current topics and propose solutions in the form of resolutions. These resolutions are then debated during a General Assembly, which mimics the European Parliament procedures.

There is a Think Tank element to our work. For example, most recently, following the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and in partnership with the Wellcome Trust and European Institute of Innovation Technology (EIT) Health, we ran a Health Think Tank for the *Young European takes on "Healthy Lives and Well-being for all"* project. In a series of events, young people from across Europe debated key issues of health and well-being with stakeholders. Almost 1,000 young people from 40 countries contributed towards a policy recommendations paper (see EYP, 2021). More relevant for youth employment, in 2014 in partnership with Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland we ran a Think Tank on *Fighting youth unemployment*. This policy paper was discussed with candidates for the European election in Berlin and was then presented to the President of the European Commission, Mr Jose Manuel Barroso and European Commissioner Laszlo Andor (see EYP, 2014).

Our events and activities correspond well with youth employment because a lot of these skills are soft skills. The work we do in our committees mirrors essential group working skills. Solving problems in a collaborative and democratic way is one of the key features

of EYP sessions. From personal experience, I can tell you that having just started a new graduate job in September 2020, skills such as confidence in your own ideas and in public speaking are important for employability. In our work there is emphasis on developing social and professional skills and growing as a person. Through our discussions, we engage with a range of stakeholders (such as politicians) building intercultural understanding and a valuable international network of peers.

Certainly, across the EYP, enabling youth employment is a very important goal, as building these skills and developing young people is at the heart of everything we do. So, supporting youth employment is a prominent feature in the work that we do towards building those soft skills that young people need. In the events we organise, there is a heavy emphasis on teamworking and good communication skills. There are also a lot of problem-solving elements trying to come up with creative solutions to big issues.

Belgin: *Can you tell me about some employment initiatives the EYP is involved in?*

Matthew: Our international mentorship programme is a good example. The EYP has been running since 1987. So, we have quite a lot of EYP alumni, who are now in senior positions in different fields. For example, our alumni include a former British ambassador to Kosovo and an aide to the Prime Minister (who runs events in the UK). We have only recently identified our alumni body as a resource to be utilised. In 2018, we piloted our first EYP mentorship programme. This programme brings together EYP members who are beginning their careers – for instance, they may be just finishing their education and looking for their first job – with EYP alumni, who are willing to share their experience with the next generation. Our international office, in partnership with the EYP Alumni Steering Group, matches pairs based on mentees' interests and mentors' experience. Our pilot included 18 mentee-mentor pairs from across 16 European countries. Since then, we ran three rounds of the mentorship programme, matching 145 participants from 36 countries in 16 professional fields. The feedback from participants so far suggests that mentors find the experience personally enriching, and mentees report the programme helpful for incorporating the skills gained from EYP events into their job search and careers. I finished this programme last year, in the 3rd cohort, with a colleague who works in a Greek university and contributes to *The Economist* with their expertise on the green economy. For me, that was really, really, useful. This year we will be running our 4th mentorship programme.

Mentoring is the most obvious youth employment initiative we have but there are other things as well. These could be more granular at regional levels, for instance, running

regional events, which are entirely volunteer-led. Giving young people opportunities to run those events is key for skills development. Also, through outreach and inclusion activities, we aim to provide activities for young people who wouldn't otherwise be aware of or be active in the EYP. Through these activities, we target for instance, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, from ethnic minorities and with migrant backgrounds. So, I grew up in a working-class family and my parents' relationship split-up when I was five years old. I went to a state school for my secondary education; that has now long closed. Despite all this, through EYP, I have been able to work in nine different countries as a volunteer, with pretty much most costs covered, except for the flights.

We invite schools in remote geographic areas to take part in our activities. The young people will be given a topic, current in European affairs, such as questions concerning refugees and migration. Then, as part of a committee of peers from across the region they will work together to come up with potential solutions to the topic. The work is multifaceted; and there are many areas to explore.

Belgin: *How do you define 'good' youth employment? What makes it 'good' work?*

Matthew: Our generation are conscious of the ethical image of the firms we work for. The big thing for young employees is probably going to be about the responsibility they are given, and the respect that they are given early in that job role. For instance, in my current work, I feel that what I do is making an impact, and this is a key element. I don't really want to be doing something that is not meaningful, or at least isn't contributing any value.

There is also the relevant support for things such as development. We must sit accountancy exams, for example, but we are given time off and professional training, to help us succeed in those exams. In comparison, some of the other firms where you must do those exams have nowhere near that level of support in place.

To summarise, good employment has three key things: The ethical image is important. The respect given because of the work you are doing is crucial. Thirdly, I would say the kind of support given to you is very important when starting out in your career. Maybe one more thing that matches quite closely with the respect element is pay. Especially in the UK's political environment, where we pay a different minimum wage to 16- and 18-year-olds, what organizations pay their young people feeds into the respect felt by that person. So fair pay is the fourth key thing. I don't think it's the most prominent thing, but I do think it is something that sets good youth employers aside.

Belgin: *From the EYP perspective, what do you see as the key challenges or issues in youth employment?*

Matthew: The most obvious problem is the impact of the 2008 economic recession. This will only worsen with the Covid-19 situation. If you're an employer and you're looking at someone who is a bit older and has more experience, especially in these uncertain times, I can understand you will be more inclined to go with them rather than a younger, less experienced candidate. So, this is a significant problem facing youth employment.

I am also concerned about the impact of degrees being delivered as virtual learning. This is going to affect the current graduating cohorts. You can still develop a lot of skills at university, such as critical thinking and critical engagement in peer discussion online. Saying that, we run our events digitally now as well, and we can still make good discussion happen. But there are things, just by nature of the logistic element that must physically be in a place in the real world, to have impact. This is particularly true for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students. As a STEM student the proportion of fees you pay go towards being able to work in a laboratory or to work with key materials. You just can't access that online. Also, not being able to go into the library or the student union is just something that naturally will be of detriment to skills development. So, I believe it's the Covid-19 cohort both at school and university who will suffer as a result; and that is unfortunate. However, this is where organizations like our own can step in. We provide the opportunity to further develop communication skills; particularly with people you don't know. These are the sort of skills you develop when you're working in a team that take you completely out of your comfort zone.

In addition, particularly for young people, economic security is important, as life is becoming more and more precarious. I don't really see, especially in the current economic climate, that things will get better soon. In my opinion we need more job security and more workers' rights. So, for instance, in the UK there is talk about removing the Sunday trading laws in post-pandemic working, as part of the economic recovery. I mean people have died for those kinds of laws to be introduced so that there is a least one day without work in a week. This is certainly very relevant for young people now, and I believe young people are more switched on to these issues as they affect them directly.

These are some of the key problems: the precarious nature of coming out of university or just education in general into the real world, where there are not as many good safety nets.

Belgin: *Does the EYP have influence on policy making relevant for youth employment?*

Matthew: The answer to this varies across national borders. We are a politically unbound organization by nature of our Charter, not representing any particular political group or party. In the UK we don't have a political framework that ties us directly to policymakers and politicians; so there is no infrastructure whereby we can influence lobbying groups or select committees. However, this is not the case outside our immediate borders. For example, in Ireland, our sister organization is relatively closely aligned to the Irish Food Board. Certainly, as a result of that they have that direct line of communication on certain things. There are a few other examples like that. For instance, Germany's EYP organization is quite closely associated with the Federal Foreign Office in Germany.

Following our 2021 – 2025 EYP strategy, we are putting more effort into monitoring and evaluating our impact. A new Steering Group is currently being formed to develop a framework for the whole EYP organization to better understand, assess and communicate its impact. So, in the future we hope to have a stronger influence on policy making.

The relationship we have with influencing public policy was best summarised to me by fellow EYP member Kevin Boland; *'EYP probably won't change the world, but it will change the people that do'*. For example, there are many people who have been members of EYP who go on into positions of influence themselves. The immediate one that comes to mind, was one of the chairs at the Davos Economic Forum last year. There is also a Georgian member who was in Nairobi for a UN Women's summit. Similarly, there is a Swiss member who was recognised in Forbes '30 under 30' and was one of the Young Leaders at the UNESCO Youth Summit, among their many other achievements (see Forbes, 2020). So, they are good examples of EYP members who have influence on a wider scale.

Belgin: *What resources are needed to improve youth employment, in general?*

Matthew: From the EYP perspective, the resources needed to improve youth employment are those relevant for making sure that we're providing skills for the young people who take part in our events. We have several training events, every year. For example, we run a Summer Academy for the board members of all 40 EYP member countries. This focuses on key topics for supporting members further, such as committee management and development, fundraising, outreach and inclusion, public relations, and communications. Further, we provide training to organise successful committees, foster project management skills for organising events, and a diversity lab, to enable people to deal with a wide range of diverse views, opinions, and national cultures. To be able to deliver

these events and training sessions, we rely on our alumni network, our partnerships, for instance with the German Federal Foreign Office or the UN Refugee Agency, and donations.

Conclusion

It was a pleasure speaking to Matthew and to hear of the youth-led initiatives supporting development of crucial employability and career management skills among European youth. As a bottom-up, youth-led organisation aiming to develop future leaders, the EYP and all the initiatives they undertake remind us of the importance of the voice of the young people in driving social agendas. Most importantly for our purpose in this *Special Issue*, for contributing to the youth employment agenda, the EYP's specific objectives include developing intercultural dialogue, opportunities for skills development within the safety net of a well-connected international network. We may take these as the primary cues the young people in Europe use, as they make sense of the opportunities in labour markets and how to navigate barriers.

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