



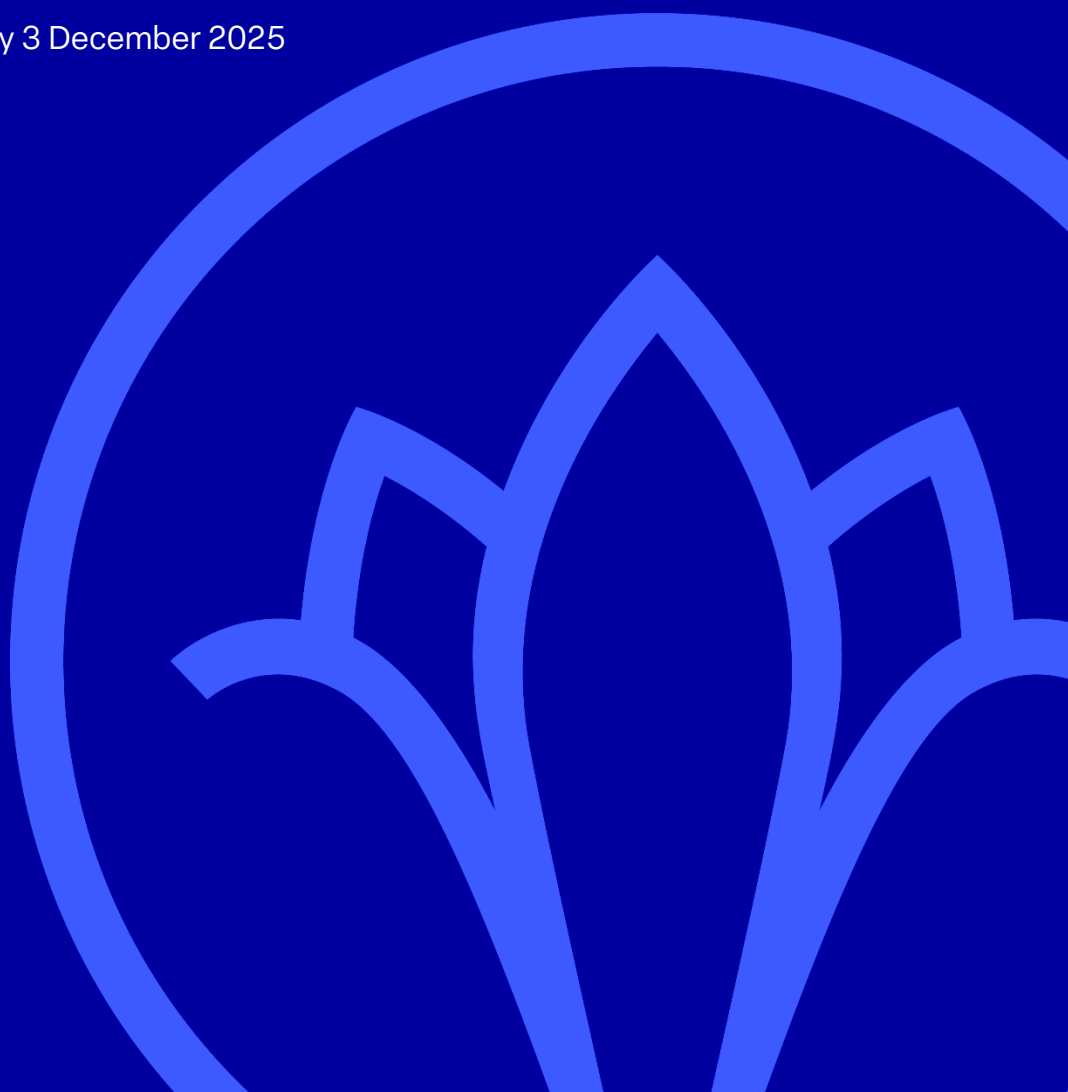
**Wilton
Park**

**Report:
Promoting empathy in adolescence:
created engaged global citizens and
enabling more peaceful, inclusive
societies**

Monday 1 – Wednesday 3 December 2025

In association with

Foróige, Pennsylvania
State University, The
Duke of Edinburgh's
International Award
Foundation, University
of Galway and Warriors
of Humanity



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The purpose of this Wilton Park event was to problematise societal problems connected to the absence of empathy, to explore the ways in which empathetic behaviour and the extension of empathy can be a solution to those problems, and then to examine how greater empathy can be developed to create engaged global citizens and to facilitate more peaceful and inclusive societies. Key findings:

- Though being more digitally connected than ever before, young people face significant challenges caused by isolation and social alienation
- Empathy—the capacity to understand another's emotional state—can be enhanced and extended, with observable benefits for social cohesion, individual well-being, and positive education outcomes, as well as improved delivery of public services
- Extending empathy can occur through a number of mechanisms, including nonformal educational programmes
- Opposition to empathic behaviour is associated with strategies and techniques of political divisiveness that undermine civil society and liberal democratic norms

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- Recommended practical solutions to promote and extend empathy include the creation of an Empathy Observatory, and the organisation of networks and working groups to address specific issues, including the potential development of a Youth Empathy Charter and a Global Human Skills Council.

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Introduction

The social and political context for this event is the rise of the “anxious generation” of young people who face social isolation, alienation, and loneliness, amid a political climate of increasing polarisation, tension, conflict, and cultural dissonance. These conditions both damage lives and endanger the fabric of civil society. The overarching practical problem that this Wilton Park event addressed was to examine how society can be repaired, how to include young people and wider society in the repair work, and what structures need to be put in place to achieve this.

At the centre of the solutions that the event worked towards was the essential and central role that empathy must play. Empathy—the “ability to emotionally share another person’s feelings or emotions” and “the ability to understand another person’s emotional state” (Silke et al. 2018)—is understood as a pro-social behaviour that is not innate or fixed, but something that can be developed, nurtured, and promoted. It is, as one participant stated, “a muscle that can be exercised.” It is a means of preventing people from othering those that are different from themselves, a tool for building stronger more resilient communities, and a means of re-embedding liberal democratic norms. It is also a social practice with the power to transform individual lives for the better, not of only young people but also for the benefit of wider society.

Much of the discussion in the event was in relation to problem specification around the agreed need for greater empathy. However, in order for “empathy” to avoid becoming a panchreston, the meeting also focused on solution design. There were two main discourses in the event in relation to policies and the role of the policy community, and in relation to education, especially nonformal education, but also in respect of formal education. A further broad discourse was the role and need for informed research in relation to empathy and how best to integrate that effectively within practical programmes and specific initiatives.

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An introduction to empathy

The problem and the context

- Young people are more connected than ever through digital technologies and social media and yet report feeling more isolated than ever.
- Algorithmic social media marketing techniques (seeking “likes” and “shares”) leads in some cases to the creation of content that is designed to inflame and aggravate. In 2025 the Oxford word of the year was “rage bait” - the creation of content that is “deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive” (Heaton 2025).
- This content is all too often used to promote populist politics (on both left and right) that is rooted in distrust of institutions, polarities of “us and them”, and creates conditions for social isolation and disconnection, described by one participant as a “compassion collapse”.
- Half of the global population are under the age of 25, and face unique challenges, including social isolation, climate change, and increased geo-political upheaval.

Empathy as a solution

- Empathy is not a fixed trait; it is a skill than can be learned.
- Empathy is also shaped by wider values and norms. As such promoting empathy is only half of a solution, the other half rests with the need to address the wider social and cultural context within which empathetic behaviours are nurtured.
- Empathy is a choice “to extend ourselves to others”, but its application is uneven and context is important. Empathy biases exist, whereby people exhibit greater empathy to those who are similar to them, and don’t necessarily empathise with those who appear to be different.
- Empathy is a means for people to be seen, recognised, and listened to by others, and therefore a key means of inclusion in community and, more broadly, civil society.
- Increased empathy leads to better educational outcomes.

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Challenges and key issues

- To examine when, where, and why empathy breaks down, or is not present to begin with
- To examine ways to promote or establish empathy not only when doing so is easy, but also, most critically, when it is difficult to do so
- To create policies and systems that cultivate empathy, but to do so without embedding difference

Empathy in theory and practice

The vision for a more empathetic society was described by one participant as “a world where through policies, programmes, and practices for adolescents, their families, their schools and their communities a range of virtues are nurtured—mindful awareness, empathy, perspective taking, compassion, forgiveness, love, altruism, and civic engagement.” The cultivation of these aspirations will, however, require the creation of an inter-generational project, involving both young people and adults, and be a work of considerable time.

Examples of young people engaging in empathetic projects included:

- A social entrepreneur in Nigeria creating opportunities for young women to develop AI skills
- A social activist from Indonesia who, with friends from high school, helped to open health clinics, and who commented that “empathy works when it moves from emotion to action”.
- A volunteer youth researcher in Ireland who co-hosted a food and empathy festival at the Department of Children in Dublin. The festival fostered intercultural communication through young people from 12 differing countries cooking different international recipes.

To routinise and habituate empathy the following challenges and needs were identified:

- The need for safe spaces to develop empathy
- To build communities that value empathy
- A recognition that young people are not the problem, but part of a solution to broader social problems that are linked to a lack of empathy

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- That young people need to be participants in the initiatives and policies to create greater empathy
- To understand the causes of empathy deficit and counter empathy
- To overcome barriers to developing effective empathy
- The utilisation of empathy education to enhance a compassionate society

Overcoming anti-empathy

Anti-empathy and counter-empathy are the opposite of the empathy described above, but have complex pathologies that include, paradoxically, forms of empathy that are constrained and partial rather than universal in nature. It was recognised in discussion that a lack of empathy is often downstream of deprivation, a lack of opportunity, and a sense of grievance fostered by a perception—or reality—of unfairness and inequity. This might be connected to employment, access to housing, schools, or delivery of public services, or more generally to do with inequality, social immobility, or deindustrialisation.

Anti-empathy and counter-empathy

- Anti-empathy is fostered by social conditions, particularly social isolation and a perception of or actual powerlessness
- Extremist political and cultural modes online are a factor in cultivating anti-empathy, including among young people. These constitute isolated individuals forming online communities that are hard to reach
- Other forms of empathy can cause problems, for example ISIS volunteers who are seemingly motivated by narratives of solidarity and emancipation: “empathy can be weaponised” and “empathy without instruction can be worse than apathy”.
- Showing empathy for particular groups (while excluding others) has been a feature of political marketing campaigns, particularly those using social media
- Trust in institutions, leaders, and policies is undermined by positioning them as being unempathetic
- Anti-empathy sentiment is often imbricated with discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and other forms of discrimination

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The benefits of empathy

- Being treated with empathy by public service employees improves citizens' perception of the state, by enabling people to express their views, be listened to, and respected. Conversely, non-empathetic behaviour by public servants has scarring effects, with detrimental spillover into other areas of public service delivery. How young people are treated by any authority figure (such as teachers, social workers, and the police) shapes their broader relationship with institutions and rules. For instance, work in the US has demonstrated that when young people in the child welfare system perceived their caseworkers as acting with procedural justice, they were significantly more likely to view the entire legal system as legitimate and less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour.
- Because empathy and empathetic behaviour can be taught, it can lead to better and more effective public services, engendering higher levels of trust among the public, including among traditionally hard to reach groups. Similarly, it can lead to a better experience for public servants, increasing their own wellbeing and job satisfaction
- “Empathy should be a core design principle for public services.”

Key questions and challenges

- What are the causes and drivers of anti-empathy, especially among young people in online spaces?
- How can those holding extreme views that lack empathy be brought back into civil society?
- Can lessons be learned from successful rehabilitation programmes for people following incarceration?
- How can public service delivery be adapted to include greater emphasis on empathy between public servants and the public?
- Can training be developed and implemented within public services that develops empathetic behaviours among public servants?

Non-formal education as a driver of empathy

Non-formal education—also referred to as experiential learning, enrichment, and learning-by-doing—encompasses all learning that exists outside of a classroom context. The discussion of non-formal education aimed to examine the ways in which

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non-formal educational practice could contribute to the development of empathy among young people.

a) Background

- The pedagogical origins of non-formal education were discussed, noting the importance of the legacy of the educationalist Kurt Hahn in the formation of various organisations with a commitment to non-formal education and experiential learning, notably Outward Bound, the United World Colleges, and the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award.
- The discussion noted the commonalities of approach to non-formal educational experiences, based on a shared philosophical background, and models of activity that placed an emphasis on practical service and authentic adventure.
- Education can be a source of social transformation by engendering curiosity and empathy.
 - “To move from pity to compassion and empathy, requires curiosity”
 - “Curiosity creates connection”

b) Examples

- Sporting activity can be a source of empathy development, for example:
 - The development of the [Sanctuary Runners](#) and the solidarity found through sport.
 - [Warriors for Humanity](#) advocates for greater social inclusion for youth through positive environmental projects, linking elite sports players with social projects
- Case-study of Foróige, Ireland. “Turning frustration into action”: how empathetic youth work can transform lives
 - [Foróige](#) is Ireland's leading youth organisation, rooted in communities and powered by non-formal education. Founded in 1952, it supports young people to organise Foróige clubs where they undertake self-led activities across a range of areas. Clubs provide safe gathering spaces for young people, based on community involvement. Foróige also undertakes youth work programmes, especially to tackle marginalisation. This includes, for example, citizenship development, and programmes targeting crime prevention, and mental health and wellbeing.

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- Personal testimony:

“Growing up in a disadvantaged area, I carried a lot: economic stress, limited opportunities, and the kind of low self-esteem that makes you question your worth. In primary school, I struggled with anger. In secondary school I grew quiet–still angry inside, doubting myself, constantly asking “Do I belong”? What changed wasn’t punishment or a label. It was a youth worker asking, “What is going on for you?” and meaning it. That’s where empathy begins: curiosity before connection. When I joined Leadership for Life¹, facilitators did small powerful things. They listened without rushing. They named strengths I couldn’t see. They gave me permission to try, fail, reflect, and try again. That’s nonformal education at its best: learning by doing, guided by reflection, with choice and voice at the centre. And it builds empathy because you practice seeing from different points of view–your peers, your community and, eventually, that of your own younger self, with kindness. Our Foróige club tackled antisocial behaviour, mental health, homelessness and the idea that young people were “troublemakers”. We met local politicians and put issues affecting young people on the table. That’s where leadership grows in youth work: young people making decisions, taking responsibility, and turning frustration into agency. And it’s where empathy grows too – listening across differences, taking action together, and learning that your story sits inside a wider community story. People sometimes ask what youth work does that school doesn’t do. Formal education is vital, but it often measures recall and individual attainment. Nonformal education measures growth in confidence, connection, and contribution. It builds the skills that make teams work and communities strong.

What did this mean for me personally? Youth work gave me a sense of self strong enough to face hard days without breaking, and a purpose grounded in service not status. It changed my mental health–giving me a language for triggers and tools for self-regulation. It changed how I communicate–clearer, kinder, more accountable. It changed how I lead–

¹ Leadership for Life is a programme run by Foróige for young people aged 15-18 that develops their leadership skills, with an emphasis on communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-awareness. (“Leadership for Life - Foróige” 2025)

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seeing the person, not just the problem, valuing the small consistent moments that accumulate into trust. Empathy isn't soft; it is transformative. And youth work is its delivery system.” **Wilton Park Dialogue, December 2025**

- Case-study of the Karsa 4 Youth project in Indonesia.
 - A Duke of Edinburgh's International Award Youth Representative set up the Karsa 4 Youth project during the Covid-19 pandemic, a youth-led initiative addressing critical gaps in healthcare access, gender equality, and youth empowerment across Semau Island and Kupang, Indonesia. The island, home to thousands, has only one clinic and limited reproductive health awareness. This creates deeply rooted impacts for young women and vulnerable groups. Through a Free Mobile Medical Clinic, Sustainable Menstrual Pads Workshops, and Youth Empowerment Workshops, the project improves access to essential healthcare, builds awareness, and cultivates local youth leadership. Beyond providing services, the project encourages young people to discover their potential, become changemakers, and lead future initiatives in their communities – by youth, for youth.
 - Personal testimony:

“Karsa 4 Youth has become more than a platform to serve. It has grown into a place of learning, leadership, and real direct impact that goes far beyond our initial plans.”

“Young people in our region who were once beneficiaries are now taking the initiative to start their own social projects to improve their communities. What began as a youth-led idea has grown into an organization supported by multiple donors, continuously reaching thousands of people in both rural and urban Indonesia. Proving that youth-led change creates change-makers, not just programs.” **Wilton Park Dialogue, December 2025**

c) Challenges and key issues

- Educational attainment is sometimes framed as the difference between “soft” and “hard” skills. Developing “soft” skills, such as empathy, can be difficult, and requires a re-thinking of educational forms.

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- Emphasis on technical skills needs to be supplemented by emphasis on human skills.
- Young people need to be involved in the process of design and implementation
- How can interventions be developed that can reach 3 billion young people globally?
- How can nonformal education be delivered at scale?
- How can interventions reach both the Global South and Global North contexts, and what variations in approach will be required?
- Hard to reach groups and inclusion and exclusion in relation programmes that can foster empathy
 - It was noted that “hard to reach groups are hard to reach” and a persistent problem in initiatives designed to boost engagement with civil society is that they become the preserve of middle-class volunteers who are self-selecting
- Young people cannot volunteer for non-formal education when they lack opportunity, resources, and time to do so. Those who cannot, will be left behind
 - People who are traumatised or have experienced social isolation or social dislocation are sometimes unwilling to speak or engage with programmes
 - Cultural differences can also contribute to exclusion from interventions and programmes, especially where programmes are generic and do not articulate with different cultural modalities

Recommendations and strategy

Strategy

Empathy is not fixed, but can be extended, expanded, and promoted. The extension of empathy can be a part of the solution to various contemporary issues, counteracting social isolation, political extremism and the propagation of toxic ideologies. Empathy can be a binding force that embeds liberal democratic values and civil society in the face of the challenges set against it, as well as improving wellbeing, life chances, and educational outcomes.

To accomplish these benefits requires systemic interventions that create spaces for young people to develop their empathetic capabilities. It also requires engagement with existing debates and priorities. These include economic sustainability, civil society development, counter-extremism interventions, and building resilience to substantial

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social change (including the challenges that AI, climate change, and geopolitical upheaval may cause), and the integration of empathy interventions within and through policies in relation to those areas. Empathy in action, and empathy through organisations, institutions, and public policy is therefore the overarching strategic objective.

Practical mechanisms

The general outcome sought is the expansion of empathy in the lived experience of young people and more broadly in society as whole. To begin to achieve this in a concrete and actionable way, work needs to be undertaken in a number of different areas to create necessary structures and networks to build capacity and develop new interventions. This in turn will require the creation of a strategy and plans for implementation. In the latter stages of the event, it became evident that there was emerging agreement around different structures and solutions. These are grouped below under three headings: working groups and work packages; network and community building; and an empathy observatory and related initiatives.

Working groups/work packages

The following groups and work packages will seek to organise going forward in the following areas. Further groups and work packages can be developed following need identification.

- Convening Group
 - A new Convening Group will provide strategic leadership and coordinate the organisation of any initiatives and other working groups. It will be responsible for strategy development, communications, and participant network maintenance.
 - It was noted that there should be both short-term and longer-term strategic objectives that will require different planning cycles and opportunity identification.
 - The Convening Group will act as a coordinator for any funding and philanthropic initiatives
 - The Convening Group will build alliances and relationships
 - Collaborations with different levels of civil society actor organisations
 - Undertake matchmaking to align groups with specific common interests

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- Provide advocacy and media representation
- Provide leadership and guidance in relation to different priorities, for example, the different needs of the Global South and Global North, and nonformal and formal educational settings
- Provide a forum for young people and their voice to be included at a strategic level
- The Convening Group will take the lead in creating the Empathy Observatory and the Empathy Gauge (see below).
- Work packages (WPs)
 - The purpose of the following four work packages is to bring together different interested organisations and individuals to address specific issues and problems identified at the Wilton Park event, and to take forward ideas and potential projects as discussed at the event as noted in the report above. These would typically involve collaboration between different types of organisations/individuals (some combination of civil society organisations, university research groups, youth work organisations and nonformal education organisations)
 - WP1: Hard to reach groups
 - Hard to reach groups pose a challenge in terms of designing and implementing interventions to promote empathy. The purpose of this work package will be to bring together those with experience of undertaking youth work and social research in relation to hard to reach groups to work on this problem.
 - WP2: Anti-empathy
 - The use of anti-empathy rhetoric to inflame opinion and encourage social division, especially online, is reflective of an active opposition to empathy. This work package will seek to better understand the ways in which the social environment has become contested by adversaries to empathy, as well as the causes and mechanisms of anti-empathy, and to work towards solutions to its appeal.

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- WP3: Public service delivery
 - Embedding greater empathy in public service delivery offers the potential to benefit young people and their families in wider social and policy contexts. This work package will seek to develop a better understanding of how, where and when greater empathy might lead to better outcomes in public service delivery
- WP4: Non-formal education
 - Non-formal education has been identified as an important mode through which greater empathy among young people can be fostered. The purpose of this work package will be to examine ways in which this can be deepened and widened, in particular to reach a greater number of young people on a global basis. This would include how the nonformal and formal education sectors could work together.

Network and community building

It was recognised that the meeting was a beginning for future discussions and network development in relation to shared values and aims in relation to promoting empathy.

- The need to include young people within these processes is of utmost importance. Effective partnerships are a critical means of including youth voice in the discussions about empathy and programmes to develop empathy
- The intention is to facilitate the creation of partnerships with organisations with shared interests, especially those with an interest in, or responsibility for delivery of, nonformal education.
- Partnership extension will build on the existing connections between the UNESCO chairs global network, the Human Development and Family Studies Department and the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Penn State University, USA, and the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at the University of Galway, Ireland.

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- Partnerships might include:
 - Non-formal educational organisations, for example the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGOS), the World Scout Movement (WOSM), the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE), and Foróige
 - International civil society organisations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Council of Europe
 - International institutions of global governance, especially those with responsibility for social, economic, and human development, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Bank
 - Humanitarian aid organizations, such as The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and Save the Children
 - Universities and research institutes with a focus on youth work and child services
 - Faith groups and wisdom traditions, and related humanitarian initiatives that focus on children, young people, and families
 - Governmental departments and agencies at multiple levels, particularly those with responsibility for children and youth services, or those public services with substantial impact on children, young people, and their families
- Effective partnerships need to be able to cut across different sectors

Empathy Observatory

The purpose of an Empathy Observatory is to monitor, coordinate, and promote empathy related interventions and research, and to provide resources and technical assistance in relation to the advancement of empathy in society. It would seek to leverage convening power and work as a commissioning agency

- The Empathy Observatory would be the venue for facilitating and including youth voice as part of empathy education and related societal interventions. A key element of the observatory would be the participation of young people, including youth as researchers
- The Empathy Observatory would act as an international centre for empathy work, and the dissemination and promotion of good practice:

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- The Empathy Observatory would act as a repository for research and other resources to enable organisations and individuals to embed empathy enhancement within practice. This might include, for example, models and resources for teachers and youth workers, and sharing good practice
- The Empathy Observatory would undertake evaluation of existing empathy related initiatives, and to provide compelling evidence of the impact that empathy can have.
- The Empathy Observatory might commission further initiatives, as a potential conduit and coordinator of fund-raising activities to develop capacity and support new projects and programmes. The Observatory might develop the following:
 - **Technical assistance and capacity building** for policy-makers, activists, as well as organisations engaging with young people in a range of settings, including nonformal and formal education, and public service delivery. This would include the commissioning of pilot programmes.
 - **Research coordination** to enable organisations with research capability to support the work of practice based groups. This would also link and coordinate with the working groups/work packages listed above to provide research and data.
 - **Empathy gauge**
 - A key ambition is to create a framework for measuring the impact of empathy, to demonstrate the value of empathy initiatives to organisations and policy-makers
 - This will involve the creation of credible methodology. This would incorporate the different national, cultural, linguistic, and conceptual variations in understanding what empathy is, and is not, in different contexts. This would include understanding the variations in empathy acquisition and understanding on the basis of gender, nationality, socio-economic group, and other demographic variations
 - It was discussed that the gauge should also seek to measure, perhaps qualitatively, issues in relation to social environment and community, as well as using existing quantitative datasets, especially those made available by the OECD, Eurostat, and other international institutions

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- A Youth Empathy Charter would provide an international platform for embedding empathy from a human rights perspective, designed and quality proofed by young people.
- A Global Human Skills Council would galvanise urgent practical policy change to make sure young people worldwide have all the Human Skills they need to thrive in a world of rapid technological change, especially those rooted in empathy and empathetic behaviour.
 - By mobilising an influential partnership of multilateral bodies, significant tech players, and the world’s largest youth movements, the Global Human Skills Council aims to establish that Human Skills are an essential complement to formal education and Digital Skills in driving the best outcomes for societies and economies worldwide.
 - It would amplify evidence from the Empathy Observatory, coordinate political support and policy dialogue across countries, continents and relevant stakeholders, establish and share best practices, demonstrating models that develop Human Skills, as well as signposting technical assistance, guidance, and partnership opportunities to facilitate implementation.

Simon Mollan

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enquiries@wiltonpark.org.uk

Switchboard: +44 (0)1903 815020

Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning,
West Sussex, BN44 3DZ, United Kingdom

wiltonpark.org.uk

