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PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY: A LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL STUDENT RIGHTS

Report of the study session held by

**Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions
(OBESSU)**

in co-operation with the
European Youth Centre of the Council of Europe

European Youth Centre Budapest
07/04/2013 – 14/04/2013



This report gives an account of various aspects of the study session. It has been produced by and is the responsibility of the educational team of the study session. It does not represent the official point of view of the Council of Europe.

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Executive Summary

The Study Session *Participation and Democracy: A Legal Framework for School Student Rights*, gathered more than 35 school student activists from all over Europe at the European Youth Centre in Budapest from the 7th to 14th April 2013. The aim of the Study Session was to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge of the participants in order to allow them to use existing tools, including legal mechanisms, to advocate for full democratic participation and to build their capacity to become multipliers among the school student community at national level.

The Study Session looked at existing tools available for school student organisations to achieve their aims and make their voices heard. The event explored possibilities for school students and their organisation to advocate for full democratic participation on national and European level. It wanted to make participants familiar with the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education and other documents available to demand full participation; to establish a common ground and developing a shared understanding on the topic of participation and democracy; make participants self-reflect about their organisations' work on the topic, share best practices, encourage networking and develop follow-up plans. OBESSU documents, enhancing and promoting democracy in schools and participation were also explored such as the [Declaration of School Student Rights](#)¹ and the [Manual for School Students](#)². In addition, they also learned about new forms of participation, developing follow-up projects and strengthening their skills and competences. They had a hands-on experience in new ways of participation, reflected on their own organisational structures and built a model of school that they will aim to develop in their own realities.

Dedicated sessions provided inputs from experts as well as participants of the Study Session who live every day fighting for school student rights, and for their voice to be heard. OBESSU's team wanted to create a safe space for participants to learn, communicate and develop throughout the week. The Study Session used non-formal methods developed both in the Council of Europe youth field and OBESSU educational activities, focusing on peer education and experiential learning. Debates on current issues were held, such as vote@16, the concept of democratic schools was explored and an exhibition about new forms of participation was created by the participants.

An important educational and methodological base and approach was to give a chance to participants to live democracy at the session, thus the preparatory team tried to make the session as participatory as possible – participants had a say in making the agenda, agenda was being adapted to the needs of the group, learning from each other was a constant element in the group work, facilitation of Open Space workshops, evening activities were developed and run by a social committee, etc.

The participants learned a lot both personally as well as for their organisation. For a week they lived together with school student representatives from all over Europe, addressing the topic of participation and democracy every day, thus constantly learning from each other and challenging themselves. By working in on a topic which is so central to all school student activists work, with participants facing the same challenges all over Europe and having different experiences, they sometimes had very eye-opening experiences when hearing

¹ <http://www.obessu.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/03/Declaration-of-school-student-rights.pdf>

² http://issuu.com/obessu/docs/a_manual_for_school_students/1?e=0

about completely different realities or how the same challenge could be chosen to be tackled with in a completely different way. The participants also acquired new tools and ideas to implement after the event, especially through the sessions devoted to developing projects and action plans promoting active participation, they increased their skills as multipliers, which will also have an impact on their organisations at a national level. In addition, the study session helped the participants acquire the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge and provided them with methods to approach the topic of participation and democracy in their everyday lives and in their home organisations.

The most important messages of the Study Session *Participation and Democracy: A Legal Framework for School Student Rights* are:

- Democracy can only be learned by experiencing it; therefore school democracy must be encouraged and improved, where representative structures are part of the decision-making processes.
- School students should be recognised as equal partners and experts in schools.
- Decisions about young people, should be made by and with young people.

Introduction

The work on participation and democracy are among the strongest points of commitment for OBESSU. We believe that as school students, being able to actively participate and have the chance to actually have a say gives a sense of ownership and builds interest and motivation which are incredibly stimulating factors. This in turn will foster active participation and democratic citizenship of students in society and later in life. This event built on our previous work, taking the topic one step further in focusing solely on participation and democracy and the existing tools, including legal mechanisms, which are already available to school student organisations.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the Study Session was to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge of the participants in order to allow them to use existing tools, including legal mechanisms, to advocate for full democratic participation and to build their capacity to become multipliers among the school student community at national level.

The main objectives of the Study Session were to:

- ❖ To make participants familiar with the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education and other relevant documents at disposal to demand full participation;
- ❖ To establish a common ground and develop a shared understanding on the topic of participation and democracy;
- ❖ To make participants reflect about their organisations work on participation and democracy and share their personal experiences;
- ❖ To encourage networking amongst participants and develop effective follow up plans;
- ❖ To build the participants knowledge of existing tools in Europe, including legal mechanisms, and develop their skills in how to use these to advocate for a full democratic participation on national and European level;
- ❖ To explore, explain and inform participants about the different levels and definitions of participation and democracy around Europe;
- ❖ To reflect on the reality of youth participation and democracy within our own organisation, school, community.

To be able to stand up for your human rights and be an active part of a democratic system, individuals have to be able to participate actively in society. Democracy cannot be understood without actively taking part in it since it is a way of life. “Every actor within the school community must be given equal value and equal ownership of the school”, and “their participation in all

discussions and all decision-making affecting school life must be guaranteed” (OBESSU Political Platform). Therefore the priorities of human rights education, promoting democratic participation and citizenship, promoting existing tools and resources on human rights education with a view of supporting the role of youth work and promoting the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education were integral parts of the programme.

Participant’s profile

The participants of the Study Session were selected through an open call, which was disseminated among the OBESSU member, observer and contact organisations. The applicants were all active in school student organisations at national level. The participants came from very different organisational backgrounds, where some have existed for many years and have a lot of experience as organisations, and working on the topic, whilst others were just in their initial phases of setting up democratic national structures for school student unions in order to foster participation of secondary school students.

Thirty-three participants attended the Study Session coming from twenty different organisations. The age of the participants ranged between 14 and 25, although the average age was around 18/19. The geographical composition of the group was also very spread out, where there were people living in seventeen different countries present, ranging from Iceland, to Romania, from Malta to Finland, and Bulgaria to Belgium.

Programme

The programme was developed around the following phases:

- Introduction and foundation
- Definitions and exploring levels of democracy and participation
- Existing tools and experience sharing
- Apply and put into practice
- Reflection and follow-up

The first phase served the purpose of introducing the topic to the participants and laying the foundations for the rest of the week. It was essential to find a common language and understanding of the topic in order to ensure that everyone had the same starting point and a chance to familiarise themselves with the subject area of the Study Session. Since everyone came from such different backgrounds, geographical, organisational settings, and not only had very different levels awareness of the topic, but also different preconceived notions, the concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘participation’ were explored. The structures of participants’ peer organisations were mapped out which was also the first element of intercultural dialogue.

The second phase consisted of exploring the concepts of participation and democracy in more depth, presenting different contexts, tools and instruments existing to support participation and in particular open the first discussion about participation in school, and school student participation. These discussions were essential for participants in order to get acquainted to different framework and approaches to youth participation, learning about different practices existing in Europe and defining the main areas of further exploration and the priority areas of student participation in school life. This facilitated the process of connecting abstract concepts to reality, and demonstrated how to implement them.

This lead to the next phase where participants had the chance to share experiences and best practices, as well as explore projects that had been done so far. Not only could the participants see what projects have been done within the group but also they had a chance to research innovative projects done by other organisations. This facilitated the process of connecting abstract concepts to reality, and demonstrated how to implement them. Furthermore, existing tools such as the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, and the Declaration of School Students Rights were also examined.

After having discussed the concepts, explored the existing tools and shared experiences the participants had the chance to think about how to use the knowledge and skills learned and put them into practice, and how they could apply this in their own reality. The last phase consisted of empowering participants to take that final leap themselves, as well as to develop follow-up projects and action plans. Furthermore, throughout the week the participants had had the chance for evaluation and self-reflection. This was brought to a close in the last phase where participants had reflected over their experiences during the Study Session and how to bring them to the home organisations.

The entire programme was based on principles of non-formal education with the aim of fostering interactivity and participants' creativity. The programme alternated between plenary sessions and group work in order to ensure that everyone felt comfortable and to create good dynamics among participants and effective exchange between them. The entire programme was designed in a way to be accessible for all always.

Inputs and Discussions: New Ideas and Conclusions emerging from the discussions:

Democracy and Participation

The Preparatory Team (prep-team) had organised sessions at the beginning of the Study Session in order to set the common ground for everyone, exploring the definitions of the concepts to be dealt with throughout the week, both to start the reflecting process and critical thinking about the concepts, but also to establish the level of knowledge and experience within the group.

When beginning to discuss democracy and participation, what it really means, and linking it to School Students' reality, many different notions emerged. A common starting point was often participation in elections, though the participants quickly agreed that participation is so

much more than that. Definitions and models, such as the Ladder of participation, RMSOS approach, and various papers such as the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, and the Declaration of School Students Rights were introduced to the participants. They were asked to examine their own educational systems as well as their own structures to see how participatory and democratic they may be. This also gave the opportunity to learn from one-another and find out how things work in different countries and organisations.

Through the discussions, it emerged how fundamentally important knowledge about your rights, representation and structures are in order to access them. Due to the fact that the participants come from so many different countries, naturally the different realities came up in the discussions and it was interesting to explore the different levels of participation and structures in schools in the different countries across Europe. In one of the discussions, the participant from Sweden stated that “in Sweden all students have a right to have a representative structure, but not all school have one. And in these cases, where they don’t exist, students may not know about these rights”. A participant from Ireland explained that in Ireland there is only one educational path to choose from, and there are no school student representatives on school boards. The Finnish delegates instead explained that in Finland you have to have school student representation in schools. Sadly, many of the participants felt that in their country school student representation was not developed enough, and that their voice, if heard at all, counted less than that of so-called “adults”.

During the study session, when discussing participation, it was agreed that decisions should not be made for youth, but with them and there was a general disagreement in putting adults on a higher level than youth. Furthermore, the concept of non-participation and political apathy were also discussed in relation to participation. Through these discussions, a general consensus emerged that there is a clear difference between active non-participation and apathy. If a person actively chooses not to participate, as a form of protest, then that is a form of participation. However, if someone does not participate simply because they do not care, then it cannot be considered participation.

The concept of democratic schools, and school democracy were also extensively discussed during the study session. One participant stated

“One of the main functions of the school is teaching the citizens what it is to be part of the democratic society. And in order to learn about that, you have to experience it”.

This statement was supported by all the participants, and it was also stated that “the primary role of schools is to create citizens, not ready products for the labour market. In order to learn about democracy it is better to live it, rather than be taught it”.

Participants felt that students must be part of the decision-making, but unfortunately, in a lot of cases youth are underestimated and not taken into account enough which is a disadvantage, but by having strong, working democratic representative organisations this often proves to be an enormous advantage, since it often exceeds the expectations of adults, and gains respect. However, at the same time, this also means that it is a huge responsibility that the organisations and their leaders carry. A participant pointed out that the main role of school student organisations/councils in democratic schools is to be the voice and face of students.

From Rhetoric to Reality:

During the Study Session, the prep-team did not only want the participants to gain knowledge and reflect on the topics, but also to gain the attitudes, skills and competences to apply what they learned when going back home and be able to both do something in their everyday life but also do projects. Therefore several sessions were aimed at empowering the participants that everyone can make a difference, but also at gaining practical skills, looking at how to develop actions and at examples of projects already done.

The participants also had a chance to analyse their own structures, both in their delegations as well as then to confront with the other delegates, in order to learn from one another and apply the knowledge and concepts they had discussed. One of the sessions, involving the Declaration of School Student Rights, they had to discuss whether certain articles were more important than others, and also reflect about the situation in their own countries. Many different impressions emerged from this. Some participants felt that they are all fundamental, and that they are all basic human rights. One participant from Denmark stated “all statements are universally important, and in Denmark all of them exist, and should be in all countries”. However, not everyone felt the same way. A participant from Slovakia expressed that for her some things are cultural: “I don’t feel that I am missing anything in Slovakia, and since I don’t have the chance to influence textbooks and curricula I put it at the bottom as importance. However during the discussions I noticed that it was extremely important for other countries. So I think it is cultural”. This could also be seen to be true for the participants from Serbia, who had rated getting finances at the bottom since they do not receive any governmental funding. One participant expressed that for him the most interesting thing that emerged from the discussions was the completely different starting point he had compared to another delegate he was discussing with. For him, the starting point is the will to have a better educational system, and that will bring about school student structures, however, the other participant felt that in order to have a good educational system one of the conditions is having school student structures.

“It is not about winning or losing, but we can make it better by putting our ideas together, learning from one another and moulding it together”.

Looking at their own structures and realities was also a good way to identify common issues that all the organisations face, and ways to tackle these. Most participants felt that one of the biggest issues for their organisation is outreach and the gap between the organisation and their constituents. Many felt that they had to work more at local level to get school students involved. Participants felt that their organisations represent a lot of students, though they do not feel connected to the organisations themselves, and in many cases, school students might not even know that a school student representative structure exists. Even one of the biggest and most well known national school student organisations stated that most students knew of them through the student card they provide, and the benefits it brings, but not what the organisation actually does and what it stands for. All organisations really felt a need to disseminate information about their organisations, raise awareness about the issues which are important to them, both to students themselves but also to stakeholders.

One of the hot-topics for young people at the moment in Europe is the debate on whether young people should be able to vote at the age of 16, which is already a reality in some countries. This debate has been highlighted largely due to the European Youth Forum’s campaign Vote@16. OBESSU did not yet have a stance on this topic at the time of the Study Session, though due to the topic it was tackling, it was decided to have a formal debate solely on this issue, where the participants had the chance to discuss and confront with one another on this issue. This was also important, because this debate would contribute to

OBESSU's official stance on this issue, as well as through other consultations and workshops having taken place at other times. The fact that this debate took place, where the delegates had had the opportunity to prepare their organisational stances before arriving to the Study Session, and then take part in it, meant that participants truly felt that they were participating in the governance of OBESSU, in contributing to the organisation taking a stance on this matter – and also contributing to a much larger debate and campaign taking place at European level. It was clear how important this discussion was to participants, not only through the buzz which was going on about it during the free time, but also through the reflection groups and final evaluation. Participants truly felt that they were participating, making a difference, and putting into practice many things that had been discussed in the previous days.

During the mid-term evaluation, the prep-team talked about how the study session was progressing, and decided to change one of the sessions coming up the next day so as to incorporate the feedback they had been given by participants, and meet their needs. They decided to make a very interactive session specifically looking at various forms of participation, in order to give new ideas and look at other movements for inspiration. It was decided that participants would be divided into groups, and each group would research on of the following formats of participation: alternative voting systems, petitions, "Occupy" movement, going viral online, blogging, artistic expressions, flash mobs and protests. After they had researched and looked up examples, they had to prepare an exhibition where they had the chance to showcase to one another what they had found. This became one of the most successful and motivating activities of the entire Study Session, since it was very hands-on and gave real examples of actions they themselves can carry out. The outcomes of this workshop were also collected and made into a [booklet](#)³, which was distributed to all the participants, but also promoted to the organisations to be able to use as a resource themselves.

On the last day, participants also had a chance to retrace their journey throughout the week, and make up a plan of action for themselves and their organisation of what they wanted to take home after this event, and what steps they can take in order to achieve their goals. This was a moment where they had the chance to think about how to put into practice all the ideas they had come up with during the Study Session.

External Speakers

On the fourth day of the study session, OBESSU had invited a speaker from the Council of Europe's Advisory Council on Youth: Mihai Floran. He had been invited so as to build the participants' knowledge on existing tools in Europe, including legal mechanisms – and specifically explaining the idea of Co-management and what this actually means. It was an informative session, which had the effect of truly showing participants an existing structure where the voice of youth is truly heard, and they co-manage this together with the governmental representatives.

On the last day, the prep-team had decided to invite a speaker who is an activist in order to inspire and motivate participants to truly become active citizens, and give ideas of how actions can be done. Åsa Gunven was the speaker invited, and she has a lot of experience

³ <http://issuu.com/obessu/docs/expo>

in advocacy aiming at changing society and micro-campaigning. She came with a whirlwind of examples, questions, actions and had an infectious energy which really enthused the participants.

“Don’t be afraid of the issues! We are the young, the visionary, the brave!”

Åsa asked the participants to start thinking about *how can I be an agent for change* as a starting point. She gave the participants a lot of good ideas on how to do actions, use pictures, social media, and other means to achieve their goals. Examples from her own experience were of great inspiration to the participants. She also gave ideas of how to mobilise people for visible actions. Many times, it is easier to mobilise for micro-actions, asking for a small commitment to begin with. Combining small micro-actions, and creating agents for change can turn into a powerful message.

The questions and discussions that were generated by this session, also showed the wealth of experience that the school student activists sitting in the room had amongst themselves. For example, the participants from Iceland shared an example how they managed to trigger a national debate on LGBT rights in Iceland, which actually brought about some positive change in the country. Åsa reminded that one should focus on the issues, pick them carefully and raise them. It is important to transmit the urgency of the issue, both for the activist as well as the target: for motivation and why they have to listen.

Lastly, a point was made about being school student representatives, and youth representatives. An OBESSU Board Member stated:

“Don’t accept the role you are given, make sure you represent youth!”

This statement set a perfect tone to the end of a very motivating study session, where participants had truly learned a lot and been able to learn about legal mechanisms, and other tools that are there to continue fighting for and safeguarding school student rights.

Reflection and evaluation

At the end of each day, participants were invited to reflect and evaluate the day. They were divided into small groups, and every evening at the end of the day they met together with their prep-team member to go through the day. This moment was a very important part of the programme, and served the purpose of reflecting over the activities of the day, and relate them to the participants’ realities. The prep-team members were using different methods of evaluation and reflection which was also to show participants various ways to make people reflect through non-formal methods. At this study session in particular, the prep-team had decided the participants themselves would take it in turn to facilitate the reflection groups every evening. Not only would this set a greater tone of them all being peers, and equals, but also assist in the learning experience and thinking about methods that can be used, as well as learning from one-another.

The prep-team had also organised a group midterm evaluation, which took place in the middle of the Study Session. This gave the group a chance to look at their aims and expectations, and think about whether these had been met, if they felt the study session was going in the right direction and see what other people’s feelings were. It also gave the prep-team an idea of what the group felt or needed more of and could adjust accordingly and take on the feedback. As with all activities, the prep-team had ensured to make the evaluation comfortable for everyone, so they made sure to use different methods.

Participants could express themselves both silently and vocally, and were also given the chance for reflection.

A large part of the last day was dedicated to final reflection and evaluation. This was both done as a whole group as well as individually. One part of the last day evaluation was silent, where a “path” of flipchart paper had been laid out in the entire room, and the participants had the chance to express themselves in drawing and writing on the paper about the journey they had taken that week. They could also see what others had expressed. The second part of the evaluation used drama, where in groups they had to prepare a sketch or song about one aspect of the week, and present it to the rest of the group. This not only served to think about the various aspects of the week, but also to bring the group together in the final moments of the study session. In addition, a written individual evaluation was also conducted – where participants were given some time to complete this in their own time.

Here is a collection of statements from the final evaluation:

- “In many ways it surpassed my expectations, it was an extremely interesting topic”.
- “I think it was really good, we learnt a lot new methods and ways of viewing things. Also just talking with all these people gives a lot of inspiration”.
- “I learnt more this week than in a month at school. I really value the whole study session”.
- “The Study Session has helped me to refill my belief in participation and my motivation to work for it, and this will be useful for me to foster participation everywhere”.
- “I have learned a lot of new methods and gained some interesting knowledge which I will take home and practice in my organization but also in the Local and National Students Council. I will talk with the members and try to include the knowledge in our work”.

Social and fun

At the Study Session, icebreakers, energizers, contact and cooperation games were played. These were organised by the prep-team and as the study session progressed and participants felt more comfortable with one-another, participants also started leading energizers, taking ownership. This added to the learning of new games, sharing of new experiences that could be repeated again once back home.

Throughout the study session the preparatory team had set up an “Ancient Greece” theme through which they presented guests, outcomes were presented, and different activities were organised around the theme. This created an informal and creative atmosphere for the participants. Inspirational quotes were also put up each day. This specific theme was chosen thinking that Ancient Greece is often regarded as the birthplace of democracy.

The participants also took a lot of initiative in organising social games, and coming up with energizers so that everyone could join in. For example during social evenings many games were played that had been self-organised by the participants, where they tried to stay together and include everybody. A mock debate was organised on one evening during the week, where participants themselves could come up with what topics they wanted do discuss

as well as took charge in facilitating the session itself. In addition, for the farewell party, the participants set up a “party-committee” in charge of organising the activities for that night.

Participants also took part in social media, through tweeting and facebook. There was a specific facebook event & group made for the study session, as well as a hashtag (#obessuDP). This also gave rise to online discussions and impressions, spreading the message further, as well as continuously sharing ideas and projects after the event. [Articles](#)⁴ were also written by participants, such as the one published on the OBESSU website.

Methodologies

The Study Session mainly used non-formal education methods to enhance active participation and interaction among the participants. Peer-to-peer learning, experiential learning and informal learning were all learning methods used.

The sessions varied between plenary sessions, smaller group work, individual reflection, presentations and active research. By alternating the methods everyone was able to participate and feel comfortable.

Examples of methods used are American Debate, World Café, Open Space, Role Play, and other. The methodologies used are also an important learning point for the participants, as they therefore learn new methodologies which they can implement in their home organisations.

Several of the Council of Europe publications were also used, such as the Compass and Have your Say. These were excellent tools and resources for the prep-team, where they could take inspiration from the activities and adapt them to the study sessions needs.

Main Outcomes of the Study Session

The outcomes of the study session have been varied and numerous.

OBESSU and its member organisations had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and expertise about the topic of participation and democracy, what tools and mechanisms exist to support school student representatives and safeguarding school student rights. Moreover, the event helped strengthen the relation among school student unions in Europe thus increasing cooperation in the future.

The event was also a beneficial learning space for further development and involvement of the organisation in aspects related both to logistics and content, which will be useful to future projects.

The preparatory team also learned a lot from the study session: the members further developed their training and facilitation skills, deepened their knowledge in the topics addressed, increased their ability to work in multicultural teams, and learned how to truly be inclusive at all times. In addition, the members of the prep-team also learned how to discuss challenging concepts and how to overcome disagreements. When designing and preparing a

⁴ <http://www.obessu.org/sakki-participant-musa-jallow-tells-us-about-his-experience-at-the-obessu-study-session-participation-and-democracy>

study session as a team, conflicts and disagreements do arise, and the team learned how to confront and resolve these together. It was an experience which was very enriching and allowed for personal growth and development. Lastly, the prep-team also learned how to incorporate participants' feedback into their sessions, and if necessary – change the agenda in order to better suit their needs. This is not always easy to accomplish, when a structured agenda has already been thought of beforehand, sessions have been prepared, and the team is tired from the ongoing week.

The participants learned a lot both personally as well as for their organisation. For a week they lived together with school student representatives from all over Europe, addressing the topic of participation and democracy every day, thus constantly learning from each other and challenging themselves. By working in on a topic which is so central to all school student activists work, with participants facing the same challenges all over Europe and having different experiences, they sometimes had very eye-opening experiences when hearing about completely different realities or how the same challenge could be chosen to be tackled with in a completely different way. The participants also acquired new tools and ideas to implement after the event, especially through the sessions devoted to developing projects and action plans promoting active participation, they increased their skills as multipliers, which will also have an impact on their organisations at a national level. In addition, the study session helped the participants acquire the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge and provided them with methods to approach the topic of participation and democracy in their everyday lives and in their home organisations.

Please find the link to OBESSU's article on the study session and its outcomes [here](#)⁵.

Follow-up activities

Both, the participants and OBESSU committed themselves to different follow-up activities.

Most importantly, since it translates into a truly multiplying experience, at the study session the participants had the opportunity to explore and improve their competences, skills and attitudes related to the topic and committed to use their expertise once back in their home organisations.

The participants committed to report back to their home organisations and to share the knowledge learned and the best practices gathered. Some participants planned concrete actions they would implement in their home organisation where they could apply and implement their new skills. These were actions such as: organising trainings and workshops on participation and democracy; putting into practice some of the alternative methods of participation they had researched; sharing what was learned with friends and family; improve the democracy within their home organisation, in their schools and in their group of friends; write articles about the study session; propose a project of visiting schools and holding workshops on the topic and develop democracy and participation in schools.

OBESSU has worked on various aspects of participation and democracy for many years, since it lies at the core of our mission. Therefore OBESSU will continue to build on this experience starting already at the Summer School 2013 "Learn to Change" which centres on Citizenship Education. Just after the study session, in April, OBESSU organised an [online](#)

⁵ <http://www.obessu.org/towards-a-more-democratic-europe-were-in>

[focus](#)⁶ specifically on the topic of participation and democracy, which not only served to disseminate the information gained at the study session, it continued keeping the topic in the spotlight, ensured to multiply the message, but also demonstrated a way of raising awareness to the participants. OBESSU also followed-up on by writing a [Position Paper on Democratic Participation](#)⁷ where some of the inputs and results of the Study Session were used.

School Student activists in Europe can also continue to disseminate the outcomes of the Study Session by promoting the [New Forms of Participation](#)⁸ document. In addition, the sessions that were held at the Study Session are readily available for all the participants as well as other School Student activists on the [OBESSU Share your Skills toolkit](#)⁹. Many participants wanted to take inspiration from the Study Session for their own workshops and trainings they would hold in their own national organisations.

Final Conclusions and Recommendations

This Study Session was a great learning experience for the participants and the prep-team, where everyone gained the attitudes, skills and knowledge to take action on the topics of *Participation and Democracy: A Legal Framework for School Student Rights*.

The participants concluded that it is essential to start educating and raising awareness about these topics with children and young people. In addition, it was also agreed that democracy cannot be taught, but the only way to truly learn about democracy and participation is to experience it. Therefore these principles should be brought into education and shine through in every aspect of school life. School should prepare young people for life, to be active citizens, and to be able to reach their own potential and fulfilment. It is in school that most young people first learn about participation and democracy, and only by being part of a democratic process, can one fully learn what it actually is and how to become an active citizen.

This led to one of the most important principles agreed by the participants – the young people should be treated as equals to adults, and that decisions for young people, should be made by young people. The same principle could be applied to school students. They should be part of the decision-making processes that affect their own education. School students should be seen as equal partners and experts when it comes to governing the schools.

The most important messages of the Study Session *Participation and Democracy: A Legal Framework for School Student Rights* are:

- Democracy can only be learned by experiencing it, therefore school democracy must be encouraged and improved, where representative structures are part of the decision-making processes.
- School students should be recognised as equal partners and experts in schools.

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<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.554254274619299.1073741826.129116870466377&type=3>

⁷ <http://www.obessu.org/wp-content/uploads/Democratic-Participation-Position-Paper-GA2013.pdf>

⁸ <http://issuu.com/obessu/docs/expo>

⁹ <http://www.obessu.org/workshops-study-session-on-democracy-and-participation>

- Decisions about young people, should be made by and with young people.

Appendices

Appendix I: Agenda

OBESSU Study Session: "Participation and Democracy: A legal framework for school student rights"								
7-14 April 2013 Eyoorean Youth Centre, Budapest								
Sunday April 7	Monday April 8	Tuesday April 9	Wednesday April 10	Thursday April 11	Friday April 12	Saturday April 13	Sunday April 14	
ARRIVALS	Opening	Defining and exploring	Critical reflection part I	Legal instruments by Mihai Florian	Using legal instruments	Democratic school Personal action plan	DEPARTURES	
	Coffee Break							
	Team building	Defining and exploring	Critical reflection part II	Declaration on school student rights Midterm evaluation	Using legal instruments	Action time! by Åsa Gunven		
	LUNCH							
	How do we see democracy?	Defining and exploring	Influences Democratic school	Free afternoon	OBESSU agora	Final evaluation		
	Coffee Break				Coffee Break			
	How do we see democracy?	Sharing experiences	vote@16		OBESSU agora	Closing and goodbye!		
	Re-groups	Re-groups	Re-groups		Re-groups			
	DINNER				Dinner out!	DINNER		
	Welcome!		Intellectual evening	Mock debate	Free evening			Party at the Parthenon
 OBESSU Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions				 COUNCIL OF EUROPE / CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE				

Appendix II: List of Participants

Study session
Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions
“Participation and Democracy: A legal framework for school student rights”

European Youth Centre Budapest, 07/04/2013 – 14/04/2013

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