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SLIDE - Student Leadership Initiatives for Democratic Engagement

Report on the Study Session 2026, held by the European Students' Union

in cooperation with the Youth Department of the Council of Europe

EYCS, 16–20 February 2026



Report on the Implementation of the Study Session

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.

This document serves as the external report for the study session **"SLIDE – Student Leadership Initiatives for Democratic Engagement"**, organised by the European Students' Union (ESU) from **16 to 20 February 2026**, hosted at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg. The study session SLIDE was inspired by ESU's ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic participation in higher education, safeguard academic freedom, and empower students to play an active role in shaping their institutions and societies.

The objectives of this study session were to:

- Provide a deeper understanding of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Policy and their implications for student participation, particularly in relation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA);
- Equip student representatives with knowledge and strategies to defend, promote, and advocate for fundamental values in Higher Education, such as safeguarding academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student rights;
- Strengthen the capacity of student representatives to influence reforms and hold institutions accountable to their commitments, by enhancing their knowledge on policy mechanisms;
- Facilitate capacity-building for student representatives and students' unions, developing advocacy and leadership skills of participants, ensuring that national students unions can engage effectively at national and European levels.

About the European Student's Union

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 44 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The NUSes are open to all students in their respective country regardless of political persuasion, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation or social standing. Our members are also student-run, autonomous, representative and operate according to democratic principles.

ESU's mission is to represent, defend and strengthen students' educational, democratic and political and social rights. ESU works to promote sustainable, accessible, and high-quality higher education in Europe. The overarching vision of the organisation is equal educational and social opportunities in an open and democratic Europe where students shape a sustainable future.

ESU is diverse, democratic, and open-minded

- We represent all students in Europe, understanding the diversity of the students. ESU is inclusive and strives for solidarity within the students' movement.
- We are independent. ESU structures facilitate the accountability of the elected representatives, work with respect towards all members and their different opinions and functions transparently.
- We are unconventional and open to new thoughts. We, as experts of higher education, bring in courageous and smart ideas through a fresh and spontaneous, but professional attitude.

Since decisions concerning higher education are increasingly taken at the European level, ESU's role as the only European-wide student platform is similarly growing

- Bringing together, training and informing national student representatives on policy developments in higher education at the European level;
- Organising seminars, training, campaigns, and conferences relevant to students;
- Conducting European-wide research, partnership projects, and campaigns;
- Producing a variety of publications for students, policymakers and higher education professionals.

Why this Study Session?

SLIDE responds to a clear need within ESU's wider mission to strengthen the voice of students in shaping inclusive, high-quality higher education systems across Europe. It forms part of ESU's long-term commitment to supporting student representatives and national unions in understanding, navigating and influencing the European higher education landscape. At a time when democratic participation cannot be taken for granted, student leaders need both the knowledge and the space to reflect, connect, and act together.

The study session was designed to reinforce the capacity of the student movement to engage with an evolving policy environment, with particular attention to the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. At the same time, it placed strong emphasis on the values that should underpin these frameworks: academic freedom, meaningful student participation, and democratic governance. By exploring these themes, participants strengthened their understanding of the political and legal structures that shape higher education in Europe, while developing practical tools to advocate for change in their own national contexts.

SLIDE also builds on ESU's long experience in organising training activities, consultations, and capacity-building programmes for its members. Through previous initiatives on topics such as quality assurance, mobility, internationalisation, and the social dimension of higher education, ESU has consistently invested in strengthening the student movement across Europe. This study session continued that work by bringing together a new group of representatives to learn from one another, exchange practices and contribute to a more connected, informed, and empowered student community.

Preparing the Study Session

Preparatory Team

Joana Azeiteiro, Course Director
Louis Brau, Facilitator and Logistics
Lana Par, Facilitator and Logistics
Katariina Järve, Facilitator and Logistics
Gianluca Rossino, External Education Advisor
Sulkhani Chargeishvili, EYC Educational Advisor

The Preparatory Meeting

The preparatory meeting took place between 21-22.11.2025 at the EYC in Strasbourg.

What we did during this meeting:

The preparatory meeting for SLIDE took place at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg and served as the main planning moment ahead of the study session. The external educational advisor, the course director, and one of the facilitators were present in Strasbourg, while the remaining members of the ESU team joined the meeting online. This hybrid format allowed all members of the preparatory team to take part in the discussions and contribute to the planning process despite being based in different countries and working under different schedules.

During the meeting, the team reviewed the original application, clarified the objectives of the study session, and discussed the administrative procedures, deadlines, and practical requirements linked to the organisation of a study session in cooperation with the Youth Department of the Council of Europe. Time was also dedicated to defining the respective roles within the team, discussing recruitment procedures, and the intended participant profile, as well as identifying the type of external experts and lecturers to be invited to contribute to the programme.

A substantial part of the preparatory meeting focused on designing the educational content of the study session. The team worked on the structure of the programme, the sequence of sessions, the working methods to be used throughout the week, and the overall balance between policy-focused content, skills development, and non-formal education approaches. The meeting also covered technical matters, division of responsibilities, future communication methods within the team, evaluation procedures, and the timeline for the remaining preparation period until the start of the activity.

Selection of Participants

SLIDE brought together **20 participants from across Europe**, representing different countries, student unions and several layers of student representation. The group included participants active at local, regional, national, and European level, reflecting the many ways in which students engage in democratic life within higher education. Many participants wore several hats at once, combining different representative roles simultaneously. It was common for someone to be active within their university, while also holding responsibilities in a national union or contributing to European-level structures.

This multi-layered profile brought significant added value to the study session. Participants arrived not only with different national realities, but also with different institutional perspectives on how student representation functions. Some were closer to everyday campus issues, others to national policy discussions or European advocacy processes. As a result, exchanges throughout the week were enriched by a wide range of experiences, priorities, and approaches.

Their previous experience also varied considerably. Some participants were already familiar with higher education policy and international cooperation, while others were taking part in this type of learning environment for the first time. This required a programme able to respond to different starting points, while creating space for peer learning and mutual support. The diversity of backgrounds became one of the strengths of the group, allowing participants to better understand how representation works across different systems and contexts.

Schedule of the Study Session

Monday, 16 February 2026

09:30	***Introduction to the study session*** Introduction to the aim & objectives, Official opening with Sophie KWASNY, Head of the Education, Training and Co-operation Division, Youth Department, Council of Europe.
11:00 Break	
11:30	***Team building activity - to get to know each other*** Expectations, programme and safe space building – to explore the agenda of the week and create an inclusive and productive working atmosphere.
13:00 Lunch	
14:30	***Introduction to the core topics of the session and to the work of ESU*** To build a common understanding of the main concepts (academic freedom, student participation) of the study session and of mission/activities of the leading organisation.
16:00 Break	
16:30	***Exploring challenges in participants' realities related to student participation***
18:00	***Reflection time***

19:00 Dinner	

Tuesday, 17 February 2026

09:30	***Fundamental values in Higher Education and EHEA*** To dive into fundamental values, their objectives and consider them from students' perspectives.
11:00 Break	
11:30	***How to promote and integrate fundamental values and human rights in student participation, and preparations for the afternoon visit to the European Court of Human Rights.***
13:00 Lunch	
14:30	***Visit to the European Court of Human Rights*** Exchange with a representative of the Court and critical reflection on the jurisprudence relating to academic freedom.
18:00	***Reflection session***
19:00 Dinner	

21:00 Movie night

Wednesday, 18 February 2026

09:30	***History of the student movement to review and reflect on how the student movement has shaped our societies.***

11:00 Break	
11:30	***Student participation, representation, and university alliances*** Jointly exploring existing practices from different national contexts.
13:00 Lunch	
	Free afternoon in the city ***Dinner out in the city and free time***

Thursday, 19 February 2026

09:30	***Call for action for student participation:*** Part 1 -reflecting on how student representation is shaping today's reality, and what kind of change we need within the student movement nowadays.
11:00 Break	
11:30	***Call for action for student participation:*** Part 2 - to make student representation active and meaningful in different contexts.
13:00 Lunch	
14:30	***Capacity-building for stronger impact*** Exploring and critically discussing existing resources and current barriers.
16:00 Break	

16:30	***Creating collaborative toolkits to empower participants, students' unions, and alliances*** Building and improving resources to respond to participants' needs.
18:00	***Reflection session***
19:00 Dinner	

Free evening

Friday, 20 February 2026

09:30	***The role of media and critical reflection on disinformation***
10:45 Break	
11:15	***Campaigning 101*** To explore key principles, stories of success, and practise using campaigning to achieve change.
13:00 Lunch	
14:30	***Presentation & feedback of the participants' campaign*** Video presentation and feedback
16:00	
16:30	***Evaluation and reflection of the study session***
19:00 Dinner	

Farewell evening

Main Outcomes

The outcomes of SLIDE unfolded progressively across the week, taking different forms each day.

Day 1 laid the foundation for everything that followed. Participants built trust quickly and recognised that many of the frustrations, doubts, and challenges they face as student representatives are widely shared. This helped reduce the isolation that can come with representative roles and fostered an early sense of community.

Day 2 brought greater clarity on how higher education policy, democratic governance, and rights frameworks relate to participants' daily realities. Concepts such as academic freedom, participation in governance, and student rights became more concrete. Many participants also started to see their local struggles as part of broader European debates rather than isolated national problems.

Day 3 marked a shift in perspective. Engaging with the history of the student movement helped participants see that student representation has always been bound up with broader democratic change. Reflecting on the future then pushed them to think beyond short mandates and immediate problems, towards the longer-term impact they want to leave on their own movements.

Day 4 was among the strongest days in practical terms. Participants grew more confident in spotting tokenistic participation and distinguishing it from genuine representation. They also left with clearer ideas for improving legitimacy, accountability, inclusion, and influence within their own structures.

Day 5 turned the week into action. Participants sharpened their skills in campaigning, communication, and advocacy, and many left with concrete plans to pursue after returning home. By the end of the study session, a stronger network had formed between participants, with continued contact, exchange, and cooperation developing naturally out of the programme.

Contribution of the Study Session to ESU's Strategic Political Priorities and Plan of Work

ESU represents the interests of students across Europe and works for higher education systems that are democratic, inclusive, and publicly responsible. Within this vision, student participation is not an optional extra, but a core part of how higher education should function. Students must be recognised as equal partners in decision-making, with a real voice in shaping the institutions and policies that affect them. SLIDE directly contributed to this objective by strengthening the capacity of student representatives to engage with governance processes at local, national, and European level.

The study session was also closely linked to ESU's political priorities on academic freedom, democratic values, and the social dimension of higher education. At a time when participation cannot be taken for granted and rights-based approaches face growing pressure in some contexts, SLIDE created space for participants to reflect on these challenges and exchange ways of responding to them within their own realities.

In practical terms, the activity supported ESU's Plan of Work by connecting European policy discussions with the day-to-day experiences of national unions and student representatives. It helped participants better understand frameworks such as the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, while also equipping them with advocacy, leadership, and communication tools. In this sense, SLIDE contributed both to ESU's policy ambitions and to the long-term strengthening of the European student movement.

Highlights & Important Moments

Visit to the European Court of Human Rights

One of the most significant moments of the study session was the visit to the European Court of Human Rights. In addition to visiting the institution, participants took part in a session with a lawyer from the Court, who shared insights into its work and into cases linked to rights, democracy, and legal protection in Europe. This created a direct connection between the themes discussed during the week and their practical application within a major European institution. Topics such as freedom of expression, participation, academic freedom, and access to rights became more tangible through this exchange, making the visit one of the most memorable moments of the programme.





Museum of the History of the Student Movement

The visit to the Museum of the History of the Student Movement became an important turning point in the study session. During the first days of the programme, participants had reflected largely on the past and present realities of student representation, democratic participation, and the challenges faced across Europe. This session helped close that chapter and open a new one focused on the future.

The visit invited participants to reflect on the legacy being built by today's student movement, the struggles and achievements that may define the next generation, and the contribution they themselves could make to a future museum of the student movement. It encouraged reflection not only on history, but on responsibility, continuity, and the future direction of student organising in Europe.





Contribution of the Study Session to the Council of Europe Youth Sector Priorities

SLIDE was strongly aligned with the current priorities of the Council of Europe Youth Sector, especially the revitalisation of pluralistic democracy and young people's access to rights. The programme centred on the role of students as democratic actors within higher education and on the importance of meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Discussions on academic freedom, student rights, and democratic governance encouraged participants to reflect on how democratic values can be protected and strengthened within their own institutions and representative structures.

Access to rights was another clear dimension of the study session. Participants explored how rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, participation, and equal access to quality education relate directly to higher education systems. The sessions helped connect broader European human rights standards with the everyday realities faced by students and student representatives across different national contexts.

The educational approach of the activity also reflected the priorities and methods of the Youth Sector. Non-formal education, peer learning, and intercultural exchange were present throughout the programme, creating space for participants to learn from one another and compare different realities. The visit to the European Court of Human Rights added a concrete institutional perspective and helped link the themes of the week to wider European democratic and human rights frameworks.

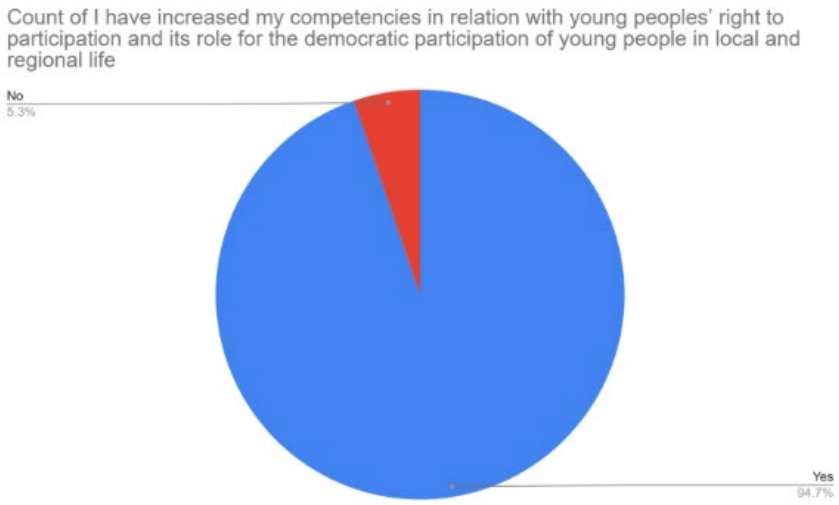
Through the Eyes of the Participants: Feedback

The study session was a very positive and impactful experience for participants, combining relevant learning with strong peer exchange. One of the main outcomes was a better understanding of how differently democratic processes and student representation function across countries. This helped participants reflect more critically on their own systems, recognising both strengths to maintain and practices that could be adapted from other contexts.

Participants also reported increased confidence in their roles as student representatives. The sessions on academic freedom, student rights, and democratic governance helped them better connect their day-to-day work with broader human rights and democratic principles. Evaluation results confirm that participants strengthened their knowledge, particularly in relation to democratic participation and access to rights.

The materials and resources used during the session were considered useful, practical, and directly applicable. The approach of allowing participants to develop their own outputs further supported this, making the results relevant to different national contexts.

A particularly valued aspect was the opportunity to meet and exchange with people from different countries. Participants highlighted this as one of the most meaningful parts of the experience, as it allowed them to share perspectives, find common ground, and build lasting connections. Overall, the session left participants more motivated, better prepared, and more connected to continue their work in student representation.



Some Interesting Quotes and Personal Reflections:

"A very good experience! I have the feeling of a broader understanding on every subject we saw and I feel more prepared to be a good student representative."

"A very useful toolkit that I will try to implement (...), and many nice people who I hope I maintain contact with."

"Motivation and general knowledge not only of the Bologna Process but various topics of student representations."

"A lot of positive energy and drive to implement change (...)!"

Moreover, from the perspective of the preparatory team, the study session achieved its main objectives and developed in line with expectations. The team observed a high level of engagement from participants throughout the week, particularly during discussions and group work. The diversity of backgrounds contributed positively to the learning process, creating a dynamic environment where participants could openly exchange experiences and challenge different perspectives.

The preparatory team also noted that the flexible, participant-driven approach worked well, as it allowed participants to focus on outputs that were relevant to their own contexts. This contributed to more meaningful and applicable results. Overall, the team considers that the session not only supported participants' learning and competence development, but also created a strong and collaborative atmosphere that encouraged continued engagement beyond the activity.

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