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Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education

"Empowering Educators for a Democratic Europe in the Digital Age"

27th Session

Podgorica, Montenegro, 3-4 December 2026

DRAFT CONCEPT NOTE

Topical debate – Student voice and democratic participation

Why this debate

Since late September 2026, school, vocational education and training (VET) and university students in several member states have mobilised on an unusual scale. Their demands converge across very different national contexts: an adequate number of teachers, decent buildings, manageable class sizes, school rhythms, affordable studies, more transparency and no algorithmic discrimination in access to higher education and above all the wish to be heard.

Beyond the immediate demands, these events raise a number of questions that lie at the heart of the Conference theme, ***Empowering Education Professionals for a Democratic Europe in the Digital Age***: do schools, VET institutions and universities give learners a real voice, do they provide learners with meaningful opportunities to influence decisions that affect their education and how can those opportunities be strengthened?

Lessons from the mobilisations

- **Learners want to be heard, and many did not feel heard through existing structures.** Much of the mobilisation took place outside the participation structures of schools, VET institutions and universities.
- **Learners and teachers often stood together.** In several countries, pupils mobilised explicitly in support of their teachers, around shared concerns about staffing and working conditions.
- **The education community is the first place to respond.** Several governments chose to initiate dialogue inside schools and with learner representatives as a first response.
- **Confrontation damages school communities.** Blockades, acts of violence and injuries to education staff placed strain on the trust needed for the proper functioning every education institutions.

A relationship to nurture

Beyond the institution itself, it is the relationship between learners and education professionals, built on trust, care and mutual respect, that makes every education institution unique. It is neither a relationship between a service provider and its users nor one between an authority and protesters. Democratic school culture should strengthen this relationship: learners who are heard, and education professionals who have the time, training and support to listen and to respond.

This trust is built every day within each education institution. It is strengthened by a culture of dialogue that is part of ordinary institutional life, in which decisions are explained to those they affect. School and institutional leaders have a particular responsibility in nurturing this culture.

Trust within institutions also depends on trust in the education system as a whole. Ministries and education authorities at all levels, local, regional and national, contribute to it by supporting institutions and their staff, by involving learners and education professionals, and the organisations that represent them, in the decisions that affect them, and by remaining open to dialogue, including in times of tension.

Building on what exists

To act, ministers can draw on tools and mechanisms that have already been developed, existing standards as well as tools currently in preparation, such as:

- the **European Space for Citizenship Education**, to be launched at the Conference, whose principles of congruency ("practice what you preach") and partnership and whose quality area on democratic governance and culture place the student voice at the heart of life in schools and VET institutions;
- the draft **Recommendation on vocational education and training** under preparation by the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU), which calls for a legal minimum of learner representation on governing bodies, including for apprentices who spend most of their time in the workplace;
- the draft **Student Rights Charter**, being prepared with the European Students' Union, which makes participation and representation a right for every higher education student;
- **existing standards**, notably Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 on the participation of children and young people under 18, and Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)6 on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes, and the Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.

Guiding questions for Ministers

The questions below are intended to guide the discussion, not to be answered one by one. Ministers are invited to draw on their national experience and to focus on the question, or the aspect of a question, most relevant to them.

1. **What have we learnt?** Why did so many learners choose the street rather than using the existing participation structures in their schools and universities, and what does this tell us about how those structures work in practice? How can we better connect those arrangements with the work of student associations? What more can governments do to foster democratic dialogue and develop a culture of dialogue with stakeholders?

2. **How can meaningful democracy at school become real, from school to university?** What guarantees and practices would ensure that learners' views, including those of learners who are seldom heard, such as apprentices, are sought, given due weight and followed up, from the first pupil council, through VET, to university governance? Which measures have made, or could make, the greatest difference?
3. **How can we foster the relationship between learners and education professionals?** How can student participation, together with a culture of dialogue within each institution, strengthen, rather than strain, the relationship of trust between learners and education professionals? What do education professionals and institutional leaders need, in terms of training, time and support, to make it work, including in times of tension?
4. **How can access to higher education be fair and transparent in the digital age?** Among the concerns raised is the opacity of some admission procedures. How can we ensure that algorithmic and AI-supported admission systems are transparent, subject to human oversight and free from discrimination, so that every applicant understands how decisions about them are made and can challenge them?

Format and outcome

The debate lasts 75 minutes in a restricted format. It opens and closes with short contributions from observers of the CDEDU representing students: namely the Organising Bureau of

European School Student Unions (OBESSU) for general and vocational school students and the European Students' Union (ESU) for higher education. This is followed by a round-table discussion with ministers. Each minister will be allocated a set amount of time to share one lesson learned and put forward one proposal, drawing freely on the guiding questions.

The Chair of the 27th Session of the Conference and the Secretary General will issue conclusions under their sole responsibility; there is no negotiated text and no change to the draft resolution. The conclusions will be transmitted to the Committee of Ministers and appended to the Secretary General's report; they will inform the implementation of the European Space for Citizenship Education and the work on the Student Rights Charter.