

Statement on Active Citizenship Education

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List of abbreviations

AI: Artificial Intelligence

AILit: AI Literacy Framework

BWSE: Bologna With Student Eyes

EHEA: European Higher Education Area

ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EDC: Education for Democratic Citizenship

EU: European Union

EUA: European University Association

GCE: Global Citizenship Education

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QA: Quality Assurance

RFCDC: Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning

Introduction

This statement sets out ESU's position on **active citizenship education** in higher education, what it is, why it matters to students and what higher education institutions (HEIs) and public authorities must do to embed it. Active citizenship education requires not only competences but also real guarantees of student rights, protection of civic space, and redistribution of power within HEIs. Active citizenship education must be understood as a political and democratic exercise that empowers students to influence decision-making, defend their rights and participate safely without fear of retaliation. In the current context of democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space and renewed pressures on academic freedom across Europe, as well as the rising misinformation risks and threats to student participation, a strong student perspective on the role of **active citizenship education** and the civic role of higher education is both urgent and essential.

ESU's [Fundamental Values and Solidarity Policy Paper](#) describes **active citizenship education** as equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills and values for civic engagement and societal participation, linking this to student-centered learning and to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Council of Europe [Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#) defines Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) as education that empowers students with knowledge, skills, understanding, attitudes and behaviours to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities, value diversity and take an active part in democratic life, with the ultimate aim of promoting and protecting democracy and the rule of law. The [Council of the EU](#) frames citizenship competence as the ability to act as a responsible citizen and participate fully in civic and social life, offline and online, at local, national, European and international levels. Taken together, ESU applies these converging definitions to higher education as an institution-wide commitment to develop the values, attitudes, competences, skills, knowledge and critical understanding needed for democratic participation and social responsibility, through curriculum that cultivates critical and ethical inquiry, participatory governance that treats students as partners, internal quality assurance that reflects democratic values and community engagement that links learning with public purpose.

These core democratic competences for students include, at minimum, analytical and critical thinking, media-, digital and AI literacy, the ability to value democracy and human rights, respect for diversity, civic mindedness, cooperation, and knowledge of how democratic systems work and interconnect.

ESU believes that active citizenship education is grounded in values and rights that define higher education, namely equality, student participation, respect for human rights, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, transparency and accountability and stresses that these are not merely skills for university life or the higher education sector, but essential foundations for empowered, responsible participation throughout one's entire life. These shared anchors should shape both institutional practice and system-level monitoring across the EHEA.

Context

Across Europe, democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space are no longer abstract trends, they are shaping student life and institutional choices. The [OECD Trends Shaping Education 2025](#) report documents polarisation and information disorder that erode trust and make deliberation harder, which can directly affect classroom dialogue, student representation and the quality of debate on campus.

The [UNESCO Global Citizenship Education](#) portfolio identifies rising disinformation, online hate and harassment, with AI driven manipulation intensifying risks to democratic debate, creating unequal conditions of participation for students who are targeted and raising the bar for media and digital literacy across all programmes.

Legal guarantees for student participation are an essential foundation for representative work. However, data from ESU in [BWSE 2024](#) indicate that several additional measures and conditions are necessary to ensure the existence of student participation in a given country and for student participation to be considered legitimate, combatting the fear of repercussions identified by student representatives.

The [EUA Statement on Academic Freedom](#) records increased pressures on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and the [EUA Trends 2024](#) survey notes institutional concerns about external interference, indicating that safeguarding campus rights is now a precondition for educational quality, not a parallel objective. These developments underline the need to foreground democratic competences, campus rights and student partnership as core quality concerns, not optional extras.

Policy and reference frameworks provide a clear foundation for action. The [Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) offers a coherent map of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding that can be adapted for higher education, giving institutions a ready vocabulary for learning outcomes, assessment and recognition, with the [RFCDC implementation reviews](#) highlighting both promising practice and persistent gaps. In parallel, the Council of Europe is developing a [European Space for Citizenship Education](#) to promote quality citizenship education through an integrated approach that prepares active and responsible citizens.

The [Council of the EU Conclusions on the democratic mission of education](#) call on systems to promote participation and common values across all levels of education, encouraging competence development and partnerships, thereby legitimising whole-institution approaches and cross sector collaboration with communities and civil society.

ESU's policy base, including the [Student Rights Charter](#), the [Fundamental Values and Solidarity policy paper](#), [BWSE 2024](#) and the [Statement on Education for Sustainable Development](#), anchors our stance in rights, participation and the public responsibility for higher education and commits us to advocate for the necessary legal guarantees, funding lines and recognition mechanisms that make **active citizenship education** real in practice.

ESU positions

Active Citizenship Education – a democratic necessity

Active citizenship education is essential to the democratic mission of higher education. It equips students with the core democratic competences needed for meaningful participation in public life, as articulated in the [Council of Europe's RFCDC](#), [UNESCO GCE](#), and the [Council of the EU Conclusions on the democratic mission of education](#).

Strengthening democratic competences is a core mission for higher education, not an optional add-on. By combining critical inquiry, ethical reasoning and constructive dialogue with practice in shared decision making, it grows student agency.

Active citizenship education depends on fundamental academic values and it reinforces them in turn. The [EUA Statement on Academic Freedom](#) underlines that academic freedom sustains HEIs contribution to public evidence-informed public discourse. For this learning mission to flourish, academic freedom and institutional autonomy must be secure from undue influence. Any democratic citizenship education cannot coexist with political and economic interference or dependence. This further underlines the necessity of sufficient public funding.

ESU believes that:

- **Active citizenship education** is essential to the democratic mission of higher education and must be embedded as transversal learning outcomes in every programme. The mechanisms for its implementation shall be periodically evaluated and improved.
- Curricula should deliberately grow student agency by combining critical inquiry, ethical reasoning, dialogue skills and practice in shared decision making within and beyond HEIs.
- Protecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy is a prerequisite for **active citizenship education**.

- Assessment should use authentic tasks, such as service learning, civic projects and portfolios, not only exams.
- Student partnership in governance and quality assurance is part of learning, and a fundamental way to promote active citizenship, not an add-on.

Higher Education as a Civic Space

Higher education institutions are vital foundations of democratic societies. They are places where learning, dialogue and participation come together to build informed, active and responsible members of society. Beyond teaching and research, higher education also has a civic responsibility to strengthen democratic culture, encourage critical and ethical thinking and protect the freedoms that allow everyone to take part and contribute to the common good. In line with the Council Conclusion on the [Contribution of Education and Training to Strengthening Common European Values and Democratic Citizenship](#), this responsibility includes promoting civic and social competences, respect for diversity and human rights as the basis of democratic participation. Higher education must not only respond to but also shape society by equipping students with the civic, digital and sustainability skills needed for inclusive and democratic societies.

Active citizenship education can only exist where higher education is recognised and protected as a civic space, grounded in democracy, the rule of law and human rights. In the Bologna Process, the [Yerevan Communiqué](#) marked and the [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#) later reaffirmed strengthening the recognition of students' rights to academic freedom and full participation in institutional governance, emphasising that students must be supported and protected as equal partners within HEIs as these commitments are essential to both quality learning, democracy and institutional autonomy. Associations and civil society organizations must see their involvement increased in higher education. Knowledge transmission should not focus on purely lecture-based teaching, but should be participatory in order to increase active learning and peer learning. Furthermore, higher education should be enhancing the possibilities for associatively involved students and education actors to exchange. In order to

favor the grasping of engagement as a concept, it is essential for students to be directly involved and exposed to active citizenship. It is therefore necessary to develop educational projects and programs in collaboration with associations and HEI.

ESU underlines that freedom of association, assembly and expression must be guaranteed for all students and staff. These are not privileges, but fundamental rights defined in the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) and reaffirmed in the [Council of Europe's RFDCD](#). HEIs must remain safe spaces for open debate and disagreement without fear of censorship, intimidation or political interference.

ESU believes that:

- HE must be protected and promoted as a civic space grounded in democracy, human rights and the rule of law.
- Academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student participation on all levels are essential to both quality learning and academic culture.
- Freedom of expression, association and assembly must be guaranteed for all, ensuring HEIs remain safe, inclusive and democratic environments free from political interference.

Recognition of Civic Engagement and Student Participation

Civic engagement and student participation are not just complementary to academic study, but are meaningful and essential forms of learning themselves. Through volunteering, student representation and activism, students gain critical thinking, communication and democratic competences that reflect the core values of higher education. These experiences contribute to personal development, social responsibility and society in general. Yet despite their value, such contributions often go unrecognized within formal education systems.

European frameworks provide a clear mandate to change this. Ever since the [Berlin Communiqué](#), the Bologna Process has recognised the importance of

validating non-formal and informal learning, including civic and community-based experiences. HEIs must establish recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures that are fair, transparent and student-centered, allowing non-formal and informal learning to be validated and credited to strengthen the culture of active citizenship and reinforce HEIs' responsibility in society. Similarly, EU-level tools such as the [European Solidarity Corps](#) serve as a validated model for documenting civic learning within non-formal education. ESU therefore calls on policymakers, HEIs and QA agencies to acknowledge and support student learning that emerges from civic engagement as a legitimate and valuable component of higher education.

ESU believes that:

- Learning gained through civic engagement, student participation, volunteering and activism is as valuable as learning acquired in formal settings.
- Higher education institutions must develop transparent, student-centered systems to validate and credit such learning, guaranteeing academic conciliation for representatives.
- Formal recognition of civic engagement through ECTS credits and the Diploma Supplement, service learning and other tools can enhance active citizenship and incorporate democratic participation in academic life.

Digital citizenship and AI literacy as Democratic Competences

In a society increasingly shaped by digital systems and algorithmic decision-making, students are not only users of this digital technology, but they are digital citizens with rights and responsibilities. ESU asserts that **active citizenship education** must explicitly include critical digital and media literacy, algorithmic awareness and AI ethics as key democratic competences, as it is no longer sufficient to teach citizenship solely through traditional democratic concepts.

Beyond that, rooted in the will to expand critical thinking amongst young people, it is important to implement spaces that allow them to further develop media and information literacy. Aiming to enable students to grow a critical mind and perspective on the available information, HEIs need to offer settings which promote the identification of verified and reliable sources, and contain the spread of misinformation. This needs to be combined with clear explanations of the issues at stake regarding current affairs.

Media and information literacy needs to be considered a transversal teaching unit of its own and to be spread more widely in higher education, including in teacher training. It is thus essential to train teachers and encourage them to facilitate debate among students from an early age : rules for listening, developing critical thinking. Teachers, regardless of their specialty, should be specifically trained in facilitating respectful debate and dialogue among students.

Drawing on the Council of Europe's [Digital Citizenship Education](#), digital citizenship is more than a technical ability, it is the capacity to participate ethically, responsibly and actively in the digital public sphere while critically assessing and questioning the information one encounters. The framework highlights that students must be prepared for active and responsible participation in digital society, combining digital and AI literacy with civic-mindedness, empathy and ethical awareness. Higher education must therefore foster these abilities not only through technical training but through interdisciplinary learning rooted in civic responsibility and democratic values as highlighted in the Council of Europe's [Draft Recommendation on AI literacy](#) and the European Commission's [AllLit Framework](#).

ESU believes that:

- **Active citizenship education** must include digital and AI literacy as essential democratic competences.
- Students should understand and critically assess how algorithms and AI systems affect democracy, equity and human rights.
- HE must empower students as informed, ethical and active digital citizens who co-shape democratic digital futures.
- Digital literacy and ethics must be embedded in all study programmes to ensure that students learn how to use digital technologies

responsibly, ethically and effectively within their academic and professional contexts.

Democratic Resilience, Peace and History Education

Active citizenship education should work as primary prevention against democratic erosion, while supporting peacebuilding and reconciliation. When students lack regular chances to learn, deliberate and act together, risks rise of disengagement, polarisation and susceptibility to disinformation or conspiracy narratives. A number of students may be drawn toward anti-democratic radicalisation, many more drift into indifference, both routes weaken campus communities and public life. In line with the [Council of Europe's RFCDC](#), [UNESCO GCE](#), and the [Council of the EU Conclusions on the democratic mission of education](#), higher education should help students relate the past to the present and to possible futures, recognize legacies of violence and exclusion and develop the capacities needed to engage constructively in democratic life.

Courses and co-curricular activities should enable students to access and produce knowledge, and to critique and apply it responsibly. Students should practice perspective taking and ethical judgment, deepen attitudes of empathy, solidarity and respect for difference, and acquire basic competences for conflict transformation, dialogue and civic-minded action. Building on the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media report, Multiperspectivity in remembrance and history education for democratic citizenship](#), teaching should promote multiperspectivity based on science, research and evidence, and acknowledge that every perspective, including our personal, is partial and shaped by context. Pedagogy should recognize and redress systemic exclusions and erasures imposed by racism, sexism, colonialism and authoritarian regimes, and it should prioritize inclusive, respectful dialogue across diverse viewpoints.

In practice, democratic resilience and reconciliation learning require opportunities for evidence-informed public discourse and civic practice across the whole student journey. HEIs should support student-led civic

projects with structured reflection and use evidence-based inquiry on contested pasts that teaches how facts are selected, constructed and become evidence. Partnerships with cultural and memory institutions and civil society should connect classroom inquiry with public purpose and lived memory.

ESU believes that:

- Every student should have structured chances to engage in inclusive, respectful dialogue across diverse viewpoints, practice argument with evidence and reflect on civic choices.
- History teaching within **active citizenship education** should cultivate historical understanding, empathy and non violence, using multiperspectivity and a human rights framing .
- Students must practice source based, critical analysis of contested historical narratives, and the assessment of their course work should be fair and free from viewpoint discrimination.
- HEIs should resource student led civic initiatives and independent student media.
- Partnerships with cultural and memory institutions and civil society are vital to connect classroom inquiry with public purpose and to create safe learning spaces for democracy.
- Inclusive **active citizenship education** is a preventive, rights based response to polarisation and anti-democratic radicalisation.

Conclusion

We choose a higher education that forms citizens, not spectators. Every campus must protect freedom, recognise student power and invest in civic learning, so that democracy is not only taught, it is practiced. Without **active citizenship education**, higher education abandons their democratic mission.