

Back to School

The State of Play on COVID-19 for European Education Trade Unions



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Christine Blower, ETUCE President opened the series of meetings pointed to the rising numbers of COVID-19 infections across the region. The series of ETUCE meetings was about discussing the return to education and training in a face-to-face setting and how across countries education trade unions had been working hard to ensure a safe return to education institutions and the implementation of the health and safety measures. The debates offered an opportunity for exchange about health and safety measures governments and local or regional authorities had put in place and taking into account the different levels involvement of ETUCE member organisations according to national social dialogue practices. The webinars provided space to share experiences, affiliates' perspectives and member organisations' vision for the future. This was particularly important as many countries were discussing whether to keep schools open during potential new lockdowns.

Overview of ETUCE activities on COVID-19, provided by Susan Flocken, ETUCE European Director.

The European Director explained that ETUCE had established a [hub](#) on its website where stories and input on how ETUCE member organisations are tackling the crisis can be found. The ETUCE member organisations had agreed on several actions. The first one was [the ETUCE statement](#), approved by the ETUCE Committee on 16 June 2020, for a recovery plan for the education sector in response to the EU recovery plan. In its statement ETUCE highlighted the devastating impact of the crisis on equal opportunities for students, as well as on future education budgets. Indeed, professional training on the pedagogical use of ICT and access to the necessary infrastructure were issues ETUCE highlighted that had jeopardized access to quality education for all in the first school closures.

ETUCE further published, on 20 May 2020, a joint [letter](#) with the European Parents' Association (EPA) and the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), emphasising that adequate health and safety measures are prerequisites to reopening schools. Noting the ways in which the crisis revealed and exacerbated inequalities, the organisations outlined a plan to mitigate the disruptions caused by the transition, through a gradual reopening of schools, and ensuring cooperation between formal, informal and non-formal settings of learning.

This joint statement received, on 27 August 2020, a reply from Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. Acknowledging the unprecedented impact that school closures had had on the education sector, the Commissioner praised the immense efforts teachers, trainers, academics, school leaders and other education personnel had made in this time to uphold education. The Commissioner addressed the actions taken by all member states on establishing and enhancing online learning. Recognising that some teachers and students lacked skills or infrastructure access to pursue online education, the Commissioner highlighted the European Commission's continuous support to schools and teachers and shared the European Commission's [guidelines](#) for successful blended education.

A third document to be highlighted was the [joint statement](#) of ETUCE and EFEE, the European Federation of Employers in Education, engaging for sustainable education systems. It is a joint social partner commitment to work on these issues together and to involve in the process of how to best proceed in the crisis and beyond in ensuring health and safety measures, decent working conditions, salaries and professional training. The European Director emphasised that ETUCE and EFEE and its members needed to work jointly on the balance between addressing the required health and safety measures and the need for students to go to school and their right to education.



School closures

Participants discussed that school reopenings caused a dilemma for education personnel. On the one hand, many schools did not have sufficient health measures in place and [governments were reluctant to invest in education and hire more staff to fill the gaps of teacher shortages and vulnerable staff](#). On the other hand, the first lockdown period had clearly demonstrated that [online education is no quality substitute to in school education](#) and keeping schools open is crucial to children's wellbeing and their ability to exercise their right to education. National divergences were noted on this issue. Namely, in Slovenia, all schools had maintained open and trade unions had used this to derive significant political momentum in countering the neoliberal narrative about the public education sector. In this regard, multiple representatives from ETUCE member organisations in Belgium and the UK emphasised that schools had not been a significant source of contamination.

Across countries a similar pattern in terms of school closures could be observed. In many countries all or nearly all schools closed in March 2020. In most countries, primary schools then reopened until the summer break, and all schools then reopened in the new school/academic year. Within weeks, schools started closing again, on a case by case basis based on infection rates. Israel marked an exception where all schools closed again for a country-wide lockdown.

Protocols set up for the 2020/21 school year include [a colour coding of schools](#). Green schools remain open while yellow establishments switch to hybrid learning, allowing for student rotation, and red schools close entirely.

Online & hybrid education

Though consensually considering digitalisation unavoidable, at least for part of the student body, participants shared the observation that [online education exacerbates inequalities](#). In Hungary for instance, online education only reached 75% of the students as 20% of students live in digital poverty and either cannot connect online or families only have one device for 2 children. In Romania, 41% of children living in rural areas do not have access to internet or a computer and a mere 25% of rural schools have internet access. The government tried to address this by broadcasting school programmes on TV but only reached 20% of students.

Similar attempts of broadcasting classes on TV were conducted in Serbia. [Many member organisations in Central and Eastern Europe had sought meetings with their respective government to demand quality internet connection for education institutions](#). Yet, the issue of digital skills, infrastructure and material extends throughout Europe, [with all participants reporting different levels of digital equipment or skill shortage](#). NEU, UK, further pointed out that, surprisingly, young teachers also often lack digital material as they overly rely on their smartphone and do not possess a computer.

[Adapting the curriculum](#) online was also listed as a major challenge. ESTUS, Slovenia had been asking for an institution that would provide teachers with instructions on how to implement distance learning, develop a methodology and pedagogy. The lack of professional advice on how to effectively conduct classes online was repeatedly highlighted with similar demands emerging from Albania, Ukraine and Israel. Such methodology had been, however, provided to teachers in Estonia and developed by member organisations in the Netherlands.

The participants agreed that school closures and curricula adjustments jeopardised the reliability and fairness of exams. On this topic, national approaches diverged, with [most countries opting for cancelling some lower exams but maintaining university entrance exams](#). In Scotland and Estonia, exams were abandoned, but maintained in Serbia.

Hybrid education where part of the class is taught physically present and the other part online, raised concerns. First, it requires extra work from teachers which, beyond considerations of well-being, is even more difficult to ensure due to teacher shortages, as French member organisation UNSA noted. Secondly, it creates a big asymmetry between students who are in school and at home.

Privacy & data protection

The spread of online education raises numerous concerns beyond work organisation. [Technology companies pose a serious threat, as education systems become more and more dependent on them](#). French member organisations wished to tackle this issue with the setting up of public online services. Similarly, ACOD, ETUCE member organisation from Belgium, warned that software that is currently free and increasingly used may become licenced, having a tremendous impact on the education sector.

The use of digital platforms creates concerns with regards to the use of the metadata produced and their protection. The [issue of privacy and of the use of cameras and microphones was raised by many members across Europe](#). This was debated by the Cypriot government, which ruled that students cannot be asked to turn their cameras on. In Greece, despite objections from ETUCE member organisation OLME, the Education Ministry passed a bill that considers it lawful for teachers to live stream their lessons from the classrooms, disregarding the impact on the professional autonomy of teachers and the right to protect their image.

Social dialogue

The crisis has had different national implications for social dialogue. In Slovenia, the government did not respect social dialogue. In Romania, negotiations with the minister of education yielded mere promises, pushing trade unions to enter in contact directly with the country's Prime Minister. Similarly, Albanian trade unions were not consulted on school closures and reopening while French trade unions were not consulted on the COVID-19 health and safety protocols. In a few national contexts, however, social dialogue remained strong. This was the case in Flanders, Belgium, where ETUCE member organisation ACOD Onderwijs has been in weekly contact with the minister, but also in Scotland and the Netherlands. [The political environment strongly impacts the ability to conduct social dialogue](#).

The Italian member organisations reported that in Italy, there was no social dialogue process engaged, due to the many ministerial turnovers. In the Netherlands, the indecisiveness of the education minister impeded efficient work on the crisis.

Workload

Although [education trade unions had obtained that teachers' salaries be maintained](#), they had undergone significant extra work burden. Yet, this [additional workload was often not taken into account and was not compensated by salary increases](#). The Armenian member organisation, CRSTESA, noted that as most teachers are women, they often had to carry most of the domestic tasks on top, a burden that increased as schools closed. This had a significant impact on teachers' cognitive burden and mental health. In France, trade unions obtained a bonus, which is limited to a lump sum €400 payment and only granted to school leaders.

Structural consequences on education

In Italy, the lack of sufficient action from the government led to an [increase in private school enrolment](#). In the UK, the financial structure of universities and the competitive higher education environment incentivised tertiary education institutions to forcefully open. This resulted in a quick spike of infection cases leading to many closures. UCU highlighted this as a lesson on [the importance of a publicly focused and funded higher education system](#).



Collage of some of the webinar participants – Zoom meeting screenshot