WORKSHOP BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

Digitalisation in Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Education Trade Unions

The education sector and the teaching profession have always been crucial in adapting citizens to societal transformations. At the dawn of the 21st Century, the digital transition stands as one of the single biggest changes and challenges for modern societies, affecting the world of work, social interactions, as well as civic engagement and participation. The digital era reshapes most areas of our lives, and poses profound and decisive questions regarding the place of technology in civilisation and humankind's relationship to it.

As often, in the wake of course-altering societal transformations, powerful private interests actively lobby for a rapid and profitable use of digital tools, impacting among others on the education sector. Equally as often, trade unions are a central voice in defending the public good and interest and uncovering the risks of hasty decision-making and unchecked modernisation in the name of innovation.

At the heart of the necessity for the education sector to address the digital transformation lies the growing digitalisation of the labour market, and of society at large. Indeed, this has resulted in the unavoidable need for students to leave formal education with at least a minimum set of digital skills, both for future job prospects, as well as to be able to engage with online platforms touching the social, societal and administrative sphere - as an ever-growing amount of social and administrative tasks require some sort of digital activity. The latest figures show that Europe crucially needs to improve in this domain: in 2017, 43 % of the EU population had an insufficient level of digital skills. 17 % had none at all, as they either did not use the internet or barely did so, while the three main reasons stated for not having internet access at home remained, respectively, the lack of need or interest (46 % of households without internet access in 2017), insufficient skills (43 %) and high access and equipment

costs (32 %) . One further topic of concern is the evident two-speed diffusion of digital skills. We witness, in Europe, a worrying, and worsening digital skills gap, in a post COVID-19 context bound to affect disproportionately the most vulnerable populations.

As highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, teaching with digital tools brings about a complex set of difficulties for teaching personnel. Indeed, the year 2019 has amplified the longstanding calls of education personnel to acquire better training in digital skills, only possible with sufficient public funding, as well as more professional agency in the use of digital tools, and working conditions adapted to the digital era, and taking into account the current transformation's impact on education personnels' employment and working conditions.

At the same time, fast-evolving technological developments are currently being imposed on education personnel across Europe, with possible long-term negative implications for the quality of education. Many governments, encouraged by private interests, such as ed-tech companies, have been prompt in adopting the principle of innovation in education, for the sheer sake of it. While teachers- as clearly proven during the COVID-19 pandemic, were able to rapidly adapt to emergency circumstances for the benefit of their students, education trade unions have been a key voice in warning about the possible risks of the unregulated introduction of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Learning Analytics, as stated in the March 2020 ETUCE Statement on the European Commission White Paper on Artificial Intelligence. While policy-makers, aided by technological companies bearing their own financial agendas, are quick to name these technological enhancements as forces of good in themselves, it is crucial that education trade unions gather, formulate and vocalise further their concerns, for instance on the well-founded basis of so-called 'individualised learning pathways',

The ETUCE Workshop on Digitalisation will aim at addressing these questions and more particularly in light of the following questions:

· **What has been the impact of the digitalisation of the education sector on education personnel's working conditions, professional autonomy, and occupational health and safety, and how to address the teaching professions' needs?**

· **How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the teaching profession with regards to online teaching?**

· **What are the risks of Artificial Intelligence, learning analytics, and data mining from the perspective of education trade unions?**

· **How can the use of digital tools contribute to more inclusive education systems?**