



WORKSHOP BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

The challenges of privatisation *in and of* education



The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic took place against a background of more than 10 years of economic austerity. Public education systems, in particular, were disproportionately affected by cuts in government spending during the last decade, and investment was only slowly beginning to return to pre-crisis levels.

During the last decade, research evidence from the OECD¹ suggests that governments have increasingly **relied on private sources of funding** to compensate for reductions in public education investment. Our analysis² also shows that **market mechanisms and efficiency-based narratives** have been progressively incorporated to drive education reforms and liberalisations.

Education marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation may appear in multiple forms, all grounded in assumed improvements in efficiency and effectiveness of spending:

- **Education and training reforms** have often entailed promoting 'business-like' management practices and market-oriented behaviour in the management of education institutions; results-based accountability and merit-based pay for teachers; contracting-out of educational services and the transfer of costs to students; or even promoting the entrepreneurial possibility to generate funds at the level of individual institutions.

¹ OECD (2019), Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>.

² H. Stevenson, L. Hagger-Vaughan, A. Milner, E. Winchip, Education and Training Policy in the European Semester - Public Investment, Public Policy, Social Dialogue and Privatisation Patterns Across Europe, ETUCE, 2017, available at: <https://www.csee-etuice.org/en/resources/publications/2042-education-and-training-policy-in-the-european-semester-public-investment-public-policy-social-dialogue-and-privatisation-patterns-across-europe-2017>



- At the same time, different forms of private involvement in the provision of education through financial incentives and other forms of a private and public finance mix incentivising **public-private partnerships**, have been actively promoted as an effective tool for rapid injections of investment in education at low cost.
- Finally, the sudden switch to the provision of online distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has unveiled growing inequalities in access to technology for teachers and students. The risks for education commercialisation from the rise of new technologies in education, such as Artificial Intelligence, are now even more prominent as for-profit **online platforms and EdTech companies**, offering low cost innovation solutions in the classroom, have rapidly started to reap the benefits from new commercial opportunities in education.

Such practices may seriously damage public education systems in Europe with long-term effects on people, societies, the economy as well as on the European project. On one side, they have the potential to negatively impact **equity in access to quality education**. On the other, by adding increasing pressures on the working conditions, professional autonomy, and the role of teachers, they are also detrimental to the provision of quality teaching and learning.

Education reforms promoted over the last few decades in the wake of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) have shown that when **standardisation, student testing, high-stake accountability, and competition** are promoted, they lead ultimately to 'teaching to the test' and homogenisation of learning, therefore degrading education instead of improving its quality. They are based on the faulty assumption that teachers have to compete in a workplace environment that is led by market principles instead of educational values and purposes. Conversely, when teachers' professional autonomy and judgement about how and what to teach are promoted and respected, quality teaching that fits each student's need is delivered and quality education can flourish.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, the risk of a heightened involvement of private commercial actors in essential education services and of an increasing reliance on commercial and economic imperatives to face the new economic crisis, is more tangible than ever. In the EU, this can also happen through the adherence to the strict fiscal rules and budgetary targets of the Growth and Stability Pact, driven through the multi-level governance coordination system known as the European Semester.

This **workshop** will review the challenges ahead as Europe is moving towards the biggest recession of modern times, with forecasted impacts on the sustainability of public budgets. It will also discuss how to resist pushes to develop "quasi-markets" in education, tying performance to rewards and sanctions, and how to ensure that well educated teachers can exert their professional autonomy over curricula, and resist tendencies to increasingly rely on the use of standardised teaching materials and mechanical measurement.

More importantly, the workshop will explore ways to deepen the strategies for united solutions, and to grow the collective power of education trade unions organised at European level in countering and resisting privatisation practices, working across all sectors and continuing to build solidarity within and across countries.

Looking at future strategies, the workshop will facilitate a discussion around the following questions:



- **How can we better mobilise membership around international/European campaigns to challenge deregulation, marketisation and privatisation in and of education?**
- **How do we better coordinate our activities, networking and knowledge sharing around privatisation and commercialisation challenges?**
- **How do we make better use of research around privatisation and commercialisation with a view to reaching out to a broader society and to strengthening solidarity for more public investment in education?**
- **How do education trade unions support teachers who are increasingly exposed to the detrimental effects of privatisation and commercialisation pressures in their workplaces, eith more to come as new technologies arise?**
- **How can we challenge increasing standardisation of teaching through enhanced recognition, respect and reward for teachers' professional autonomy and judgement?**

