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ETUCE Position on

“Right to quality and inclusive education and sustainable public investment must be the key of the European Education Area 2025”

Adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 3 November, 2020

Following announcing the European Education Area initiative on 2017 and many discussions and a public consultation since then on how to shape the education and training strategies of the EU for the future, on 30 September 2020 the European Commission published a [Communication on Achieving the European Education Area 2025](#). This document will be the basis of the Council Recommendation to be adopted on the same subject on 30 November by the Education Council of ministers. The Communication focuses on six areas: **quality, inclusiveness and gender equality, green and digital transitions, teachers and trainers, higher education and geopolitical dimensions**.

The Commission invites the Council to set the commitment for the EU as a whole to achieve the following targets by 2030:

- The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%.
- The share of low-achieving eight-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15%.
- At least 98% of children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.
- The share of people aged 20-24 with at least an upper secondary qualification should be 90%.
- The share of 30-34 years old with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 50%.

The following text is the response of ETUCE, which represents 127 education trade unions within 51 countries in Europe, to the Communication, based on consultation with its Member Organisations.

The position paper demands realistic indicators and benchmarks, sustainable public investment, actions to increase the status of teachers with adequate salary and working conditions, and effective social dialogue with the education trade unions. ETUCE requests education trade unions' involvement in developing a policy on “European guidance for the development of national career frameworks”, ETUCE's involvement in “Steering Board for the European Education Area” in the “European Education Area Platform”, and that trainings to teachers in the Erasmus Teacher Academies be recognised.

Education is a right

Education is a human right and public good and this has to be respected and strengthened as a future EU objective in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nation (UN) and the **full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights**. We remind that inclusive education is an adequate response to increasingly complex and diverse societies of today which considers diversity as an added value and not simply as a challenge to address. It rather uses the unique contribution and background that every student and every teacher bring to the classroom for preparing active and open-minded citizens. In November 2017, the European Commission published [its Communication](#) to the EU Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg which endorsed the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). The text focused on setting up new policy goals on education for the 2018-20 period and beyond and announced the European Education Area (EEA). Two years later, in November 2019, the Education Council of the European Union adopted its [Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems](#). ETUCE reacted to both policy initiatives ([2018](#), [2020](#)) and clearly underlined that the EEA should be based on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is surprising that three years after the endorsement of this very important political agreement, the **European Commission has been referring to the Pillar within most of its education policy initiatives but it has not required the member states to present their national strategies to implement the first principle of the Pillar: "Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market"**. We regret that even though the Communication refer to the Social Pillar it does not present effective actions to achieve equal access to all students and teachers to quality learning and training.

The status of the EEA

The initiatives within the Communication imply that the European Education Area is intended to be set up the same way as the Bologna Process, for example the *"Steering Board for the European Education Area"* and in the *"European Education Area Platform"* seems to be a strong policy body on bringing together the national education systems. **We remind that the European Education Area must in every circumstance respect national competences of the EU member states in education. We are against the forced harmonisation of education and training systems in Europe which reflect its diverse cultures.** Indeed, since the year 2000, the EU motto has been 'United in diversity'. Learning about and exchanging experiences between education systems of other continents is very useful and is already being supported by the OECD. However, a **"dialogue" with other continents or national systems would entail that the European Education Area is a coherent single education system for the whole of Europe, which is an utterly misleading concept.** We believe that this cannot be the target of the EEA. We ask the European Commission to support mobility of students and teachers more ambitiously and more explicitly enhance policy dialogue between the EU and the EU neighbourhood countries (including the Western Balkans) and among the Bologna Process countries with the inclusion of the respective education trade unions.

Indicators and benchmarks

Concerning the concrete suggestions of the Commission to the Member States in the form of new indicators and benchmarks, and **in order to develop relevant indicators for the future of education and training, we ask the Commission to carry out thorough research and impact assessment, and adjust the targets based on trustworthy data on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education**, the students and teachers. Deciding what and how to measure progress towards shared aims is of utmost importance, as indicators and benchmarks have the power to shape and define the EU education agenda and the Member States' education systems. We believe that many of these indicators are very challenging and require financial

commitment by governments, which should also be **measured in order to avoid further privatisation in education** (e.g. in early childhood education). It is essential to clarify the terms used in indicators, e.g. who the low achievers and early school leavers are and how the number of early school leavers increased in 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. **The indicators should lead to actions that support the socio-economically disadvantaged students with joint social and education policies.** Both the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) are attached to indicators and benchmark which reflect the central and enabling character of SDG four and EPSR principle one on quality education. However, also in light of the impact of the COVID-19 on educational access and learning outcomes, ETUCE **stresses the need for increased efforts to collect, measure and analyse data on the most excluded segments of the population, therefore to operationalise equity measurement in education**, so that SDG Target 4.5 is achieved. Ultimately, the indicators should lead to actions that support the most disadvantaged students, being affected by circumstances outside of their control, such as wealth and income, gender, birthplace, religion, ethnic minorities and children with disabilities, with joint social and education policies.

Public investment in education

The success of any strategy to implement the European Education Area depends on adequate financing. Yet, the European Commission has stepped back from its earlier initiative (2017) to promote a minimum level for education investment¹ of at least 5% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for education investment. With the education systems emerging from a decade of insufficient education investment in the name of cost-efficiency and financial consolidation policies, and largely exposed to short-term solutions, privatisation pressures, increasing demands for educational effectiveness, **the European Education Area should instead call for large and vibrant public investment stimulus and put particular emphasis on the need to mobilise more, and more equitable public investment in education.** The long-term commitment for improving fairness, equality and social inclusion in schools, enhancing availability of adequate digital material, supporting and encouraging the safe use of digital technologies in schools and education institutions, not as a means in itself, but an opportunity to enhance the quality of education, and cooperative school leadership and teaching in working environments where education professionals can flourish so that all students do well, requires sound and effective investment. In the face of the greatest economic contraction of modern times, **the forthcoming EU financial initiatives such as Next Generation EU, as well as upcoming recovery plans by national governments should ensure that well-resourced education systems based on public service values and democratic governance** are at the hearth of a commitment to deliver on the Education 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and on the European Pillar of Social Rights. This should go together with **a strong call for a meaningful involvement of the European and national education social partners at all stages of the design, implementation and assessment of education policies and identification of financing needs**, including in the future **expert group** of the European Commission **on quality investment in education and training.**

Right skills

¹ “Member States already invest, on average, almost 5% of GDP in their education systems. However, there are important differences between Member States, with some spending around 4% or less (Romania) while others pending up to 7% (Denmark). Working towards upward convergence to make Europe a continent of excellence will require improved investments in education in some Member States, closing the gap to the EU average.” https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-strengthening-european-identity-education-culture_en.pdf

The Communication mentions many times the “right skills” for the labour market. After every economic and financial crisis there is a tendency that companies blame education for the unemployment rate of graduates and skills mismatch while in reality many times reasons of skills mismatch is that companies do not offer quality and fair jobs that would be attractive for graduates. According to CEDEFOP, 70% of the companies suffer from skills shortages but few of them link this to obstacles they create to find skilled workers, e.g. recruitment problems, geographical location of the company, salary level and working conditions.² **We ask the European Commission to consider that digitalisation and innovation should not be implemented in schools for the mere sake of innovation.** Green skills and digital skills first and foremost serve the main purpose of education as a social and pedagogical education institution in the context and the world we live in. **The European Commission must protect education** and should define future education objectives which are in line with and further enforce the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights which says that education should enable all “*to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market*”.

Teachers’ training

Indeed, teachers play a central role in providing quality education and training according to [the OECD TALIS 2018 survey](#) less than one in five teachers consider their profession valued in society. While the Communication correctly focuses on the shortages of teachers and their professional development it lacks any recommendations to member states on how to make the teaching profession more attractive and to ensure that initial teacher training in each country is at Masters level. Taking into account the negative effects of the previous economic and financial crisis and now the COVID-19 crisis on the teaching profession, **EU decision-makers should put quality of teaching, developing higher quality and inclusive initial teacher education and continuous professional development, decent working conditions and salaries as well as raising standards in teaching into the focus of the European Education Area.** The idea of the Erasmus Teacher Academies is promising, but **teacher training should be recognised** within this initiative. Concerning learning mobility of teachers, we request that the transferability of salaries and portability of social benefits and the recognition of mobility programmes be part of continuous professional development and should be included when the Commission develops its “*policy framework for increasing the number and quality of learning mobility of teachers*”.

Fair working conditions of teachers

Teachers should be entitled to better career opportunities, high job security and social protection, and decent salary reaching the same level in every country as of other tertiary graduated employees. **Within the European Education Area teachers and other education personnel in every European country should be given the space, tools, support, appropriate salary and decent working conditions to exercise their profession.** This includes defining teachers’ working time according to collective agreements in order to eliminate the unacceptable high number of working hours including the defined teaching hours and time for other duties e.g. administration, consultation, preparation, and research, especially in the context of increased levels of digitalisation in the teaching profession. We remind that according to [the OECD Education at a Glance 2020](#), teaching profession is in average 11% less paid than other professions with tertiary graduated. **The reinforcement of collective bargaining is essential as the prerequisite to guarantee decent salaries, pensions and decent working conditions for an attractive and rewarding teaching profession.** Therefore, we request to **involve ETUCE in developing the “European guidance for the development of national career frameworks”**.

² CEDEFOP, 2015 [Skills, qualifications and jobs in the EU: the making of a perfect match?](#)

The importance of social dialogue

We regret that the European Commission does not mention the essential role of social dialogue with the education trade unions in its Communication in relation to education policy reforms. We remind that only “cooperation between European stakeholder organisations, teachers’ associations and teacher education providers to work together and provide input to policy recommendations on innovative and multi-disciplinary teaching and learning approaches for basic skills” does not mean social dialogue and such a policy can have a detrimental effect on national social dialogue process. Governance of education and collaborative leadership in schools are the fundamental requirements of high quality and inclusive education systems. Shared school governance with clearly defined responsibilities and taking into consideration the needs of all key stakeholders in education (including teachers, school leaders, and other education personnel, students, parents, and the wider community), is important for inclusive education creating democratic school culture. This entails **strengthening social dialogue mechanisms and ensuring the full participation of social partners in education in the development, monitoring and evaluation of education policies and reforms at all levels. In the European Education Area, the assurance of effective social dialogue with education trade unions should be a target.** We strongly consider that the European social partners in the education sector are key partners on designing EU-level policy on education. The *European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE)* is committed³ to take an active role to contribute to reach the European Education Area 2025 goals. The objectives for 2021-25 need to be achieved by enhancing further exchanges among member states within the working groups under the “*Open Method of Coordination*” wherein education trade unions are members. We also request a membership in the “*Steering Board for the European Education Area*” and in the “*European Education Area Platform*”.

Social and citizenship competences

We regret that the “*Pathways to School Success*” initiative will focus on low achievers and early school leavers only from the perspective to make them catch up with basic skills. The COVID-19 crisis clearly showed that schools are essential for students to develop their social competences. **Education is also key to providing a sense of belonging and opportunities for active participation for all learners, especially for those who are disadvantaged.** Teaching key competences, especially the transversal skills, are important and the role of teachers is essential in developing how key competences can be applied to teaching. Teaching social sensitivity, empathy, intercultural dialogue, citizenship skills and social competence should be applied transversally throughout the whole education process, not only in such subjects as arts, culture, history and philosophy, and practiced in the educational institution. Crises enhance the growing tendency to orient education towards crude labour market skills; therefore, it is essential to fight even more for social cohesion, democratic values and citizenship, and against radicalism by enforcing **social and citizenship competences. The European Education Area should not forget and re-enforce the objectives of the [Paris declaration of EU ministers of education on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education](#)** and continue discussing about its implementation within Open Method of Coordination working groups and in the Education Council meetings. We ask **ETUCE’s membership in the future working groups on “*supportive learning environments for groups at risk of underachievement and for supporting well-being at school*”**

³ https://www.csee-etuice.org/images/attachments/ESSDE_WP_2020-21-WEB.pdf

Respect of full qualifications

Respecting full qualifications and holistic education in each education sector is fundamental. **We have already expressed our concerns that defining curricula based on the employability rate of graduates endangers the holistic approach of education⁴, and ideas of modularisation of education and replacing qualifications/diplomas by micro-credentials⁵ will not guarantee that learners are well prepared for life and the labour market.** Instead, micro-credentials provide learners with low quality education and leaving certificate, and push them to low job positions and to social and economic exclusion. We ask the European Commission to refrain from suggesting to countries to extend micro-credentials to the formal education system to replace full qualifications because this will have a detrimental effect on academic freedom and sustainable public investment to higher education, as well as on access to fair jobs and salary, career progression of the graduates, inclusive education and equal opportunities in education and labour market. **We ask to respect the principle of freedom of knowledge of higher education** and note that companies should stand to their responsibility of training their own employees, workers and staff, not fire them once they no longer have the matching skills. We ask the European Commission to recommend to the EU countries to guarantee high quality public lifelong learning for all adults through sustainable public investment and decent salary levels decent working conditions and permanent contracts for adult learning educators and trainers

Respect of academic freedom

While the European Commission plans to move forward with the “*European Universities*”, we have commented⁶ that these networks should be created while ensuring inclusiveness and diversity of the networks concerning the involved institutions and the students. **The university alliance projects should respect and safeguard national and institutional competence in higher education. We remind that academic freedom and institutional autonomy must be respected in relation to digitalisation and internationalisation of higher education,** and we regret that the Communication does not suggest sustainable public finances and continuous professional development for teachers and researchers. **We are strongly against marketising higher education and research. We remind that sustainable public investment in higher education and research needs to be ensured via the European Semester to make education and research fully inclusive and accessible and to guarantee a supportive working environment for academics and researchers.** Concerning the planned “*European Degree*” and a “*European University Statute*” we remind that higher education is a national competence. Thus, we demand that these ideas be discussed with the respective ministries of education and education trade unions and that national and institutional competences on higher education be respected. **The European Commission should carry out a fully-fledged research and impact assessment on these proposals.**

Recognition of degrees

⁴ Joint ETUC - ETUCE Position on a European-level graduate tracking system of VET learners and tertiary education students (July 2020) <https://www.csee-etu.org/en/resources/statements/3905-joint-etuc-etuce-position-on-a-european-level-graduate-tracking-system-of-vet-learners-and-tertiary-education-students-july-2020>

⁵ Joint ETUC – ETUCE Position on Micro-credentials in VET and tertiary education (July 2020) <https://www.csee-etu.org/en/resources/statements/3908-joint-etuc-etuce-position-on-micro-credentials-in-vet-and-tertiary-education-june-2020>

⁶ [Teachers have an essential role in “Building a stronger Europe”](#) - ETUCE Reaction Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 8-9 October, 2018

As the European Commission plans “*automatic mutual recognition possible by 2025*”, ETUCE points out that an **automatic recognition would require a harmonisation of the structure and the content of upper secondary school systems and a unified quality control system. We are clearly against these attempts** as according to the EU Treaty national education systems, including their structure, content and quality assurance systems are a national responsibility. ETUCE agrees, that knowledge, skills and competences must be recognised and acknowledged, but only to the extent that the student’s competence is likely to match the competence requirements of each member state. **ETUCE suggests that the recommendation instead should call on member states to inform students and learners on the possibilities of having their knowledge, skills and competences recognized and to establish administrative support systems that applicants can access and use easily.** We remind that higher education diplomas are influenced by the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) and the Bologna Process wherein all countries agreed on the structure with BA, Master and PhD, that facilitates a system with mutual/automatic recognition and the quality control debate need to be taken within this context.

Fair green transition of education and schools

We request fair green transition of education and schools within the European Education Area. EU countries need to take action urgent to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4) and on climate change (SDG 13). In particular, target 13.3 aims to: “*improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning*” and target 4.7 aims to “*ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development*”, which is not only envisaged as a way of enhancing skill sets and boosting the economy, but also of furthering the aims of active citizenship and peace and developing critical thinking. In order to achieve these goals, **EU member states should better connect environmental policies to education policies and the European Commission should support to set up national green skills and competence strategies.** Indicators and benchmarks on green skills and competencies could be developed based on EU-level research on mapping national policies on integrating climate change awareness, environmental responsibility, sustainable development, and green skills and competences within education curricula of early childhood education, general education, VET and higher education. The [European Green Deal](#) announced to set up a “*European competence framework to help develop and assess knowledge, skills and attitudes on climate change and sustainable development*”⁷ and we welcome that the European Commission will work on this to present a Council Recommendation on this topic. However, while the **Education for Climate Change Coalition** is to promote outreach activities and campaigns to foster engagement at local and regional level, we believe that the **underlying competence framework for a fair green transition of education should be developed among ministries of education and education trade unions within an “Open Method of Coordination” working group.** Such competence framework should also support teachers' and trainers' initial and continuous professional development on environmental protection as this is a transversal teaching topic in schools.

Fair digitalisation in education

We request fair digitalisation in education. In relation to the planned *Digital Education Action Plan for Europe* and on the *Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence*, we acknowledge, in view of the fast evolution of technological progress, and its impact on the labour market and society as a whole, the need for a meaningful and balanced reflection on the potential benefits and risks of the digital era for the education

⁷ European Commission’s Communication The European Green Deal, 11.12.2019
https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/european-green-deal-communication_en.pdf

sector. We believe that these reflections and decisions will durably impact the education sector, both teachers and students alike, and that they risk deepening social, gender, economic, cultural and geographical inequalities. Therefore, we recall our [Position Paper on the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2020](#) which underlines that **teachers, other education personnel, and schools must be at the driving seat in this process, and policy makers should engage them meaningfully** in view to take into account their expertise and foresight. **Member States should provide adequate and sustainable public investment to ensure equal access to IT tools and internet for all teachers and students, with particular attention to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.** Furthermore, **teachers at all level must receive adequate training and technical support** to the online learning and to develop pedagogical and didactical use of ICT, making sure that the preparation of digital teaching materials does not burden on their workload. In addition, we remind that online teaching and learning has to perform as a tool for inclusive education and it cannot constitute the aim of education.