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ETUCE Report

Education Trade Unions in Europe facing COVID-19 Omicron Variant

March 2022

1. Aim and coverage of the study:

In light of the fast-spreading of the new Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus and several mobilisations and strikes organised by education trade unions across Europe, ETUCE* set up a short survey open for all ETUCE member organisations to feed into the ETUCE study '*Education trade unions in Europe facing the COVID-19 Omicron variant*'. The survey aimed to map the COVID-19 situation in the European region and recent developments and challenges faced by teachers, academics, other education personnel, and their education trade unions at the current stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This ETUCE study is, therefore, based on primary data gathered through a survey among [ETUCE member organisations](#). The survey gathered 47 responses from 41 countries including:

Albania (SPASH), **Armenia** (CRSTESA), **Austria** (GÖD), **Belgium** (CSC-Enseignement, CGSP-Enseignement, COV), **Bulgaria** (SEP), **Croatia** (IURHEEC), **Cyprus** (KTOEÖS), **Czechia** (ČMOS PŠ), **Estonia** (UNIVERSITAS), **Finland** (OAJ), **France** (SNES-FSU), **Georgia** (ESFTUG), **Germany** (GEW), **Greece** (OLME), **Iceland** (ITU), **Ireland** (TUI, IFUT), **Israel** (ITU), **Italy** (FLC CGIL), **Kazakhstan** (KTUESW), **Kosovo** (UESCK/SBASHK), **Kyrgyzstan** (KHWU), **Latvia** (LIZDA), **Luxembourg** (SNE/CGFP), **Malta** (MUT), **Moldova** (ESTU), **Montenegro** (TUEM), **Netherlands** (AOB), **Norway** (UEN), **Poland** (ZNP), **Portugal** (FNE, FENPROF), **Romania** (FSLE), **Russia** (ESTUS), **Scotland** (EIS), **Serbia** (TUS), **Slovakia** (OZPSaV), **Sweden** (Läraryförbundet), **Switzerland** (LCH), **Tajikistan** (TUESWRT), **Turkey** (EgitimSen), **UK** (NEU, NASUWT, UCU) and **Ukraine** (TUESWU) participated.

This amounts to 80% of countries where ETUCE is represented.

For a few countries, replies were received from different ETUCE member organisations. Participants were asked to provide answers to 9 questions addressing the perceived impact of the COVID-19 Omicron variant in the education sector.

Important to note is the temporal deviation that occurred in this study, as it was conducted in the period from **10 February 2022 to 1 March 2022**. This survey can



however only depict a momentary assessment of the situation. Due to the volatile and constantly shifting evolution of the COVID-19 infection rates in Europe, the situation at the start of the survey might not accurately reflect the situation towards the end of it. While a continuous temporal comparison would thus be interesting, it is not feasible in the current framework of the questionnaire.

2. Perceived impact of the COVID-19 Omicron variant on the infection rates in education:

The ETUCE study analysed the perceived evolution of the COVID-19 infections in the education sector with the spreading of the Omicron variant from the perspective of education trade unions at a national level.

66% of respondents indicated that the COVID-19 **infections have substantially increased with the emergence of the Omicron variant in their respective countries**. This constitutes a dominant majority of the ETUCE member organisations reported in 26 countries.

This data seems to be in line with the highly infectious nature of the Omicron variant, witnessed in most countries in the European region. On the other side of the spectrum, 7 respondents across 6 countries indicated a substantial decrease in COVID-19 infection rates. These include **Bulgaria (SEP), Moldova (ESTU), Ireland (TUI & IFUT), Georgia (ESFTUG), Kyrgyzstan (KHWU), Kazakhstan (KTUESW)**.

Only 9 respondents indicated that **infection rates slightly increased or decreased**, suggesting that the impact of the Omicron variant did not impose a substantial effect on the COVID-19 infections in the period under analysis. Only one country did not answer within the framework of the questionnaire.

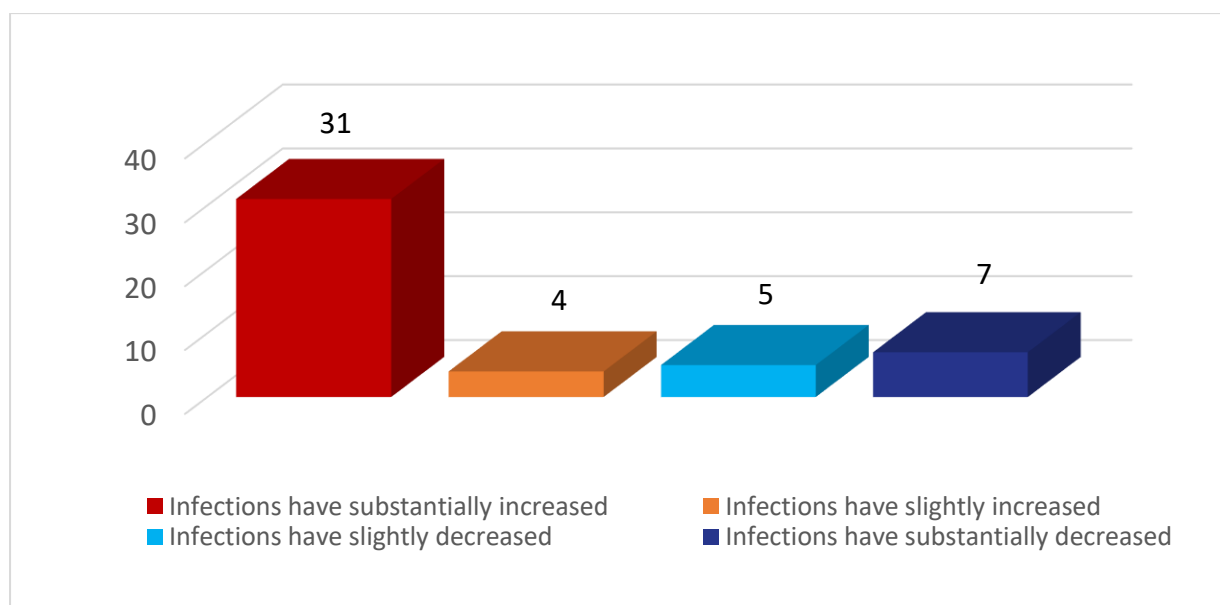


Figure 1: Impact of COVID-19 Omicron variant on infection rates in the education sector. Source: ETUCE survey.

It is worth mentioning that the data collected in the framework of this survey might differ from official national estimates. However, the objective of this study was limited to evaluate the *perceived evolution of COVID-19 infection rates* in the education sector from the perspective of education workers.

3. The reaction of governments - Updates of the government-issued health and safety measures:

In order to evaluate the impact of the Omicron variant on workers in the education sector, the questionnaire asked whether the governmental health and safety requirements for the education sector were updated with the emergence of the Omicron variant.

Answers to this question indicated a wide array of different national or, sometimes, regional responses. However, as a general trend, the ETUCE study observed **high frequency and, occasionally, chaotic implementation in the update of governmental health and safety measures.**

Education trade unions from Montenegro and Serbia indicated the governmental decision to prolong some national holidays to contain infections.

Conversely, during the period in which the survey was conducted, **some education trade unions did not observe any updates on the government issued health and safety measures.** These include countries such as Albania, Armenia, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Other member organisations, for instance from Malta, indicated that the government updated the general health and safety measures in the society, but kept the same protocols for the education sector.

Most commonly observed updates of the health and safety measures include:

- **Quarantine measure:** In most countries, the tendency leaned towards reducing or lifting the quarantine measures for both teachers and students.
- **School closure:** As a response to active COVID-19 cases among students, the **policies for school closure** were often updated and, sometimes, lifted to favour the continuation of in-presence teaching and learning. However, the study showed varying thresholds among country cases. In Italy, for instance, despite the government's decision to keep all education institutions open, in practice, due to high autonomy at the local or regional level, the share of online and distance learning resulted in levels above the initial estimations.
- **Testing policies:** The testing policies in place in education institutions are also perceived as a volatile and changing feature in the updates in government-issued health and safety measures. Two key tendencies regarding this issue stand out: (1) The frequency of mandatory testing has been generally increased and (2) student-testing is generally administered by parents, but there is little control over the testing procedure, as reported by Israel and the Netherlands.
- **Vaccination:** Several education trade unions reported that national **vaccination campaigns** started targeting younger audiences to increase the vaccination rates among students. This can ultimately help alleviate the risk of infection and, thus, some pressures on the education sector. However, in some countries, issues of ineffective vaccination campaigns are also detected. For instance, Turkey reported the lack of a widespread and effective vaccination campaign, while a low level of vaccination among youngest children was reported by Poland.

- **Face covering:** Regarding the use of face masks, there are different results across countries. Most respondents indicate that the use of face masks remains mandatory or recommended (Georgia), while in some countries such as the UK and Switzerland the requirement was lifted or expected to be removed in the near future such as in Malta.

In some countries, education trade unions reported that the constant change and re-adaptation of health and safety protocols was stressful, confusing, and ultimately unhelpful in addressing the needs of teachers, academics, and other education personnel regarding the challenges of the pandemic. These challenges will be more specifically addressed in the next section.

4. Main challenges for teachers, academics, and other education personnel:

Participants in the ETUCE study were asked to indicate the main challenges faced by teachers, academics, and other education personnel at the current stage of the pandemic.

Most notably, as a general trend, the increasing infection rates had a severe impact on education workers as **the risk of infection** was perceived, as critical, especially in crowded classrooms.

Due to high infection rates among workers in the education sector, lack of **support staff and teacher shortages** were voiced as the most predominant challenge linked to the emergence of the Omicron variant. Subsequently, the impossibility to find teacher replacement resulted in a **higher workload** for teachers, academics, and other education personnel, and, in extreme cases, even to **school closure**, for instance, in Romania.

Respondents also mentioned the issue of **long-COVID** as a threat to their ability to adequately perform their work and to protect their well-being.

Regarding **health and safety in education institutions**, keeping education institutions safe was reported as challenging. Some respondents also lamented that the determination of the government to keep the school open is accompanied by the total disregard for the ongoing disruption to education caused by high infection rates and the short-, medium- or long-term health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers and students (e.g., United Kingdom, and France). In Cyprus, the Ministry of Education insisted on restoring in presence education and teachers wishing to continue with online classes were threatened with salary cuts.

Generally, **ventilation and air filtration** were reported as underdeveloped and insufficient in many cases. Additionally, in several countries, teachers were often required to perform **additional administrative tasks**, including enforcing mask-wearing, hygiene procedures and, in some cases, controlling testing and contact tracing.

Besides, the **rapidly changing** government-issued **health and safety protocols** and the lack of coherent communication with the national authorities have caused **increasing mental distress and organisational issues**.

While some countries have restored in-presence teaching and learning, **many education institutions across Europe, mainly in higher education, have kept offering remote learning or modes of hybrid and online teaching**, which are often perceived as difficult to manage and organise and unsatisfactory regarding educational outcomes.

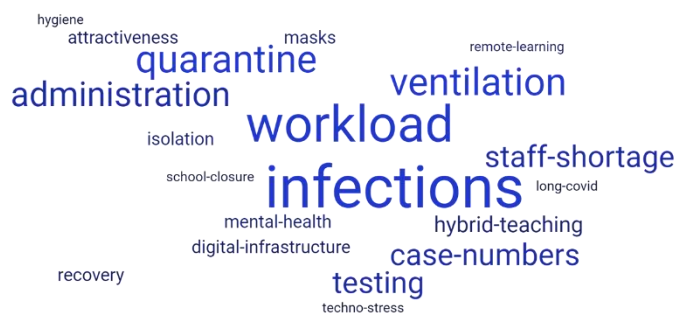


Figure 2: Main challenges for teachers, academic, and other education personnel. Source: ETUCE survey.

Nevertheless, even in countries where in-presence teaching is the norm, the high **number of students in quarantine** is reported as a serious issue. This is, indeed, responsible for pedagogical discontinuity and constitute an obstacle for teachers and academics to perform their work, including organising the classes and reaching out to students in quarantine and tracking the pedagogical progress of students. Subsequently, several education trade unions further pointed to the **lack of adequate recovery policies** to address the learning losses of students.

The lack of adequate **digital infrastructure and quality internet connection** was mentioned by Moldova and Georgia as the main obstacles to providing quality education in rural areas.

Georgia further reported that even though schools have the internet connection, **remote and blended teaching are severe challenge as families**, especially those with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, **lack computers and other supplies to support their children**. Similarly, poor connection and a high price of the Internet were also identified by Tajikistan as the main obstacles to carrying out online training in higher education.

The administrative burden, combined with the organisational difficulties, in most cases without recognition or additional support, have led to **increased work-related stress and higher cases of burnout**. In this respect, the case of Ireland (TUI) illustrated that COVID-related sick leave has been reduced from 28 days to 10 days and will eventually move to ordinary paid sick leave.

In relation to the demands of continuously switching among different teaching settings (online, remote, and hybrid), Germany pointed to an **increase of technostress** in the teaching profession.

The combination of these psychosocial risks has a **significant impact on the physical and mental health** of teachers, academics, and other education personnel. In this regard, Norway pointed out that the pandemic has not contributed to making the teaching profession more attractive and expressed the concern that the pandemic will affect **teachers' recruitment** in the long run.

5. Education trade unions' view and mobilisation on the governmental pandemic response:

To grasp the level of satisfaction of ETUCE member organisations of the governmental pandemic responses in their respective countries, participants in the study were asked to provide their view of the current measures applied by their government in the education sector.

Most notably, a general tendency of education trade unions being unsatisfied with the government-issued measures is evident. Member organisations indicated that the governmental measures are often **insufficient, inadequate, or chaotic**. As a consequence, the measures not only fell short in achieving their goal of reducing infection rates and ensuring health and safety for people, but they also imposed additional stress on teachers, academics, and other education personnel. Constant adaption to new measures and, in some cases, additional administrative tasks are named as core reasons for **unsustainable workload**.

Depending on the specific national context, measures are considered either too strict or too lax. As indicated by the Netherlands, even within the country there can be opposing views on this matter.

Similarly, while in some countries (e.g., Ireland - IFUT), education trade unions would prefer a more **prescriptive decision-making approach** by the government, in other countries, such as Bulgaria (SEP), a **case-by-case approach** is preferred. Czechia reported a discriminative measure for the infected teachers in primary and secondary and early childhood education (ECE). While the first group is paid the average salary during the quarantine period, teachers in ECE only get a sick leave pay corresponding to the 60% of the average salary.

According to ETUCE, this data shows the importance of adapting the health and safety policies in education to the specific context, listening to the needs of those who live education at the forefront daily. In this regard, respondents from Portugal (FENPROF) indicate a lack of **social dialogue** between governments and education trade unions, or as in Italy, the lack of fruitful outcomes.

What even further deteriorates the evaluation of governmental responses is that often, the same problems have persisted for a long time without being satisfactorily addressed. Most frequently, this was observed for digital infrastructure, health and safety measures in education institutions, such as ventilation and CO2 sensors. While these issues can only be scarcely tackled with short-term policies, it must be acknowledged that the pandemic has already lasted two years.

Nevertheless, the dissatisfaction with the measures did not apply to all respondents. Some education trade unions also voice that they see the government responses in their countries as appropriate or at least acceptable (Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Norway, Russia, and Scotland).

6. Education trade union Mobilisation:

Education trade unions participating in the study highlighted several methods of mobilisation to address the different challenges afflicting the education sector. These include:

- **Lobbying actions:** The predominant approach of education trade unions was to **directly appeal ministries and government to action**. **Albania**, for instance, has requested government to take emergency action for immediate replacement of infected teachers. The **Finnish trade union, AoJ**, is lobbying additional fund to education and the **Irish TUI** is lobbying to maintain the additional COVID teacher allocation. The **Polish ZNP** called for clear rules regarding working conditions and salaries of teachers teaching in remote and hybrid systems, while the **Czech ČMOS PŠ** has negotiated with the Education Ministry to change the current rules.

- **Social dialogue and cooperation:** Several unions including in **Iceland, Malta, Norway, and Scotland** reported regular meetings and/or cooperation with the Ministers to monitor the situation and decide on and/or improve the measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Trade union campaigns:** Trade union campaigns constitute another significant branch of mobilisation. These entail a wide array of campaigns and most commonly aim to increase the awareness of the public for the needs of the education sector. Some of the campaigns include:
 - Trade union campaign to advance occupational health and safety (**Georgia**)
 - Trade union campaign to support teachers (**Montenegro and Sweden**)
 - Support to a student-initiative against inadequate hygiene and health protection and against wilful contamination (**Germany**)
 - Trade union campaigns for demanding increased budget for education, more teachers support, and more effective and widespread vaccination (**Turkey**)
 - Publication of introductory information on protection measures against Covid -19 (**Tajikistan**).

- **Strikes:** In some countries, the dissatisfaction of trade unions due to continuous demands ignored by the governments led to education trade union strikes at a national level.
 - **In France**, teachers' appeals for the protection of health and safety in schools was ignored to such an extent that on **13 January 2022**, ETUCE member organisations including SNES FSU, UNSA Education, FERC-CGT, Sgen-CFDT, FEP-CFDT, FNEC.FP-FO, SNESUP-FSU, SNCS-FSU, and SNUipp-FSU went on strike to call on the French government to respond to the repeated demands of teachers, academics and other education personnel. The protest gathered around 100,000 education workers and managed to open a dialogue with the Prime Minister. (Read more on the French strike [here](#)).
 - **In Greece**, several proposals submitted by education trade unions in collaboration with epidemiologists were ignored by the Ministry of Education. Trade union demands were not heard despite mobilisation jointly organised by the educational federations and other unions, especially of the public sector. Therefore, climax of these actions took place with gatherings and rallies at the beginning of March.

- **In Israel, the union ITU** protested the testing programme for students and posed a threat to strike which eventually led to a dialogue with government on redefining the testing programme and outlining new guidelines.
- **In the UK**, some local branches of **UCU** entered disputes with employers as education institutions were considered unsafe.
- **In Italy**, after a general strike in December 2021, **Fil Cgil** has started operating through third institutions and consultive means to influence the government politics.

Generally, **in the first months of 2022, a high-level of education trade union mobilisation was witnessed in different countries across Europe.** These include **Belgium, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom.** Despite most strikes were not directly related to the COVID-19 situation, pre-existing challenges for the education sector have undoubtedly amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. Mandatory vaccination and testing for education workers and view of ETUCE member organisations:

Mandatory vaccination: Data gathered in the ETUCE study showed that **mandatory vaccination for education workers** is applied in 8 out of the 41 total countries under analysis. These are **Austria, Albania, Armenia, Italy, Latvia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Tajikistan.** There have been some attempts by other governments to impose mandatory measures, for instance in Poland, but they have been eventually withdrawn.

Mandatory testing: Concerning the enforcement of mandatory testing for education workers the answers vary significantly. Some countries such as **Bulgaria and Croatia** applied **mandatory testing for non-vaccinated teachers only.** Other countries applied **mandatory testing for all education workers irrespective of the vaccination status.** This was the case for Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, and Georgia. The frequency and administration of tests **could also differ based on vaccination status.** In the **case of Greece**, non-vaccinated teachers are obliged to present a rapid test three times a week at their own expenses. Conversely, for vaccinated teachers the costs for testing were covered by the state.

In some countries, as it is the case for **Turkey**, the issue of vaccination was perceived from a different perspective as education trade unions still advocate facilitation and more wide-reaching access to vaccination for education workers.

Regarding how the ETUCE member organisations evaluate mandatory vaccination, a very clear tendency was identified. Indeed, **the dominant majority of respondents advocated voluntary vaccination, while was against the employment of mandatory vaccination.**

Only three countries clearly voiced their support for the application of mandatory vaccination of teachers, academics, and other education personnel. Additionally, in some countries, the topic of mandatory vaccination has been **a divisive topic in the trade union movement and society,** while in other countries, this **has not been a point of discussion at governmental or societal level.**

Despite national differences, the collected data generally shows that since the beginning of discussion on mandatory measures for the education sector started (August/September 2021), the number of countries applying mandatory vaccination and/or testing requirements has remained relatively stable. Hence, **the approach of applying mandatory measures has not appeared to take hold across Europe.**

8. Conclusions:

The data collected through this study has shown that **the spread of the Omicron variant corresponded to a shift in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic** in most of countries across Europe. While epidemiologists keep calling on prudence, several governments have announced **a new phase of the pandemic**, which resulted in the **lifting of many emergency measures** previously in place.

Education trade unions across Europe have been underlining the importance of **restoring in-presence teaching since the beginning of the pandemic**. Nevertheless, **there must be no compromise to health and safety in education institutions**. In this respect, the ETUCE study sheds lights on **numerous challenges** still faced by teachers, academics, and other education personnel across Europe.

Most notably, as clearly emerges from this study, **the health and safety education institutions are not yet ensured**. While **increasing COVID-19 infections** have further disrupted educational activities, education trade unions also warned of the heavy impact that the pandemic has been producing on **educational outcomes of students and psychosocial risks of education workers and students**.

Against this backdrop, the **governments' answer** to the emergence of the COVID-19 Omicron variant have been perceived by ETUCE member organisations **as insufficient, inadequate, or chaotic**. Therefore, in many cases, the national measures did not only fall short in achieving their goal of reducing infection rates and ensuring health and safety, but they also imposed an additional stress on teachers, academics, and other education personnel.

In light of a **general trend of dissatisfaction** towards the health and safety measures in the education sector, many ETUCE member organisations engaged in **negotiation, social dialogue with the government or lobbying actions** to improve the situation in the education sector. In some countries, where the demands of education trade unions remained ignored for long time, ETUCE member organisations mobilised with **protests and strikes**, which eventually opened some dialogue with the governments. In general, it is observed that the **COVID-19 has contributed to worsen pre-existing challenges** in the education systems.

Regarding mandatory vaccination and other mandatory measures for the education sector, this emerged as an increasingly debated matter across Europe in 2021. However, the ETUCE study shows that the approach of **imposing mandatory measures has not taken hold across Europe**. Indeed, as of March 2022, it remains limited to a few countries. As a relevant outcome of this study, it is worth mentioning that clear prevalent position of ETUCE member organisations on vaccination is outlined, with **the vast majority of members support a voluntary approach to vaccination**.

In conclusion, the ETUCE study shows that the **COVID-19 crisis is still far from being concluded** and keeps inflicting its negative impact on the education systems across Europe. The evidence presented in this report should, once more, make clear **the need for governments to address the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on the education sector, and engage in **concrete social dialogue**

with education trade unions to ensure a fair and equitable education-led recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in the short, medium, and long term.

Useful links:

ETUCE COVID-19 Hub: <https://www.csee-etuce.org/en/policy-issues/covid-19/3631-general-information>

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control - COVID-19 Vaccination rated by country:
<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/infographic-covid-19-vaccination-eueea>

UNESCO – Interactive map with total duration of school closure by country:
<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#durationschoolclosures>

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