



**Attractiveness**  
of the Teaching Profession



**Towards a Framework of Action on the  
Attractiveness of the Teaching Profession  
through Effective Social Dialogue in Education**

**Executive Summary**



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# **Towards a Framework of Action on the Attractiveness of the Teaching Profession through Effective Social Dialogue in Education**

## **Executive Summary**

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## Introduction

The central importance of education in every aspect of our lives is well understood. Economic prosperity, social cohesion, democratic engagement, and the development of sustainable futures in Europe depend critically on the commitment and capabilities of European citizens, and education is central to the development of that potential. Developing potential is a core task of teachers, and teachers are foundational to achieving all the ambitious hopes and aspirations that the nations of Europe have for their education systems. It follows that ensuring an adequate supply of teachers, who have the skills and expertise to undertake the work required of them, is critical. Hence, the recruitment and, crucially, retention of sufficient teachers, who are appropriately qualified, is a key responsibility for those charged with managing education systems.

However, it is increasingly recognised that there are growing problems of teacher supply across Europe. Put simply, teaching as a profession appears insufficiently *attractive* to encourage an adequate supply of new entrants into its ranks, or to retain those already working in the sector. The problem is widely recognised, and has been described as a “crisis” in a recent Eurydice report:

The teaching profession has been going through a vocational crisis for some years now, attracting fewer young people and losing others trained to be teachers. Many European systems are now suffering from shortages. Moreover, the teaching profession is evolving and teachers have ‘increasing demands, responsibilities and expectations put before them’. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021a, p. 11)

In this report, we set out data relating to the scale of the teacher supply problems (in terms of size and form, and the changing patterns across Europe), and identify the key factors that can help explain current trends.

There are clearly significant immediate and short-term problems in teacher supply in Europe, and, in many countries, those problems are likely to intensify in the medium term (5-10 years). However, the real crisis in teacher supply may be further in the future as the attractiveness of teaching as a profession diminishes relative to the opportunities available to graduates elsewhere in the labour market. This trend reflects long-term changes in work and the labour market that have been accelerated by the pandemic, but which will shape work in the future.

### Understanding teaching as a profession: making sense of *attractiveness*

The *attractiveness* of a profession must always be understood as a relative concept. Any profession competes with other occupations, both to attract new entrants, and to retain current members. In this sense, it can be considered in purely economic terms (a labour market that seeks to bring demand and supply into some form of equilibrium) but is best understood by drawing on analyses from both economics and psychology in which financial

rewards are part of a wider assessment of complex intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. That current labour markets for teachers are problematic can be reflected in data presented in the 2021 Eurydice Report on European<sup>1</sup> teachers' careers, development and well-being.

This report (on teacher supply in the lower secondary sector in 2019/20) highlighted no fewer than 27 jurisdictions with problems of teacher shortage, combined with a further six countries that were simultaneously experiencing teacher shortages and problems of over-supply (for example, having a surplus of teachers in some subject areas, but shortages of teachers in other subject areas) (see Table 1). Only three countries were identified as having problems of 'over-supply'.

*Table 1. Teacher shortages in lower secondary education in Europe 2019/2020*

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Country</b>
Shortage	BEde, IE, HR, RO, UK-WLS, AL, MK, FR, UK-SCT, NO, DE, LV, LU, NL, CZ, AT, PL, CH, BG, EE, HU, SE, IS, BEfr, BEnl, DK, UK-ENG
Shortage + surplus	LI, EL, ES, IT, LT, PT
Surplus	CY, TR, UK-NIR

(Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021a)

Further analysis reveals a complex mix of both recruitment and retention problems (see Table 2). Several countries face difficulties attracting people onto teacher preparation courses, but, then, supply problems can be compounded when trainee teachers either quit their programmes, do not transfer into teaching posts on completion of their course or enter teaching but leave soon after. In some countries, this rate of early attrition can be a serious problem.

*Table 2. Most significant problems associated with recruitment and retention in Europe*

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Country</b>
Initial Teacher Education (ITE) shortages (low applications and/or high dropout)	FR, UK-SCT, NO, DE, LV, LU, NL, LT, PT, RS, MT
High teacher exit	BG, LI
High teacher exit and ITE shortages	EE, HU, BE, IS, BEfr, BEnl, DK, UK-ENG
An ageing teacher population	DE, LV, LU, NL, CZ, AT, PL, CH, BG, EE, HU, SE, IS, LI, EL, ES, IT, LT, PT

<sup>1</sup> The report focuses on all 27 EU Member States, as well as the United Kingdom, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Türkiye.

(Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021a)

The data above point to a stark problem. This is often presented as an “ageing” teacher population – whereby it is estimated that several countries will have to replace 1/3 of their teachers in the next decade, rising to as much as 50% in some countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021a). In the 2019 Education and Training Monitor, 32.8% of primary teachers and 39% of secondary teachers in Europe were aged over 50, with the figure for the primary sector exceeding 40% in Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania. Four countries (Estonia, Germany, Italy and Sweden) had more than 13% of primary teachers aged over 60 (European Commission, 2021).

Combined with difficulties recruiting potential teachers on to teacher preparation programmes, the problems appear clear.

However, the picture is more complex and needs to take account of not only the age profile of the teacher workforce but the gendered nature of the profession, which is overwhelmingly female at all levels (see Table 3).

*Table 3. Percentage of women teachers by education sector in the European Union 2017*

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Pre-primary	95.7%
Primary	85.5%
Secondary	64.7%

(Source: European Commission, 2019a)

### Factors impacting teacher supply

A wide range of factors are identified in the research literature that can impact on teacher supply. These factors are identified below:

- Pay – pecuniary reward
- The nature of the work – including, for example, the balance between teaching and administration
- Public perception/societal status – including the role of media and policy representation
- Pupil behaviour and standards of discipline (real and perceived)
- Job security – including the prevalence of precarious contracts
- Access to professional development – including initial teacher education, induction and on-going professional development
- Collaborative work cultures

- Professional autonomy and the space to exercise professional judgement – scope for creativity, but also the absence of prescriptive practices
- Classroom conditions – including class size, but also wider issues of equipment and infrastructure
- Quality of school leadership – their capacity to support and develop teachers in their work
- Self-efficacy – teachers’ own self-confidence in their ability to undertake the work confidently and effectively

In the report, the above factors are clustered into a number of themes relating to support for practice (initial teacher education and professional development), working conditions (workload, pay, task discretion) and well-being and stress.

As would be expected, the way these particular issues are experienced across Europe differs considerably according to country context. For example, teacher education programmes differ significantly, and initial teacher education systems are becoming more diverse, partly in response to the need to increase teacher supply but also to attract more diverse applicants.

One challenge with assessing the impact of particular factors on teacher supply is that individual factors can have different impacts in different contexts. For example, in some contexts, and by some measures, teacher pay can appear relatively attractive, but those countries may still experience significant teacher shortage problems. Pay therefore is clearly an important factor, but it must be seen as one of several that can either work in a mutually supportive way or can work against each other.

In Europe, teachers’ pay is typically below average graduate earnings, with only a small number of countries demonstrating the reverse. In several countries, pay has fallen behind other graduate occupations since the 2008 economic crisis, particularly when compared to the private sector, but, in other instances, pay may be relatively poor but has not deteriorated in recent years. Pay alone therefore cannot explain the trend towards increasing teacher shortages but must be seen as part of the picture which should also include working conditions, broadly defined. Indeed, in the report, we discuss at length a single research study which suggests that teachers experience higher levels of *work strain* when compared to other occupations. *Work strain* is high levels of work intensity (effort expended within working hours) combined with low levels of task discretion. It may be that these issues will look different in different national contexts, but the study emphasises the need to look at quality of working life, broadly defined, focusing not only on traditional areas of concern (working hours), but also factors such as task discretion and the opportunity to work in collaborative environments.

Where these factors work in negative ways, there is the inevitable potential to impact teacher stress levels, and this is recognised as a distinctive problem in the teaching profession. For example, the 2021 Eurydice report concluded that stress levels among teachers in Europe are “common”, having been reported by nearly half of all teachers.

What is also clear is that many factors that have caused problems for teacher supply (workload, stress) were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and that many of these

problems have been enduring post-pandemic. Indeed, these problems have been further compounded by high levels of inflation and the immediate impact on real pay.

These issues are clearly impacting on teacher supply, although what is less clear is the extent to which factors may have long-term, or only short-term, impact. Our concern is that it may be tempting to think that immediate crises (inflation, impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic) will ease, and an improved situation will return. In the next section, we explain why this analysis may be over-optimistic.

### The attractiveness of the teaching profession: from short-term problems to long-term crisis

Data presented in this report highlight the problems currently experienced in teacher supply across many European countries. These problems are likely to worsen significantly in countries expecting large numbers of teacher retirements in the next 5-10 years. However, our view is that this analysis may still under-estimate the scale of the problem ahead, partly because it misunderstands it.

The reality is that problems of teacher shortage have long been a feature of many national education systems. Public education systems are large employers of graduate labour, but, typically, pay below average graduate earnings. This is always likely to create shortages, and, in particular, in moments of economic growth (when private sector salaries increase, but public sector salaries are often held down by governments struggling to manage competing demands). However, the cyclical nature of the economy, and its link to the teacher labour market, can, periodically, be expected to correct the problem as recessions encourage an increase in teacher applicants due to the scarcity of other job opportunities.

Nevertheless, this analysis is only a part of the picture. A fuller understanding makes it necessary to take account of the gendered nature of the labour market. As indicated above, the teacher workforce is dominated by women. There are many complex reasons for this, but an important factor is the perception that teaching is a job that has advantages for those involved in childcare (still, overwhelmingly, women). As long as this feature of teachers' work was an important consideration, then it has been possible for these perceived advantages to be traded for lower pay. Here, we argue that teaching as a profession has often relied on women, and women's labour, to be able to pay lower salaries (typically where teachers' pay levels are higher, the gender imbalance is reduced). Put another way, and more starkly, women's labour has acted as an artificial subsidy to public education systems by depressing pay levels below what would otherwise need to be paid as a competitive market salary.

This situation no longer applies. Over time, shifting employment patterns have led to a growth in jobs that compete for graduate labour. Much of this expansion has been in sectors such as financial services, IT and the creative industries. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the businesses in these sectors recognised the need to offer "family-friendly" employment policies in order to attract the labour they needed. This often made combining work and caring for family more manageable, but this process accelerated rapidly when the Covid-19 pandemic encouraged home and remote working on a substantial scale.

Since the period of lockdowns has ended, teachers have returned to their schools, but many other workers have not had to return to their offices, or at least not on the same basis.

The serious and long-term problem that the teaching profession now needs to address is that teaching is becoming increasingly demanding - classrooms are more complex, hours of work are lengthening and teachers experience high levels of scheduling and timetabling rigidity. Increasing accountability demands can interfere with the core task of teaching, and what have been seen as the benefits of being able to work with young people, further adding to stress and decreasing job satisfaction. By contrast, employment opportunities elsewhere are providing increasing flexibilities with more home working and less timetabling/scheduling rigidity. Moreover, long-term trends in the economy point to an expansion of these types of jobs, with more opportunities for women graduates as employers compete to secure their labour.

The challenge for teaching as a profession therefore is to ensure teaching is an attractive career choice in a competitive graduate labour market, recognising that what made teaching attractive in the past is likely to be less and less effective in attracting teachers in the future. Unlike in the past, the system cannot rely on economic cycles to auto-correct teacher shortages, because the current source of the problem is more complex and more enduring.

What is required is a reconfiguration of teachers' work that addresses three key areas:

1. The intrinsic nature of the work – ensuring that teachers can teach in a way that brings them high levels of satisfaction.
2. Wellbeing and quality of working life – ensuring that teachers have the working conditions to be effective in the classroom, and to experience an appropriate work-life balance.
3. Remuneration – ensuring that teachers have appropriate levels of pay without depending on hidden subsidies to suppress pay and avoid paying market-rate salaries.

## Social dialogue and the attractiveness of the teaching profession

The scale of the problem we have outlined is considerable. Without serious, long-term solutions, the problem may even be existential. It presents what can be described as a “wicked problem”, that is, a problem that is enduring and appears to have an intractable element. Our argument is that such problems need to be addressed in a process that engages key stakeholders and is robust enough to be able to manage the inevitable and unavoidable tensions and conflicts. Social dialogue offers the most effective mechanisms to address these issues, precisely because such dialogue necessarily engages all key parties and is also predicated on a recognition and understanding of the underlying tensions. Decision-making processes that seek to deny or wish away the underlying tensions are more likely to generate poor results because they fail to address stakeholder concerns. Solutions are less likely to command wide support and will be inclined to be short-term and, often, problematic.



However, for social dialogue to make an effective contribution to tackling these issues, we would highlight the importance of two considerations.

*First*, social dialogue needs to take place at all the levels where relevant decisions are being made. It may be that many key issues are determined at a national level and so national-level social dialogue is required – both in the form of collective bargaining and other forms of dialogue – to be able to make the necessary decisions and collective agreements. However, many key issues that can impact the quality of working life, and hence teacher supply at a micro-level, are the outcome of local, even school-level, decision-making. Developing robust social dialogue processes at all levels of the system is important if all key decisions are to benefit from effective dialogue between social partners. This is particularly important to avoid implementation gaps, whereby agreements reached at national or local/regional levels are not experienced as expected in the workplace.

*Second*, the agenda for social dialogue needs to be considered broadly to include both traditional *industrial* issues and wider so-called *professional* issues that have a significant potential to impact the quality of working life but are not always considered legitimate issues for social dialogue (sometimes from an employer side and sometimes from a trade union side). Drawing on the analysis presented in this report, we suggest that such an agenda for social dialogue focus on the following:

**Rewards.** The issue of pay is central to whether teaching is seen by potential recruits as an attractive profession and, also, critical to issues of retention. Pay relates not only to global levels but also to rates of progression during a career and how, and in what ways, remuneration might be linked to other issues such as geographical location, subject specialism or participation in professional development.

**Well-being and quality of working life.** Broadly defined, well-being has a significant impact on overall quality of working life and, therefore, both recruitment and retention. In this report, we have highlighted that well-being and the linked concept of stress are closely linked to the workload demands on teachers. Workload is often measured by hours worked, but it is important to recognise the possibility of work intensifying within hours worked. Much of this activity can in turn relate to the balance between time devoted to teaching and time devoted to activities other than teaching, with the latter further divided between activity that is more directly (preparation, marking) and that which is more indirectly (including much administration) related to teaching. In this area, we would highlight the issue of task discretion (see earlier discussion) in particular, and the need to ensure teachers experience agency in their work. The focus here is on the quality of working life. Social dialogue can make an important contribution to establishing the formal agreements that can shape the experience at work, but, also, and more difficult, is the role that social dialogue can play in ensuring adequate space for task discretion.

**Equalities.** The overwhelming majority of education employees are women and there remains a perception that teaching is “women’s work”, with this perception greater for teachers of younger age ranges. This may contribute to the suppression of teachers’ pay overall and support the imbalance in the workforce. For example, one argument is that teaching is a job that can more easily be reconciled with childcare and, as women remain the

primary carers, it follows that the job may be more attractive to women. Social dialogue can make a major contribution to addressing these issues by pursuing policies that challenge stereotypes, tackle inequalities and confront discrimination (including institutionalised discriminatory practices). Here we refer to gender, but many of the same arguments apply to all groups that experience discrimination and structural inequalities. One challenge is to make teaching attractive to all given that any “flexibilities”, that, in the past, may have made teaching appear relatively attractive, are losing their comparative advantage.

**Teacher support.** Ensuring teachers have the professional self-confidence and self-efficacy to be effective in their jobs is a major contributor to teacher retention. This not only requires high-quality and appropriate teacher education and effective support for early career teachers (where the risk of dropout is greatest) but also on-going support throughout teachers’ careers. In this report, it has been argued that mid-career and veteran teachers can be neglected and taken for granted (because the opportunity cost of quitting is high, therefore, their retention is assumed) and so professional development needs to be appropriate to career stage. Earlier in this report, the notion of career breaks was identified as an important factor in supporting teachers who have longer service. All of these inputs can make a difference, but they are also legitimate issues for social dialogue. For example, ensuring access to professional development that is an entitlement, and is appropriately resourced, has contractual implications. Similarly, there may be tensions between employer and employee expectations, and these may be the focus of social dialogue. Moreover, and as with other issues identified, there can be significant implementation gaps between national agreements and workplace experience, and so social dialogue at all levels is important.