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ETUCE Position on the Spring Package 2023 of the European Semester

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The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) – representing 126 education trade unions at all levels of education in 51 countries, i.e. more than 11 million education workers – is committed to ensure that European and national policymakers adopt and implement appropriate policies to fully guarantee the European citizens' human right for **education as a public good**, by developing **high quality, inclusive, equitable and sustainable education systems in Europe**, and to shift the focus of the EU economic governance coordination from the sole principles of fiscal stability and cost competitiveness towards upward convergence leading to the **improvement and promotion of the European Social Model**.

1. ETUCE Analysis

With regards to the European Commission Communication on the European Semester Spring Package 2023¹, published on 24 May, ETUCE notes that:

- **The structural involvement of social partners remains unsatisfactory at European and national level**, although the Commission recognise its key role for the successful delivery of the European Semester and Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) priorities;
- The request to all Member States of maintaining or bringing their deficit below the 3% of GDP Treaty reference value, as indicated by the European Commission in its Communication on orientations for a reform of the EU economic governance framework², constitutes a **limitation to Member States' capacity of committing in strategic investments**;
- The announced **withdrawal of the debt reduction benchmark**, the so-called "1/20 rule" setting out in the Stability and Growth Pact an annual reduction of the debt ratio by 1/20th of the difference between the actual debt-to-GDP ratio and the 60% threshold³, can have a beneficial impact on public expenditure;

¹ COM(2023) 600 final.

² COM(2022) 583 final.

³ As defined in the Treaty on European Union, Protocol No 12 on the excessive deficit procedure, article 1: "The reference values referred to in Article 126(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union are: 3 % for the ratio of the planned or actual government



- **Fiscal adjustments should allow for increasing public expenditure** as a mean to impact positively debt-to-GDP, making it more sustainable for public finances that are relevant for public education;
- In the framework of the EU economic governance review, the medium-term fiscal and structural plans will introduce more flexibility permitting reforms and investment adjustments over at least 4-year periods, nevertheless **Member States with substantial unbalances will have stricter timelines for adjustment than the Member States with moderate conditions**;
- Despite inflation being projected to continue declining, core price pressures are proving more persistent and eroding the **purchasing power of teachers, academics, and other education personnel**, whose salaries have not been adapted or adequately raised for years in several Member States;
- In fact, as highlighted by the European Commission, in the EU the nominal compensation per employee increased by 4.9% in 2022 but **real wages decreased by more than 4%** compared to the previous year: the inflation still hits hard workers' purchasing power;
- Due to limited administrative capacity and investment bottlenecks, some Member States are facing severe challenges in administering funds allocated by the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF): this will have a **negative impact on public investments under the RRF national plans in the education sector** and, in particular, in those Member States that are most in need of accessing the RRF resources;
- The European Commission continues assessing the status of the education systems in the European Union purely from the angle of the labour market activation, while overlooking the specific needs and issues that currently characterise the education sector: **decreasing attractiveness of the teaching profession, widespread shortages of teachers, demands for more and better investments in reskilling and upskilling of professionals in education**;
- According to the Eurydice data (2021), teacher shortages in secondary education in Europe have affected a large majority of Member States (17), with a small group experiencing both shortages and surplus depending on the subject area (6): the main causes for this phenomenon are the **lack of adequate Initial Teacher Training (ITT)**, meaning low number of applicants and/or high dropout (FR, DE, LV, LU, NL, LT, PT, MT), **the high numbers of teachers leaving the profession (BG, LI)**, **the high numbers of teachers leaving the profession together with a lack of ITT (EE, HU, BE, IS, BE, DK)**, and **an ageing teacher population (DE, LV, LU, NL, CZ, AT, PL, BG, EE, HU, SE, IS, LI, EL, ES, IT, LT, PT)**;
- The European Commission recognises these worrying trends by highlighting the **increased pressure on education and training systems** as a result of the pandemic, the lack of appropriate digital infrastructure, and the growing shortage of teaching staff;
- **The increasing disparities in access to education, research, and training** go along the geographical and social divide that separates urban areas from rural and outermost regions;
- The conjunction of the record employment rate (74.8%) and the labour and skills shortages points at the **increasing employment gaps between population groups**, to the detriment of specific age cohorts, and underrepresented and marginalised groups, e.g. young people, women, persons with disabilities, people with a migrant background, Roma, etc.;
- The Commission point out the importance of **enhancing access to early childhood education, curriculum reforms, and creating upskilling and reskilling opportunities**, in particular for skills relevant to the green and digital transition: these measures need to be supported by appropriate

deficit to gross domestic product at market prices; 60 % for the ratio of government debt to gross domestic product at market prices.”.

public investment, coming from increased **current expenditure** (e.g. to support wages adaptation and Initial Teacher Training), **structural investments**, and **new own resources of the European Union** (e.g. Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency, RRF, cohesion policy funds);

- Initial Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) actions **needs to be free of charge** for the professionals and **to take place during the working hours**.

2. ETUCE Key messages

In line with its [analysis of the Autumn Package 2023](#), ETUCE reiterates the call to the European Commission and to Member States to:

- **Introducing a golden rule for public investments** – that allows borrowing for clearly defined public investments and principal repayments, without affecting current expenditures – to safeguard productivity and ensure social and environmental conditions for the well-being of current and future generations;
- **Broadening the definition of public investments and decoupling structural and current expenditure**, by including public investments in education and training, and taking into consideration the impact the green and digital transition have on the education sector and the teaching profession;
- **Promoting collective bargaining, social dialogue and social partners' involvement as a golden rule**, involving social partners in education in the design and implementation process of National Reform Programmes, Country Reports, Country Specific Recommendations, and national Recovery and Resilience Plans;
- **Supporting teachers and other education personnel in Ukraine and across Europe** in their effort to ensure quality education to children and students fleeing the war zones to EU Member States, and offering help to colleagues in Ukraine and to refugees and displaced Ukrainian residents in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive;
- **Increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession** by ensuring professional autonomy, academic freedom, collaborative and collegial leadership, and by delivering decent salaries and addressing any pay inequalities. It is also necessary to promote sustainable working conditions and teachers' well-being, by limiting excessive workload and working hours, to establish quality entry pathways and retention practices, and to ensure quality and inclusive initial education and continuous professional development;
- **Reversing the lasting trend of privatisation in the education sector** that has allowed an increasing number of private actors to access the education system, therefore fostering the commodification of the sector. The Final Report of the Commission expert group on quality investment in education and training, published in October 2022, has not taken in due consideration the requests of education trade unions to develop a comprehensive overview of effective education policies following a needs-based approach;
- **Enhancing the labour market prospects of young people by promoting inclusive and quality vocational education and training and tertiary education**, offering targeted employment services' support (including mentoring, guidance and counselling) as well as supporting quality apprenticeships and traineeships (particularly in small and medium sized enterprises), in line with the reinforced Youth Guarantee;

- **Improving learning outcomes and reducing inequalities in education and training** through the expanded access to tertiary education (particularly for disadvantaged groups), the prevention of early school leaving, the increased participation in the labour market relevance of tertiary education, with a special focus on sectors such as ICT and STEM;
- **Investing in reskilling and upskilling of adults**, notably in skills needed for the digital and green transitions. Providing greater incentives to workers to engage in upskilling and reskilling, investing in eco-efficient infrastructures and digital equipment, without encouraging a commodification of training paths and its detriment as a social and human right;
- **Boosting the digital competences of students and adults**, increasing the digital talent pool by developing digital education and training ecosystems supported by key enablers such as high-speed connectivity for schools, equipment, teacher and education support personnel training; supporting institutions with expertise on digitalisation with a special focus on inclusion and on reducing the digital divide;
- **Recognising that education is not a commodity, therefore limiting and regulating the role of private AI system operators and EdTech companies in education**, which risks undermining the existing national definitions of education as a public good and a human right;
- **Providing all children at risk of poverty or social exclusion with free and effective access** to early childhood education, and education and school-based activities, in line with the Recommendation establishing a Child Guarantee (EU/2021/1004);
- Equitable and quality, inclusive education and training systems can be achieved through **targeted measures focusing on the most disadvantaged, including migrant and refugee students and students with special needs.**

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**The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 126 Education Trade Unions and 11 million teachers in 51 countries of Europe. ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and a European Trade Union Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International, the global federation of education trade unions.*