ETUCE Position on

"Achieving the European Education Area"

Adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 30 July, 2020

On 22 July 2020 the European Commission launched a public consultation on "Achieving the European Education Area" which is open until 26 August 2020 via this link.

The following text is the response of ETUCE, which represents 11 million teachers in Europe, to the background document of the public consultation, the European Commission's Roadmap, based on consultation with its Member Organisations.

1. Timing

ETUCE represents 131 education trade unions within 51 countries. Teachers in every education sector made limitless efforts during the COVID-19 crisis to make education ongoing many times without having the relevant IT skills and tools. Their trade unions tirelessly supported the education staff to ensure salary, working conditions, and access to training, IT materials, tools and internet connection. While the world is not over with the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on education has not been fully analysed yet, it is difficultly understandable why the European Commission runs a public consultation in relation to the education and training strategy for the next 5 years during the summer months. We ask the European Commission to extend the deadline and allow teachers, their unions, and education experts to share their views on the proposal after their well-deserved summer holiday.

2. Right to quality and inclusive education for all

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*". 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 as 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.

3. Clear goals and strategies

Concerning the public consultation, we believe that the European Commission can achieve the European Education Area only with clear monitoring on national actions and reforms in line with the following goals:
- Right to high quality and inclusive education for all supported by sustainable public investment;
- Quality and inclusiveness of education achieved by clear national strategies to be updated to new needs;
- Right and guarantee of high quality and inclusive training and lifelong learning for teachers and trainers on necessary skills, including digital and green skills and skills required by the teachers, supported by public budget;
- Education as a human right and public good to prepare the students to be open-minded, culturally sensitive and responsible citizens with solid democratic values and ready for necessary upskilling within the labour market;
- Improved governance: Social dialogue need to be strengthened and national strategies need to be set up with the education trade unions and based on research on students' and teachers' needs.

4. Governance with education trade unions

Democratic 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 the essential involvement of education trade unions in the framework of effective social dialogue with education employer organisations and governments, in designing and implementing (including monitoring and evaluating) necessary educational reforms. In the post-2020 strategy, the assurance of effective social dialogue with education trade unions should be a target. The post-2020 objectives need to be achieved by enhancing further exchanges among member states within the working groups under the "Open Method of Cooperation" wherein education trade unions are members.

5. Well-developed indicators and benchmarks

Concerning the concrete suggestions of the Commission in 2017 to the Member States in the form of new indicators and benchmarks[1], and in order to develop relevant indicators for the future for 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. 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 crisis. The target should lead to set up actions to support the socio-economically disadvantaged students with joint social and education policies. In order to introduce benchmarks on green skills, digital competences and entrepreneurship skills they need to be aligned with sufficient funding to develop these areas in a qualitative way.

6. Protect holistic education as a public good

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 the reality many times reasons of skills mismatch is that companies do not offer quality and fair jobs which can be attractive for the 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, eg recruitment problem, geographical location of the company, salary level and working conditions.[2] This is why we do not agree with the European Commission's Roadmap that "*battling unemployment will require learning new skills or improving the existing ones (up- and reskilling), including through short-term higher education courses (micro-credentials) and flexible study programmes*". First and foremost, companies should offer quality and fair jobs and upskilling / reskilling. Secondly, 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".* Respecting full qualifications and holistic education in each education sector is fundamental. We have already expressed our concerns that defining curricula based on employability rate of graduates endangers the holistic approach of education[3], and ideas of modularisation of education and replacing qualifications/diplomas by micro-credentials[4] will not guarantee good preparation of the

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[1] "In the context of revamping the existing EU level cooperation, make the Council benchmarks for the share of low achievers and early school-leavers more ambitious by 2025,reducing the first benchmark from 15% currently to 10% and the second from 10% currently to 5 %.New benchmarks could be agreed for digital competences and entrepreneurship" https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-strengthening-european-identity-education-culture_en.pdf

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

[3] Joint ETUC - ETUCE Position on a European-level graduate tracking system of VET learners and tertiary education students (July 2020) https://www.csee-etuce.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

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

learners to life and labour market, but rather provides them low quality education and leaving certificate, and push them to low job positions and to social and economic exclusion.

7. Right to play

In the same line, we do not agree with the Roadmap which states that "*Europe needs to invest in the learning competences and habits from the earliest age: quality early childhood education and care leads to better learning results and jobs*." This statement indicates that according to the European Commission early childhood education (ECE) is a tool to prepare young children to the labour market. However, the post-2020 strategy on education should enforce countries to do more to ensure quality and inclusion of ECE as a human right and be available and accessible to all children for free. Previous Council proposals put a lots of emphasis on modernising ECE e.g. via new technologies and digital tools. ETUCE reminds that ECE is not only a preparation for school and several studies show that overly academic ECE has a negative impact on children, therefore play should have bigger importance in ECE. The curriculum should be structured around play-based learning and teachers with pedagogical experience in early years' learning should be employed in all early years' settings. We highlight the importance of well-balanced use of digital and IT tools combined with protecting the well-being of the children and free of charge ECE. Teachers with pedagogical knowledge are responsible for the child's early childhood education and care and their professional autonomy needs to be protected. ECE is essential for the inclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged children for whom support should be given from an early age on. Thus, ECE should be state provided and part of national school systems with qualified ECE teachers and proper working conditions to the teachers. Concerning the previously announced benchmark (95 % children aged 3 and upwards should participate in ECE) we underline that the benchmark on participation in ECE itself does not indicate the quality of ECE. Well-educated educators/teachers in ECE with professional autonomy must be included in decisions on ECE systems. Furthermore, we believe that the EU should provide more support for more research and data collection on ECE by appropriate funding and making these funds more visible and accessible for education unions.

8. Protect the social role of schools and education

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 the key competences can be applied to teaching. Whilst digitalisation, innovation, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skills are now in the forefront of discussions, future EU policies should focus more on arts in all education sectors. The direction towards teaching STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) would be a good trend. Teaching social sensitivity, empathy, intercultural dialogue, citizenship skills and social competence can be best achieved with arts, languages, culture, history, and philosophy. While following any crisis there is a tendency to shift education towards labour market needed skills, it is essential to fight for social cohesion, democratic values and citizenship, and against radicalism with enforcing social and citizenship competences. Arts need to be better supported as they have been neglected in recent years when the focus has been on skills for the labour market. Students need to be incentivised and motivated to learn languages which is essential in enhancing

democratic values and European identity, but training and recruitment of teachers of foreign language should be supported when there is a shortage of language teachers in some countries. The post-2020 strategy should not forget but rather 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 Cooperation working groups and in the Education Council meetings.

9. 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 reflection on the potential benefits of the digital era for the education sector. We believe that these reflections and decisions will durably impact the education sector, for teachers and students alike. Therefore, we recall our [Position Paper on the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2020](#) which underlined that teachers, other education personnel, and schools must be drivers in this process, and policy makers should engage them meaningfully in view to take into account their expertise and foresight. Access to IT tools and internet for all students and teachers need to be ensured by sustainable public investment and consider online teaching and learning as a tool but not the aim of education.

10. Fair green transition of education and schools

Within the post-2020 strategy EU countries need to take action urgent actions 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: "[i]mprove 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 global citizenship and peace. 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*"[5] which we believe should be developed among ministries of education and education trade unions within an "Open Method of Cooperation" 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.

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[5] 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

11. Well trained and highly valued teachers

We agree with the European Commission's Roadmap that while 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. 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, as well as raising standards in teaching into the focus of the post-2020 education strategy. 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 post-2020 strategy 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 unacceptable high number of working hours including the defined teaching hours and time for other duties eg. administration, consultation, preparation, and research, especially in the context of increased level of digitalisation in the teaching profession. 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.

12.Sustainable investment to education

The post-2020 strategy should put particular emphasis on the need for further public investment in education, improving equality and social inclusion in schools, and cooperative school leadership and teaching. The use of digital technology needs appropriate and continuous high investment in schools regarding the equipment and software updates. The suggestion of the Commission in 2017 concerning 5% of GDP[6] as a target of minimum investment in education is not challenging as only few countries of the EU have not achieved this goal yet. Thus, this target can be discouraging for some countries or even encourage them to decrease their investment to public education. The target should be more ambitious in order to ensure sustainable investment to high quality and inclusive education and to invest more in order to facilitate innovation and creativity with the best learning and teaching equipment in schools. Instead of further pushing public-private partnership with funds like EFSI[7], the European Member States should be incentivised to commit to boosting public investment in education, by: a) making the case for additional flexibility and for excluding growth-enhancing investment in education from the calculation of the deficit and

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[6] "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 spending up to7% (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

[7] European Fund for Strategic Investments https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/jobs-growth-and-investment/investment-plan-europe-juncker-plan/european-fund-strategic-investments-efsi_en

debt levels within the Growth and Stability Pact; b) avoiding that precious resources are diverted from public services to incentives and subsidies for public-private partnerships; and c) by implementing fair, adequate and progressive tax systems. Member States should intensify their efforts to expand a revenue base that allows for public investment in education within the post-2020 strategy.

13.Strengthen agreed education priorities within the European Semester

Country Specific Recommendations to countries on improving teachers' professional status, equitable and inclusive education could be included also in the European Semester process and should reflect therein in a Social Scoreboard[8] that fosters upward convergence across Europe and ensures that the commitment of governments to deliver on the Education 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is met. This should go together with a strong call for meaningful involvement of the European and national education social partners at all stages of the Semester.

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[8] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1196&newsId=9163&furtherNews=yes