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ETUCE Statement on the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at work for 2021-2027

Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 16 November 2021

Background:

On 28 June 2021, the European Commission put forward the [EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at work 2021-2027 – Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work](#). This initiative was subjected to two extensive [public consultations](#) in November 2020 and from December 2020 to March 2021. Building on the experience of the previous strategic framework on occupational health and safety (2014-2020) and drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU Commission laid down a series of actions, including legislative measures to strengthen Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in the upcoming seven years.

The new OSH Strategic Framework is developed with a tripartite approach involving EU institutions, Member States, and Social Partners and is based on **3 key priority areas**:

- Managing change in the working world due to green, digital and demographic transition
- Improving prevention of workplace accidents and illnesses
- Increasing preparedness for any future health crisis

The document is currently under discussion within the European Parliament and by the Ministries within the Employment and Social Policy Council.

The following ETUCE* statement seeks to represent the views of education trade unions as regards the actions within the OSH Strategic Framework which will have an impact on workers in the education sector.

**The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 127 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.*

1. Consultation with and involvement of trade unions within the new EU OSH Strategic Framework



Education trade unions welcome that the EU Commission adopted a tripartite approach involving social partners in the formulation of the new OSH Strategic Framework. Education trade unions also welcome the value that the Strategic Framework gives to the role of EU sectoral social partners by affirming that *“The **EU sectoral social dialogue** makes a strong contribution to the effective implementation of EU OSH legislation. The Commission will engage with social partners to identify relevant areas and actions at the sectoral level to implement this strategic framework.”*. Education trade unions are hopeful that the EU Commission’s pledge will be respected during the implementation of the Strategic Framework. ETUCE further underlines that education trade unions have an important role to play in the implementation of the new OSH Strategic Framework to ensure the health and safety of workers in education, which has been one of the most disrupted sectors from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Enlarge the ‘vision zero approach’ to all work-related accidents and diseases and reinforce the prevention of risks for health and safety

ETUCE welcomes that the proposed framework adopts a **“Vision zero approach to work-related deaths”**. Nevertheless, ETUCE remarks that the scope of this approach which is only limited to work-related deaths is not adequate to ensure healthy and safe working places in the education sector. Workers in the education sector are, indeed, exposed to a series of occupational hazards which, although not deadly, can have a disastrous impact on the physical and mental health of teachers, academics and other education personnel. **Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)**, for instance, are the main work-related physical diseases affecting education personnel across Europe. Nevertheless, ETUCE remarks the lack of any ambitious action in the Strategic Framework to address them. In addition, many education institutions across Europe contain **asbestos** which exposes thousands of education personnel across Europe to work-related deaths.

Therefore, education trade unions urge the EU Commission to

- **Enlarge the vision zero vision to all accidents and diseases, including psychosocial hazards.**
- Reinforce the **focus on the prevention** of all work-related accidents and disease, including psychosocial risks when implementing the measures foreseen in the new OSH Strategic Framework. This should be done in continuous cooperation and social dialogue with sectoral social partners, including education trade unions.
- Clearly highlight the **obligation for the employers to carry out risk-assessment and ensure preventive measures** not only during emergency times in order to ensure adequate prevention of health and safety risks for workers in education. These measures should be developed and updated on a regular basis with truthful cooperation and social dialogue with education trade unions.
- Put in place concrete efforts to prevent and combat musculoskeletal disorders, including putting forward a proposal for a EU Directive on work-related (MSDs).
- Review the [Asbestos at Work Directive 2009/148/EC](#) in its integrity rather than limiting to revise the protective limit values as proposed in the Strategic Framework.

3. Recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease and increase preparedness for future pandemics

The COVID-19 health crisis had an unprecedented impact on the health and safety and well-being of workers in the education sector. Teachers, academics, and other education personnel have worked tirelessly at the forefront and borne the major burden during emergency teaching to ensure the right to quality education for all learners. **In this context, it is undeniable that national and European legislation frameworks on health and safety were not adequate to protect workers in the education sector.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, academics, and education personnel had to unexpectedly shift to emergency online, hybrid or remote teaching environments with a sore impact on their health and safety and well-being. All education personnel have been coping with increased workload and overtime, unbalanced work-life balance, inadequate home working spaces, lack of supporting staff and training for emergency teaching and missing psychosocial support. In addition, some European countries have forced teachers and education personnel to conduct on-site teaching during the whole period of the pandemic, putting education workers' health and safety at high risks. Therefore, thousands of teachers and education personnel across Europe got infected and lost their life due to COVID-19.

In front of this devastating situation, **education trade unions urge the EU Commission and the Members States to put in place all the necessary measures in the new OSH Strategic framework to impede the occurrence of a similar scenario in the future by:**

- **Ensuring that all European countries recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease and providing adequate safeguards to prevent the contraction of the virus and appropriate supporting measures.** These must include, for instance, replacing staff as well as financial and psychosocial support for education personnel contracting the virus. Therefore, ETUCE welcomes the EU Commission's commitment to updating the Commission Recommendation on occupational diseases by 2022 to include the COVID-19 virus. In this respect, ETUCE also reminds that at the moment, only 17 European countries recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease, while the other Member States recognise it as an 'accident at work' (i.e. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Italy, Slovenia, and Spain)¹.
- **Updating the [Biological Agents Directive \(2000/54/EC\)](#) to ensure it becomes an adequate tool for adequate preparedness of health and safety systems in future health crises.** In this respect, while ETUCE welcomes that the EU Commission integrated the COVID-19 within the Biological Agents Directive, it also remarks that this action is not sufficient to ensure the resilience of education systems in future health crises. Therefore, education trade unions urge a revision of the current Directive to include the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis, while ensuring concrete consultations and social dialogue with education trade unions to adequately address the needs of workers in the education sector within the reviewed Directive.
- **Conduct further research to assess the long-term impact of the COVID-19 in the education sector.**

¹ Eurostat: Possibility of recognising COVID-19 as being of occupational origin at national level in EU and EFTA countries (2021 edition) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/7870049/13464590/KS-FT-21-005-EN-N.pdf/d960b3ee-7308-4fe7-125c-f852dd02a7c7?t=1632924169533>

4. Adequately address the disrupting impact of psychosocial risks on teachers, academics and other education personnel

Addressing psychosocial risks is crucial for education trade unions. Indeed, teachers, academics and other education personnel are among the most affected professions by psychosocial hazards. Exposure to psychosocial stressors in education can lead to physical, psychological, and social effects. Psychosocial factors are also significant predictors for musculoskeletal disorders, which are the most prevalent cause of disability for teachers worldwide.

ETUCE welcomes the EU Commission's actions within the proposed Strategic Framework to tackle psychosocial risks at work. These include **funding opportunities** to promote good mental health and prevent mental illness at work within Horizon 2020 (e.g. Magnet4Europe, EMPOWER, and RESPOND projects) and as well as **a campaign by the European Agency for Safety and Health at work and e-tools and guidance** for risks assessment on psychosocial and ergonomic risks. **Nevertheless, ETUCE remarks that the proposed actions are not ambitious enough to produce a real impact in the prevention of psychosocial risks in education.** In addition, the current legislative measures such as the [Council Directive 89/391/EEC](#) concerning mental health in the workplaces have proven not adequate to counter and prevent psychosocial risks. Education trade unions further underline that the COVID-19 added a particular toll on the exposure of education personnel to psychosocial risks which must be taken into account in the EU OSH Strategic Framework.

Therefore, education trade unions urge the European Commission to:

- Develop **legislative measures, such as a Directive, on psychosocial risks and well-being** at work, including the possibility of **revision of psychosocial measures** within the proposed framework.
- Revise the current list of **occupational diseases** with a view to include psychosocial risks such as anxiety, depression and burnout.
- Conduct **further research to assess the impact of COVID-19** and increasing **digital education teaching and learning environments on psychosocial risks and well-being of workers in education.**

5. Reinforce the prevention of and combat against violence and harassment including cyber-harassment and gender-based violence

In the education sector, violence and harassment, also including third-party violence, are among the most worrisome health and safety issues affecting teachers, academics and other education personnel. Nevertheless, a persistent tendency of non-reporting, combined with blaming culture and the lack of preventive and supporting measures remain among the main challenges in countering these phenomena in the education sector. ETUCE welcomes that the Commission has introduced the dimension of gender-based violence within the new OSH Strategic Framework. Nevertheless, ETUCE also remarks that the EU Commission's **actions on preventing and countering of violence and harassment remain insufficient to provide any concrete steps in the prevention of and combat against violence and harassment.**

In particular, education trade unions call on the EU Commission to:

- Reinforce the prevention of and combat against violence and harassment, including the possibility of **laying down legislative measures at EU level** while ensuring the respect of social partners' agreements between social partners on preventing and combatting violence and harassment in the workplaces.
- Integrate the prevention of and combat against **cyber-harassment** which is currently not mentioned in the proposed Strategic Framework.
- Enlarge the scope of the combat against violence and harassment to ensure that **it does not apply to cases on discriminatory grounds**.
- Create more synergies with the [Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 \(No. 190\)](#) of the **International Labour Organisation** when implementing the actions within the OSH Strategic Framework.

6. Adequately address OSH challenges deriving from digitalisation and the use of artificial intelligence in education

ETUCE welcomes the EU Commission's proposal to review the legislative framework on digitalisation by 2023 such as the [Workplace Directive 89/654/EEC](#) and the [Display Screen Equipment Directive 90/270/EEC](#). In this respect, ETUCE underlines that increasing use of digital tools and artificial intelligence in the education sector are accompanied by a series of new challenges. A new [ETUCE study on digital education](#) reveals that health and safety concerns related to digital education are among the main challenges faced by the majority of education trade unions.

Besides cyber-harassment, trade unions underline new emerging challenges which put the health and safety of workers in the education sector at risk. These include **work-related stress, screen fatigue, internet addiction, and the right to disconnect, as well as data privacy and intellectual property rights of teachers, academics, and other education personnel**. In addition, as it was previously underlined in the [ETUCE position on the Artificial Intelligence Act](#), education trade unions call on the European Commission to integrate health and safety issues within the proposed Regulation on Artificial Intelligence. This is of utmost importance for education which is identified as a high-risk sector for the use of artificial intelligence tools.

Therefore, education trade unions demand that the European Commission:

- **Mainstream the protection of health and safety in all the revised legislative framework** regarding digitalisation and artificial intelligence.
- Ensure meaningful **social dialogue with education trade unions** for the revision of the legislative measures at European level and during the implementation at national, regional and local level.
- Ensure that **education trade unions are represented within the European Artificial Intelligence Board** which is set to be established by the European Commission to ensure the implementation of the Artificial Intelligence Act.